

Understanding the Impact of Co-teaching on First Year Teacher Preparation

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) across the country strive to deliver high-quality programs that prepare future teachers for the demands of the field. Field experiences are integral in providing opportunities for Preservice Teacher Candidates (PTCs) to apply theory and pedagogical knowledge obtained in coursework to an authentic classroom setting. The researchers sought to identify the impact of co-teaching and reflective practices on graduates' perceived preparation effectiveness. Surveys distributed to first-year teachers by the state education agency provide insight into graduates' perceptions of preparation provided by the EPP.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, co-teaching, field experience(s), and reflective practice

The demands on educators are at all-time highs. In a recent survey from the National Education Association (NEA), it was revealed that 90% of educators are feeling burned out. Additionally, 55% indicated they are ready to leave the profession earlier than planned. Schools are also short-staffed, with 74% of teachers stating they have had to take on additional duties due to staff shortages, and another 80% reported that unfilled job openings have led to more work obligations for educators who remain in the field (NEA, 2022). Due in part to these challenges, and many others, there are fewer educators available to fill open positions. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022) enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs was 32 percent lower in 2018–19 than just six years earlier. With the demand for teachers at an all-time high and a teacher workforce that appears to be shrinking, it is essential for Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) to provide experiences that prepare future teachers for the demands of the profession.

One way of preparing future teachers for the challenges encountered in the field is to provide them with authentic experiences within a classroom setting. However, the critical teaching shortage also means there are fewer in-service teachers, making it difficult to find high quality mentors to partner with pre-service teacher candidates (PTC). Additionally, for some mentor teachers, hosting a PTC can feel like an additional responsibility, especially to one who may already be feeling burned out. From a university perspective, field experiences help shape (positively or negatively) PTCs, but as Ritter et al. (2007) indicates there is a significant variation in the quality and effectiveness in field experiences. For example, the level of experience found in mentor teachers, the extent to which teacher candidates assume

responsibility and deliver instruction, and the campus environment are factors that influence the quality of field experience. Like most EPPs, our institution strives to provide field experiences that are relevant and meaningful. The early childhood through sixth grade (EC-6) certification program requires PTCs to complete more than 250 early field experience hours prior to their final clinical teaching (student teaching) semester. These placements occur in a variety of settings. Early experiences in the field require PTCs to not only observe their assigned mentor teacher, but participate in planning, delivering instruction, and assessing in various content areas.

The participating university houses a K-5 public charter school on campus in which all face-to-face PTCs in the EC-6 program are required to complete a semester-long placement. PTCs spend three hours a day, four days a week in the semester-long placement. The university and charter school partnership enables a dependable high quality field experience placement. However, our program has the unique challenge of placing up to 70 PTCs across 12 classrooms. This requires placing up to eight PTCs in a classroom at one time. Program faculty and charter school teachers work closely to facilitate mentoring and supervision of multiple PTCs. Since 2016, two university supervisors have utilized peer-to-peer co-teaching as a way to allow multiple PTCs to collaborate, plan, and provide instruction to meet the needs of K-5 learners.

Why Co-teaching?

Co-teaching dates back nearly six decades to the 1960s and was originally considered by many to be an example of progressive education. Cook & Friend (1995) describe co-teaching as “Two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single space” (p.1). Each co-teacher brings unique skills and prior experiences to the classroom. These co-teachers supplement each other, rather than act interchangeably (Friend, 2014). Bacharach et al., (2008) describe a co-teaching experience through an EPP as one in which the cooperating teacher and PTC collaboratively plan and deliver instruction. Villa et. al., (2013) suggest co-teachers engage in a cooperative process of interaction, interdependence, performance, as well as monitoring and processing of interpersonal skills, and individual accountability. Cook and Friend (1995) have identified six approaches to collaborative teaching which include:

Station Teaching. Students are divided into groups with each teacher delivering part of the lesson at a station. Independent work typically occurs in one of the stations. Students rotate through all stations, allowing teachers to work with all students.

Parallel Teaching. Students are divided into two, equal-sized groups. Each teacher works with a teacher. The teachers may present information in different ways, or they may choose to present the same information in the same way. They may also present different information in each group.

Alternative Teaching. One teacher works with the majority of students, while the other teacher instructs a small group to reteach, enrich, assess, pre-teach, or another identified purpose. Teaming. Students remain in one group, while the teachers co-lead to deliver instruction.

One-Teach, One-Assist. Students remain in one group, with one teacher leading instruction while the other teacher briefly interacts with students to focus attention, answer questions, further explain concepts, etc.

One Teach, One Observe. One teacher leads instruction while the other teacher collects specific data pertaining to one or more children.

These models of co-teaching differ slightly but work toward the common goal of providing instruction that meets the needs of all learners. In a meta-synthesis of co-teaching conducted by Scruggs et. al. (2007), administrators, teachers, and students perceived co-teaching to be beneficial socially and academically. The meta-synthesis also revealed that co-teaching training, sufficient time to plan, and co-teacher compatibility are important elements of a successful collaboration.

Co-Teaching Field Experience Overview

The implementation of peer-to-peer co-teaching began as an action research project to allow more opportunities for PTCs to plan, teach, and assess lessons within the university charter school field experience (Akerson & Montgomery, 2017). Additionally, the researchers hoped to provide a field experience opportunity that encouraged authentic collaboration among future educators. Co-teaching has since become an integral part of the field experience in our program. Co-teaching is modeled by university supervisors in-class, PTCs are provided an in-depth co-teacher training at the beginning of the university charter field experience, and PTCs are then provided with six peer-to-peer co-teaching opportunities across the semester to experience each of the co-teaching models. Co-teaching has allowed two PTCs to be engaged in one lesson simultaneously. However, with as many as eight PTCs in a classroom, the remaining PTCs act as observers and data collectors during every lesson.

To take advantage of multiple observers for each lesson, the researchers also developed a process for providing peer feedback. While two PTCs co-teach a lesson, the remaining PTCs observe and provide feedback through data collection on the co-teaching pair in an attempt to help the PTCs develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Early attempts to utilize feedback from peers often resulted in superficial comments such as “that was a great lesson”, but provided little evidence to support what was “great”. Rarely, if ever, did we observe peer feedback that suggested areas for growth in the PTC. As Liu and Li (2014) suggest, students are capable of providing high quality feedback, but must first receive training. In recent years, we have worked to help our PTCs understand the purpose of feedback and how to collect data to inform the feedback process. The data collection focuses on the facilitation of the lesson and the K-5 students' response to the instruction. Every time a PTC candidate delivers a lesson as the lead teacher in a co-teaching partnership, there are several layers of co-teaching being implemented. A pair of co-teachers lead a lesson, while all other PTCs collect targeted data through the One Teach, One Observe co-teaching model.

Co-Teaching: What Have We Learned?

In the last six years of implementing co-teaching as part of a field experience, the researchers have collected data that highlights the benefits and challenges of co-teaching. Overall, the findings suggest that PTCs believe co-teaching models allow for more individual student attention, the potential to meet the needs of their students more quickly, and the ability to have multiple perspectives incorporated into a lesson (Montgomery & Akerson, 2018). Additionally, there were a host of other benefits PTCs have acknowledged connected to co-teaching,

including: increased collaboration skills, improved classroom management, gaining confidence through the co-planning process, developing a deeper understanding of the curriculum, additional opportunities to teach, and learning to direct the efforts of other adults in the classroom (Akerson & Montgomery, 2017).

Co-teaching has made a positive impact on PTCs in field experience placements. But, we began to wonder what happened to our PTCs once they graduated and entered the field? Were they sufficiently prepared for the demands of the first year of teaching? In an attempt to answer these questions, we began to examine data from the state of Texas Teacher Survey to Evaluate Educator Preparation Programs (TSEEPS).

Teacher Survey to Evaluate Educator Preparation Programs

The Texas Education Agency, under the current State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC), requires first year teachers holding a standard certificate to respond to a survey at the end of the year. The results of the survey are used by the state for monitoring and understanding the effectiveness of EPPs. The survey is available online and once the results are collected by the state, they are made available to EPPs (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2022).

The TSEEPS consists of 49 survey items across the following domains: planning, instruction, learning environment, professional practice and responsibility, students with disabilities, English language learners, and an overall rating. The survey uses a four-point Likert scale that allows the participant to evaluate the EPP with a rating of:

3 - Well Prepared. All, or almost all, of the time I was able to demonstrate a thorough understanding and had the required knowledge and skills.

2 - Sufficiently Prepared. Most of the time, I was able to demonstrate a general understanding and had the required knowledge and skills.

1 - Not Sufficiently Prepared. I demonstrated limited understanding and had partial required knowledge and skills.

0 - Not at all Prepared. I demonstrated little to no understanding and had minimal required knowledge and skills.

The researchers analyzed the TSEEPS results of the academic years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 for program graduates of the participating EPP. The only identifiable data included in the survey is the Texas Education Agency (TEA) identification number. The TEA identification number was matched to a university identification number to determine which first-year teachers received training in co-teaching while in the EC-6 program. Once matched, the researchers were able to identify how first-year teachers perceived the preparation provided by the EPP. There were a total of 59 first-year teachers who completed the first-year survey during academic years 2018-2019 or 2019-2020. Of the 59 first-year teachers who responded to the TSEEPS, 15 PTCs participated in co-teaching training and had a semester-long field experience in co-teaching. It is important to note that not all PTCs experienced co-teaching as part of their field experience placement in the university charter school. The co-teaching experience was facilitated through two sections of the field experience. Other field experience sections were supervised by faculty in which co-teaching was not part of the field experience. These PTCs participated in a

traditional field experience placement in which the PTC completed the required components of the course individually. The survey results included 44 PTCs who did not receive a co-teaching field experience.

Results of the Teacher Survey

The TSEEPS was analyzed by the researchers across all 49 questions, six domains, and the overall evaluation. For the co-teaching and no co-teaching groups, the mean rating for each question and domain was calculated. The results of the analysis across domains are included in Table 1. The first-year teachers who received co-teaching training and a semester-long co-teaching placement rated the EPP higher than first-year teachers who did not receive a co-teaching experience across every domain of the survey, with the largest differential occurring across the planning domain (0.26), followed by the instruction domain (0.24). Additionally, the overall rating of EPP was 0.19 higher for those who experienced co-teaching.

First Year Teacher Survey Results Across Domains

<u>Teacher Survey Domain</u>	<u>Co-teaching (n=15)</u>	<u>No Co-Teaching (n=44)</u>
Planning	2.58	2.32
Instruction	2.49	2.24
Learning Environments	2.54	2.38
Professional Roles and Responsibilities	2.60	2.53
Students with Disabilities	1.73	1.98
English Language Learners	2.27	2.27
Overall Rating	2.33	2.14

Table 1.

Table 2 represents the number of questions across each domain in which the mean score was higher across groups. For example, the planning domain included 12 questions, of which the co-teaching group's perceived level of preparation was higher across 11 of the questions.

Comparison of First Year Teacher Survey Questions by Domain

<u>Teacher Survey Domain</u>	<u>Total Number of Questions</u>	<u>Co- teaching</u>	<u>No Co- Teaching</u>
Planning	12	11	1
Instruction	13	11	2
Learning Environments	7	7	0
Professional Practice and Responsibilities	6	5	0
Students with Disabilities	6	1	5
English Language Learners	4	3	1

Note. The data indicates the number of questions by group in which the mean preparation rating was higher.

Table 2.

The Professional Practice and Responsibilities domain included six questions, of which the co-teaching group's perceived level of preparation was higher across five of the questions, with one question having the same rating as the no co-teaching group (advocating for the needs of students in the classroom).

Of the 49 questions on the TSEEPS, the co-teaching group rated their level of preparation higher than the no co-teaching group in 38 of the questions, and equal to the no co-teaching group in one question. There were 10 questions in which the non-co-teaching group perceived their level of preparation to be higher than the co-teaching group. In addition to the data provided in Table 2, respondents were asked, "What is your overall evaluation of how well you were prepared for the realities of the classroom as they exist on your campus?" For this question, the co-teaching group had a mean score of 2.33 and the non-co-teaching group had a mean score of 2.14.

Implications for Co-teaching

The results of the TSEEPS provide insight into the role co-teaching plays in the preparation of first-year teachers. In six out of seven domains of the TSEEPS, and across more than 75% of questions, first-year teachers who received training and co-teaching field experience rated their EPP higher than those who did not receive the same experience. These results are encouraging, but also identify areas in which additional support is needed. In the students with disabilities domain first-year teacher ratings suggest this as an area where additional preparation would be beneficial. Within the context of co-teaching, identifying ways to support students with disabilities will be essential moving forward. Exploring opportunities to collaborate across field experience placements and potentially pairing peer special education PTCs with EC-6 PTCs would be one way to support this initiative.

Additionally, collecting and analyzing perceptions of program preparation across multiple field experiences would be beneficial. While the TSEEPS data was helpful to better understand the perceived level of preparation, the survey did not specifically ask about the role of co-teaching. It would benefit the program to follow up with first-year teachers who received co-teaching training and ask specifically how co-teaching may have impacted their level of preparation. Similar to the TSEEPS, the state of Texas administers a survey tool for principals to evaluate first-year teachers that connect back to the EPP. Evaluating the perceptions of principals is also essential to better understand how effectively EPPs are preparing PTCs. Furthermore, as co-teaching within field experiences offered by the EPP evolves, it will be important to continually monitor and collect data to inform the direction of the experience to ensure the needs of all stakeholders are met.

Field experiences play a large role in most EPP programs and provide opportunities for PTCs to take on the role of an educator prior to becoming a teacher of record. Understanding the impact these experiences have on PTCs and how they contribute to first-year teachers' preparation is essential. Co-teaching has the potential to equip PTCs for the demands of the teaching profession and impact their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to increase their longevity in the field.

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