"You Want Me To Do What?" The Benefits of Co-teaching in the Middle Level

Ellis Hurd (*Illinois State University*)
Gary Weilbacher (*Illinois State University*)

Abstract

Exemplary middle schools use interdisciplinary teaming that often involves some level of co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing. In addition to this collaborative foundation, federal mandates for supporting students have led to frequent co-teaching between special educators, bilingual/bicultural specialists, and regular classroom teachers. Given that middle level educational frameworks, current inclusion practices, and demands for differentiation are all dependent upon teachers working together, increasing the presence of co-teaching within middle level teacher education programs is both pragmatically sound and connected to foundational theories of middle level education. Middle school teachers and university faculty members who engage in co-teaching with teacher candidates can provide candidates with practical experiences tied closely to the work that will be expected of them as public school teachers. Early exposure to co-teaching models can better equip our students for their future work in today's schools. This study highlights the benefits possible from the implementation of a co-teaching model within a middle level education program. Benefits of co-teaching for middle level teacher candidates, classroom teachers, and university faculty are included. The results of this study may provide a unique framework of co-teaching that enhances interactions among educational constituents for improved teacher preparation, professional development for practicing teachers, and improved instruction for middle grades students

Statement of Problem

Exemplary middle schools use interdisciplinary teaming which is characterized by co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing with two or more teachers coming from different subject areas (Author, 2013; Beane, 1997; Conderman, 2011). In addition to this collaborative foundation within middle schools, the need for co-teaching is tied to federal mandates supporting students with disabilities as well as mandates in teacher education, in general. As caseloads for special education teachers continue to rise and as students with disabilities enter the regular education setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the need for co-teaching is considerable.

Given that accreditation standards, middle level educational frameworks, current inclusion practices, and demands for differentiation are all dependent upon teachers working together, increasing the presence of co-teaching within teacher education programs is both pragmatically sound and connected to foundational theories of middle level education. The purpose of our study was to examine the professional educational benefits for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members who engage in

co-teaching. Here we examine the benefits of co-teaching as it concerns teacher preparation for teacher candidates, practicing teachers, and university faculty all for improved instruction for middle grades students.

Background

Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2013) defined co-teaching as "two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching all of the students assigned to a classroom" (p. 4). Beninghof (2012) also stated that co-teaching is "a coordinated instructional practice" in general classrooms with much time spent on shared responsibilities of planning and reflection. These same researchers provided information on what co-teaching is not, including teachers working in isolation; one teacher teaching while another tutors (Beninghof, 2012); or a "phenomenon that lends itself to precise investigation" (DLDCEC, 2001, as cited in Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). While we have exemplars of what is and is not co-teaching, the process of co-teaching itself is natural, unfolding, and difficult to pin down.

The majority of literature tied to co-teaching is connected to the collaboration between regular classroom teachers and special education teachers (Conderman, 2011; Friend & Bursuck,

2011; Heck, Bacharach, & Mann, 2010; Hildenbrand, 2009; Miller, 2008; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). As valuable as this research is, it is not directly relevant to our study. There seems to be limited research available regarding the types of co-teaching arrangements utilized in our study. For instance, in a review of over 400 articles related to student teaching, only one form of co-teaching was referenced, which involved two teacher candidates co-teaching with each other under the guidance of one cooperating teacher (Clarke, Triggs, & Neilson, 2014). Although various researchers have studied the co-teaching of regular and special education teachers in the normal classroom environment, limited attention has been given to the occurrences of co-teaching among middle level teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, and university faculty.

Weilbacher and Tilford (2015) recently examined the perceptions of teacher candidates and their cooperating teachers regarding co-teaching in a year-long Professional Development School (PDS) middle grades program. The results indicated that co-teaching deepened the mentoring relationship between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates, was considered to be a strong form of teacher preparation, and was seen as beneficial for middle grades students. The strengths of this model included mutual learning, professional support, benefits for the K-12 students involved, and noticeable gains in pre-service teacher confidence with ample feedback in teaching.

With limited relevant research to draw upon, we relied significantly upon the work from St. Cloud State University (2012) that describes models of co-teaching we used when working with teacher candidates and cooperating teachers (see Table 1). These models include: *One Teach, One Assist; Station Teaching; Alternative (Differentiated);* and *Team Teaching*. These four models were used in varying ways at all sites and by all participants involved in the study. Each model provided a unique perspective in co-teaching.

Table 1:
Co-Teaching Models

Co-Teaching Models	Definition
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher has primary instructional responsibility while the other assists students with their work, monitors behaviors, or corrects assignments.
Station Teaching	The co-teaching pair divides the instructional content into parts where each teacher instructs one of the groups with groups spending time at each station
Alternative (Differentiated)	There are two different approaches to teaching the same information. While the learning outcome is the same for all students, the instructional strategy is different.
Team Teaching	Well planned, team-taught lessons that exhibit an invisible flow of instruction with no prescribed division of authority occurs. Using a team teaching strategy, both teachers are actively involved in the lesson.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to fully investigate the nuances and activities occurring with co-teaching. Given that this study involved various models of co-teaching between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers, candidates and university faculty, classroom teachers and university faculty, and, at times, all three parties, a qualitative design was the favored methodological approach for fluid movements in and out of the study to reconstruct the teaching process as a form of inquiry (Creswell, 1998, 2013; Hurd, 2012, 2013).

A variety of data sources were used for the study to examine the professional educational benefit of co-teaching for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members. Interview and focus group data from a convenience sample population of consenting middle grades classroom teachers

and their assigned teacher candidates were used as the primary data source for the study. Additional data sources included interview data from university instructors and field notes compiled by the authors (university faculty members) during their observations from their respective schools. Finally, on-going conversations between the university faculty members (authors) occurred as a multi-layered data source. This report only examined the benefits as derived from interview and focus group data.

Setting

The target middle grades schools were located in a small urban city within the Midwest. This small city had a population of approximately 130,000 residents. There were two school districts with five middle schools within the area. At the time of the study, the city had a minority population of about 20%. In addition, the median family income was approximately $50,000. Significant metropolitan areas were conveniently located within reasonable driving distance.

The participating schools in the study included Meadow View School and Prairieland Junior High School (PJHS) (pseudonyms). These schools were selected for their long-standing involvement in and support of the Middle Level Education Program. Meadow View and its teachers have supported the efforts of the program through collaborating and teaching middle level teacher candidates and students. Similarly, PJHS has been involved in the PDS program for 13 years and has provided powerful learning experiences for its middle grades students and the teacher candidates who have been placed there.

Meadow View School was part of a combined elementary and middle school (K-8) building and associated with a 9-12 high school. At the time of study, the total population of the schools was 1,000 students. Of this amount, 390 were enrolled at the K-8 building. The demographic breakdown of Meadow View and its affiliated high school was 70.9% White, 9.2% African American students, 5.4% Hispanic students,

7.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan, and 7.3% Multi-Racial.

PJHS was part of a unified district that had one area career center high school, one comprehensive high school, one junior high school, and seven elementary schools serving approximately 5,605 students. According to the 2015 State of Illinois Interactive Report Card, the enrollment at PJHS was 1,209 students. Demographically, the population was 50.1% White, 25.2% African American, 12.4% Hispanic students, 2.9% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 9.0% Bi/Multiracial. The free and reduced lunch population at the school was 58.5%.

Across the two schools, a total of nine classroom teachers in grades 7th through 8th participated in the study. There were also eight participating middle level candidates. Of this number, three candidates at PJHS were paired with three classroom teachers; whereas one was shared by two classroom teachers on the same team. At Meadow View there was a 1-to-1 ratio with four candidates and their participating teachers. In addition, one faculty instructor with experience teaching in the traditional course sections and mentorship for the PDS for the middle level education program participated in the study.

Participants

In exploring co-teaching among all teachers' responses (n=9), we found that the distribution of teachers across grade levels at the middle school varied. Accordingly, 44% (n=4) reported working on a 7th grade level team, 100% (n=9) on two 8th grade level teams, and 44% (n=4) reported working at multiple grades or levels[1].

Of the teachers and faculty instructor (n=10) working at all levels, 40% (n=4) identified as male, and 60% (n=6) identified as female. Also, 100% (n=10) identified as White/European American. Of these numbers, 70% (n=7), reported being 40 years of age or younger. Whether age and/or gender of a teacher influences the types and frequency of use of co-teaching was not examined as part of this study; but these factors of influence certainly may play a role in an educator's outlook and educational and workplace identities (Hurd, 2010, 2012).

---

[1] Percentages do not total to 100% as teachers indicated working on similar teams and in multiple grade levels/split assignments.

Likewise, a majority of participating teacher candidates identified as White/European (75%; n=6). One candidate identified as Asian American; whereas another identified as African American. Of these numbers, 50% (n=4) of the candidates were part of the senior-block, PDS program; whereas the other 50% (n=4) were part of the junior-block, pre-student teaching clinical class. Yet all the candidates were enrolled as part of the middle level education program at the same time. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Procedures

Data on participants' experiences were collected over one academic year (eight to nine months) through two interrelated phases: individual and focus group interviews. Following the procedures of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Wolcott (1994), we gathered field notes during weekly school observations over several weeks. These notes were transcribed and analyzed for distinguishable factors of the teacher candidates' and classroom teachers' experiences. To establish understanding and *transferability* (Shenton, 2004), factors were compared and analyzed through *structural corroboration* (Eisner, 1998).

The interrelated phases involved a minimum of three individual and focus group interviews with teachers. The first one emerged from natural conversations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), followed with an intensive interview which emerged from observations. We then conducted one final focus group interview for member checking to ensure *coherence* (Eisner, 1998) and *rigorous subjectivity* (Wolcott, 1994). Open-ended questions were asked using *holistic analysis* (Yin, 2009), focused on key factors derived from observations.

In this report, our key factors have been limited to the following questions:

1. How do you see yourself as a co-teacher? Describe how your colleagues see you?
2. What are the professional educational benefits for teacher candidates, middle grades classroom teachers, and university faculty members who engage in co-teaching?
3. How can higher education faculty assist teachers and teacher candidates with school transitions and young adolescents?

For data analysis and representation, Creswell's (2013) *spiral* method was used, a custom-built and learned approach to qualitative research, to investigate the different layers of data on the effectiveness of co-teaching included in the study. Using significant factors from field notes, university faculty member conversations (authors), and interviews, the authors engaged in the process of constructing, deconstructing, and then reconstructing impressions of the data to more fully understand the issues. This method was especially important and useful given the limited research available on co-teaching between middle grades teachers. Specific responses from interviews were analyzed for *patterned regularities in the data* (Creswell, 1998, p. 152). We used these patterns to construct comparisons between each teacher and between the groups of teachers at the different schools for *consensual validation* (Eisner, 1998). Themes emerged *within* and *across* interviews (Chase, 2005) and were compared against that of our own experiences and journeys as faculty in co-teaching and in research (Hurd, 2010, 2012, 2013; Hurd & Weilbacher, 2014).

Findings and Conclusions

General Trends

An examination was also conducted of the number of years that teachers and the faculty instructor had worked and the number of years they taught at the same level or school(s). One half of the teachers (50%; n=5) reported having worked for 15 years or less in the field, while 50% indicated they had worked in education between 17-22 or more years. Two participants reported having taught for 37 years or more. Regarding the number of years teachers taught at the same school and grade level(s), nearly all (90%; n=9) of the teachers indicated they had worked at their particular level(s) and in their particular school(s) for six or more years. Only one teacher responded with having worked at the current grade levels and in teaching for fewer than five years. The length of time a teacher has taught at a school(s), the grade level(s), or has worked, in general, may influence the educational outlook and use of co-teaching.

The distribution of core-content areas (English language arts, math, science, social studies) along with reading was nearly equal across the two schools. ELA was taught by 33% of the teachers (n=3); math was taught by 22% of

teachers (n=2); science and social studies were only represented by one teacher each (11%, respectively); whereas reading was taught by 22% (n=2) of the participating teachers. Of these numbers, two teachers (22%; n=2) reported having taught both ELA and Reading as their content areas.

Co-teacher Identifications

In an effort to provide additional background perspective into how the cooperating teachers perceived co-teaching, during interviews we asked the teachers about their co-teaching self-identifications. When asked the questions, "Do you see yourself as a co-teacher? Describe how your colleagues see you", half of the Meadow View School teachers identified as co-teachers; whereas the other half did not see themselves as "true" co-teachers.

Mrs. Sherrie Baker, an English teacher, stated,

> Um...I've done it. I don't do it as often as I would like to I think. Um, a couple of years ago, I would have said absolutely because the team that I taught with, we worked more together as we would plan together; we would do cross-curricular activities. So, we would be co-teaching. (personal communication, October 20, 2014)

Yet Mr. Crow, the science teacher, reported,

> I do. I do see myself as a co-teacher. Since I have been at this middle school, I've enjoyed having teacher candidates come in my room with their teachers at the college levels. So, yes. I see myself as a co-teacher." (personal communication, October, 22, 2014)

Similarly, Professor Armstrong—a faculty instructor in our program—when asked the question about co-teacher identity, identified as a co-teacher and cited personal experiences having co-taught with a special education teacher.

> Then for one year, I actually co-taught with a special education teacher in my math classroom. Again she brought a different perspective to what we were doing. And you know, it was our class, so she was not just working with her students who were in there. She was

working with all students. So, we had two teachers in there. (personal communication, October 15, 2014)

After the forum interviews, however, all the teachers from Meadow View concluded that they were not co-teachers, traditionally speaking. That is, the teachers only had three academic units by which they co-planned, co-taught, and co-assessed. Thus, they chose to redefine themselves as collaborative teachers, as they did not consistently co-teach throughout the year. In fact, forum discussions drew out other co-taught units which were initially forgotten. The teachers remembered their big unit and neglected to "count" the other two co-teaching units because they "did not at first remember those activities" (teacher forum communication, November 4, 2014). Likewise, the conversations with Professor Armstrong revealed that even a legitimate identification of being a co-teacher still does not necessarily translate to being a co-teacher on a middle grades team. One can be familiar—even successful—with co-teaching in a general and special education model but still be rather unfamiliar and/or unsuccessful with a co-teaching model within a middle grades team structure.

In examining teacher candidates' responses, similar findings were evident. Of the four students at Meadow View, three identified as co-teachers. Natalie described the fluid nature of the parallel co-teaching experience in relation to her identity:

> I would say yes. Um, I think just because I've had different experiences where working with people, the longer you work with people, the more you kind of figure each other out. So, with that experience of, um my job, I'm able to like become more fluid and just work side by side and like finish each other's sentences and really becoming like almost one teacher, but two bodies. So, it's been a great learning experience of how, um, just how to present information. How to do it in a way that doesn't feel like this one teacher's saying this, this one teacher's saying that. (personal communication, October 2, 2014)

Chantay described the different kinds of teachers' personalities involved with co-teaching and how that might influence one's identity as

compared with that of one's partner. She said that there could still be challenges present in the model related to classroom control due to issues of lesson and classroom ownership. But overall, her experience was worthwhile, as she "got along" with her partner during the co-planning and co-teaching process.

Four of the five PJHS teachers saw themselves as co-teachers and their perspectives were quite different. Mr. Bond never even mentioned co-teaching with his teacher candidate but provided a lengthy description of the co-teaching relationship he had with his special education partner. Especially compelling was his metaphor of "family" in describing how their classroom functioned:

> As a co-teacher I see myself as the "Dad" of the "classroom family". I am the stricter "man of few words" that you don't want to disappoint. I effectively reach students that respond better to this type of male figure. My co-teacher is the "Mom" of the "classroom family" and effectively reaches those that require a softer side and more of a motherly way of instruction. Together we "Mom and Dad" make up the co-teaching team, together we make decisions that are best for our students.

In contrast, Mr. DeMarco focused solely on the co-teaching that took place with Cassie, the teacher candidate who also worked with Mrs. Daniels. There seemed to be some disappointment in his description as they were unable to reach what he considered to be his ideal version of co-teaching:

> I would like to see myself as a co-teacher in the true sense of the phrase – one who shares all teaching responsibilities in a particular class. In my co-teaching experiences, the other teacher and I communicated this ideal to each other; yet, it was hard to practice in the classroom. Our classes typically fell into a lead teacher/assistant teacher situation.

Mr. DeMarco went on to describe a variety of reasons why his co-taught classes fell short of the ideal, including start time challenges, students not seeing he and his partner as equals, and finding time for common planning time. He also mentioned how he would often just use the same plans as his other classes for the co-taught class which would not provide adequate time for the co-teacher to plan how she would help during class. Thus, she was forced into the "background" into the teacher/assistant teacher model.

Mrs. Daniels, who also mentored Cassie, had probably the most complex description of co-teaching, as she mentioned her partnerships involving both teacher candidates and special educators:

> I see myself as a co-teacher in two ways. When I co-teach with a special education teacher I see myself as sharing the responsibility for teaching all of our students by working together for planning instruction, delivery lessons/activities, managing student behaviors, adapting/modifying lessons, and assessing students. As a co-teacher with student teachers, I see the above response as the "model" for what I can offer as a cooperating teacher. I think my role is to show my student teacher how to do the above things as an individual teacher, yet know that he/she can apply them to working within their own room, to working with special education teachers, to working with a team of teachers and working with department colleagues...as time passes, my job is to serve more as a mentor to guide the development of the above techniques.

Mrs. Dennis focused solely on her co-teaching experiences with teacher candidates, and mentioned the value it had for her own professional growth. She indicated that she had enjoyed spending time with the student teachers, learning from what they brought to the classroom. The co-teaching helped her because the student teachers modeled "current teaching methods" and used "lesson planning with modern technology." The current methods and strategies also helped Mrs. Dennis to "better connect with [her] students and tailor lesson plans to match student interest" and "provide timely feedback and differentiated instruction". Each of these Prairieland teachers came to the interviews with different perceptions of how they see themselves as co-teachers and why they value the experience.

School	One Teach, One Assist	Station Teaching	Alternative (Differentiated)	Team Teaching
Meadow View	1x in MA	1x in MA; 2x in SCI, SS, ELA (most common)		1x in MA
Prairieland	8x in MA, Reading, ELA (most common)	8x in MA, Reading, ELA	4x in MA, Reading, ELA	3x in MA, Reading, ELA
Author 1	1x in MA	MA, SCI, SS, ELA- 1x each		1x in MA
Author 2				8x in MA, Reading, ELA

Figure 1: Experiences with the Co-Teaching Models

The Benefits of Co-Teaching

Several benefits of co-teaching were mentioned during participant interviews of teachers, the faculty instructor, and teacher candidates. They were expressed within respective groups (i.e., benefits to teachers, to students, candidates), as well as across group classifications. The overall shared benefits of co-teaching were reported as: (1) better preparation of content and increased opportunities for students; (2) a focus on the needs of middle schoolers with another set of eyes; (3) an increased respect for colleagues; and (4) extended time. The most pronounced idea reported was time. Over and over, participants returned to the concept of increased time for planning, teaching, and assessing as a direct result of co-teaching.

Co-teaching benefits for cooperating teachers. According to the analysis of the interviews with cooperating teachers, co-teaching provided benefits to the teachers, helped their students, and was influential in preparing teacher candidates. During planning together, the faculty members and teacher candidates at Prairieland used *Team-Teaching* as their co-teaching approach (see Figure 1). Teacher candidates indicated that the co-planning process was valuable. This was the first experience many of the teacher candidates had with co-planning and team-teaching. The teachers indicated they were able to self-reflect and assess what strategies worked and what did not work. The teachers were also provided the opportunity to observe other teachers and expose themselves to other techniques and instructional strategies. They were then able to implement new tactics in their own classrooms. Some teachers reported they observed that student-centered learning was successful in a classroom they observed and, in turn, they began to implement activities like this in their own class. Another reported benefit was in having teacher candidates that were relatively closer in age to the students than the teacher may have been. Teachers were able to observe how the candidate related with the students and used those connections to relate classroom material to the students' personal interests. This helped teachers tailor instructional plans that related to students' interests.

Station Teaching was another one of five co-teaching models used during this study. As stated earlier, it occurs when a co-teaching pair divides the instructional content into parts where each teacher instructs one of the groups with groups spending time at each station (St. Cloud State University, 2012). In this case, the students rotated between topical/content groups within the four content area courses (math science, social studies, and English language arts).

Mrs. Sherrie Baker described her experience with station teaching:

> So each station had its own teacher, and that allowed for four different lessons to be taught and practiced at the same time. So, it was a time saver…they had

that direct supervision of a teacher and direct teaching from a teacher. So that was beneficial. (forum communication, November, 16, 2014)

By far, this model was favored and used by teacher candidates and cooperating teachers at Meadow View for reasons of time: covering more content with less time and more people (see Figure 1). Logistically speaking, it also allowed the cooperating teachers who were supervising to walk around and observe the teacher candidates for lesson/teaching evaluation. More importantly:

> Whether [the co-teaching] was a [university] student, or myself, or the faculty member, that there was a lot of deeper understanding that was gained by having that collaboratively directly taught small group instruction. I think it really, really, worked well. (Aron Brown, forum communication, November, 16, 2014)

Co-teaching benefits for middle grades students. Another benefit of co-teaching concerned meeting the needs of individual middle grades students. One cooperating teacher remarked that she set up her co-teaching differently than her colleagues in that she had the same mathematics content being taught in all the co-teaching groups. Each group was essentially doing the same thing.

> So, it was much more individualized and we were able to meet the needs of every learner…with the co-teaching, we were able to meet the individual needs and make a lesson that was tailored to each of them which was nice. (forum communication, November, 16, 2014)

Other important benefits of co-teaching for middle-grade students included more opportunities for small groups and individualized instruction, re-teaching of concepts to students who may be struggling, and providing occasions for the teacher candidate and the teacher to show the students how the lessons apply to different skills they are working on. Co-teaching also provided flexibility by providing choices of leaders for students to whom they could go for help. Some students responded better to the teacher candidate than the teacher and preferred to receive help from her or him while other students preferred the teaching style of the teacher and would continue to seek help from him or her. The teachers had the chance to see how the students responded to different teaching styles and were able to help the teacher candidates reach students who may have been struggling with one teaching style. One teacher indicated he observed another classroom and noticed that students appeared to develop a sense of learned helplessness in one classroom and succeed in another. This observation provided him with a deeper understanding of how some students behaved and responded to other teachers in different settings.

An unanticipated benefit for the middle grades students in the classrooms emerged from this program. Some students who were once considered "shy" had become more engaged in the classroom. These students may have connected with the teacher candidate and their teaching style and allowed them to engage more often. Some students seemed to pay attention better in the classroom when a new face and/or extra person was present. Many teachers reported the students would often ask when the teacher candidate would be returning to help in the classroom.

Co-teaching benefits for teacher candidates. One of the goals of the middle level education program is for its teacher candidates to reach near equal status to the teacher in the classroom. This is considered a sign of success. Teacher candidates were motivated to work harder and prepare more to earn the equal status and to show their cooperating teachers they are prepared and have the same background knowledge on the lesson topic. The teacher candidates also reported wanting to have the same level of knowledge on the topics taught and therefore pushed themselves to learn more about the topics. They did this to be prepared to teach it at the same level as the co-teacher would be. One of the interns indicated this is a new goal she has set for each lesson she teaches and has pushed her to prepare better for class. Overall, co-teaching helped the teacher candidates develop a mind-set of not letting their teaching partner down so they became more prepared.

Professor Armstrong described how sharing time and expertise with a cooperating teacher for co-taught lessons offers a unique perspective for teacher candidates, one that may not occur otherwise. "I think they [teacher

candidates] understood that there are more ideas and I think you have an opportunity when you are co-teaching to bring in different perspective, different ideas, different backgrounds that connect to make a stronger lesson…" (personal communication, November, 14, 2014). She went on to share how her respect grew for the middle grades math teacher with whom she co-taught and how she "seemed to enjoy an opportunity to talk professionally with someone in her own field, to share backgrounds and information and resources" (personal communication, November, 14, 2014).

Teacher candidates in a similar way mentioned several benefits of co-teaching with cooperating teachers and with middle level specific faculty. Their answers at first focused on classroom management over pedagogy. Mason shared, "You [teacher candidates] can keep going and then have the other one, um, other co-teacher deal with [off task student behaviors] in a different manner. Um, if that didn't work, you can always switch" (forum communication, October, 29, 2014). Later on, however, teacher candidates began to dig deeper into the benefits, describing encounters with *Team Teaching* and *One Teach, One Assist* (St. Cloud State University, 2012). Chantay and Natalie reported:

> And that was beneficial, just in case you forgot something or in case, maybe they, um, the one assistant could see a student was maybe struggling with a concept could elaborate a little bit further than, um, the one teaching. So, that seemed to be really functional for our benefit. (forum communication, October, 29, 2014)

Assisting Teachers and Teacher Candidates with Co-teaching

The final factor examined assisting teachers and teacher candidates in clinical course experiences. We asked participants questions about school transitions and young adolescents and how university faculty might assist. Several ideas were offered during interviews by teachers, the faculty instructor, and teacher candidates. The overall ideas were reported as: (1) early clinical and co-teaching opportunities for teacher candidates; (2) going beyond observations and the norm by having a focus on co-teaching authenticity with teachers, their students, and the school curriculum; (3)

increased faculty and cooperating collaborations and partnerships or reciprocal co-teaching. For readability, the findings in this section are presented as a dialogue between all three constituents and the researchers simultaneously.

"How can higher ed. faculty assist teachers and teacher candidates with school transitions and young adolescents? Please explain."

> I think what is happening in [your classes] is huge. That during the day, they're able to instead of going to class and learning about these [middle school] students, they're able to go into the classroom and observe these things and to really see how different content areas work. But then also get to know a specific group of students in a classroom. And observe, then then do small group and then class teaching. (Mrs. Sherrie Baker, October 20, 2014)

"Okay. That's interesting. What else can you all tell us, or what else can faculty do to assist?"

> Yeah, um. I think the setup is wonderful and all of those real experiences in the classroom are amazing. But I would love to see us bridge the gap even more. You know, um, sometimes if teacher candidates are in my room and they are observing, I'm sure sometimes that they have questions and they're not sure why certain things are done and…you know, why does that happen? And things like that. So, I think that one of the pieces is building a greater connection. So, maybe even us [cooperating teachers] coming over to co-teach with you [university faculty]. (Ms. Cori Dayle, personal communication, October 15, 2014)

"Is there anything else you'd like to share about how higher ed. faculty can help?"

> To me, we're moving in the very strong direction. That we're increasing the number of clinicals. As a classroom teacher, I saw the PDS program as such as strength because the student were in there for such an extended amount of time. By having that extended amount of time, I felt that they were so much better prepared when they went out. It takes experience; it takes time for planning. So, I think the more opportunities we

give the student teachers to do that, or give clinical students to do that, um, just the better prepared they're going to be. The more comfortable they're going to be. And I think they're going to enjoy the profession because they're going to see the high points. (Professor Armstrong, personal communication, October 15, 2014)

The social studies teacher interjects.

Stay current. Get a sense of what the most pertinent information is for students to know before they walk in...try new ideas specific to our school site. And so bringing those ideas about what might be effective, for your students, for our students, could be an immensely great partnership and collaborative opportunity. (Mr. Aron Brown, personal communication, November 15, 2014)

"Well, what about the teacher candidates? How can faculty assist you with your clinical school transitions and understandings of young adolescents?"

I would have the [university] school place us in a course, like a nine week course, but on teaming or team teaching. I've never seen higher ed. or middle school team teaching. (Jackson, personal communication, October 29, 2014)

"So, even beyond a professor going over to a clinical setting and co-teaching with the cooperating teacher, you're saying you'd like to see the faculty of your program actually co-teach together in a course?"

Either that, or make it, like, five required hours that we have to go to any of the local schools and watch co-teaching in practice, actually happen. (Jackson, personal communication, October 29, 2014)

Chantay interjects.

I agree with that. So, all of this is kind of new to me, so I find it very interesting, but you don't dig deeper into it. Rather than just see the co-teaching like we did in our observations, we maybe when all

four teachers sit around and talk actually see how can the Civil War be incorporated into a science lesson and a math lesson. (personal communication, October 29, 2014)

"Is there anything else you'd like to share?"

I think the way we're going about it now is just like slowly but surely, kind of acclimating into the school system. And just, we start like observations, and so it's kind of trickling in and just becoming comfortable in a classroom environment and observing. I loved the different rotations. Like, okay, you're observing. Okay, now you're just going to circulate. Okay, well now you're going to break into small groups...to get a feel for the students, the teacher, and each other and all that kind of stuff. So, I think that I personally love that we did it this semester. (Natalie, personal communication, October 24, 2014)

"Thank you, everyone, for your time and for sharing your thoughts on how faculty can assist teachers and teacher candidates with better school transitions and with understanding young adolescents. Your insights were both confirming and challenging."
Overall, co-teaching was a positive experience for the faculty members, candidates, cooperating teachers, and middle school students in the classrooms.

Discussion

Time as a Benefit of Co-teaching

Interdisciplinary teaming, exploratory curriculum, and rich middle grades specific pedagogy all take massive efforts of time and planning from a team of committed and specially-trained teachers (AMLE, 2010; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 1991, 2009). Yet one of the drawbacks of co-teaching concerns time. Teachers face daunting time constraints in today's classrooms, divided between test preparations, standards-based grading, project-based curriculum, parent and community involvements, service learning, common planning time for integrated units, standards for socio-emotional leaning and advisory, just to name a few. At the same time, one major

necessity of co-teaching includes time, for a team of teachers for their professional development, their students, and a school overall. Time for cross-curricular course offerings, authentic advisories, integrated units, mini-courses on student-driven topics of interest are just some of the ways that time translates as a benefit. Once a middle grades team is able to reach this level with co-teaching, the benefits can be exponential.

As mentioned earlier, the overall shared benefits of co-teaching with teacher candidates include: (1) better preparation of content and increased opportunities for students; (2) a focus on the needs of middle schoolers with another set of eyes; (3) an increased respect for colleagues; and (4) extended time. These findings are supported in the research by Villa et al. (2013) who report co-teaching benefits such as professional growth, differentiation, teacher access, behavior management, student engagement and support for unidentified students, and time on task. Perhaps the most poignant connection to their research and that of ours is the focus on the needs of middle schoolers with another set of eyes. This is corroborated by how co-teaching can provide adolescents with that a sense of belonging due to the increase in acceptance of diversity while setting high expectations for all learners (Villa et al., 2014).

However, the question of how to maximize co-teaching benefits while minimize its drawbacks naturally remains answered. Until this main barrier is addressed, the challenges may continue. Considerations based on this study point to the following two influencing factors.

Issues with federal and state mandates. Impossible to ignore today is the impact of federal and state-mandated change tied to hundreds of institutions of higher education and to public schools. While these changes, which are often corporate-driven and commercialized, frequently run counter to the inclusive tendencies of researchers and partnerships; there is no denying that these mandates have altered the work of researchers and teachers alike (Ellis & Bogle, 2008; Hurd & Weilbacher, 2014). Sustained, engaged and complex initiatives such a co-teaching at the middle level can provide multiple perspectives on schooling practices through organic and authentic responsivity toward school culture, home culture, and classroom and teacher interactions and partnerships. These initiatives

may even fight against the reluctance of some teachers to take teacher candidates and/or co-teach as a result of a high-stakes era.

Issues with the partial implementation of the middle school model. One of our program goals is to deliberately try to imbed more co-teaching within our coursework and clinical experiences to augment university-school partnerships. Quite contrary to our goal, we learned that leaving co-teaching up to cooperating teachers led to rather infrequent and informal episodes of co-teaching. And this minimal "winging it" depiction of co-teaching existed despite our emphasizing the importance of co-teaching during initial meetings with the cooperating teachers and teacher candidates. We had no idea that minimal planning had occurred. This discovery suggested that we may need to place greater emphasis on co-teaching within our clinical experiences in order to facilitate *confidence and competence* through a concerted effort toward *gradual release of responsibility* (Villa et al., 2013).

Challenges related to implementing co-teaching models really ride on more deeply rooted issues with schools that struggle to implement the concept of middle grades education, namely interdisciplinary team teaching. This struggle has been well documented in the literature (Beane, 1997; Mertens, Anfara, Caskey, & Flowers, 2013; Ruder, 2010). The trends of various transitions to and away from the middle school concept over the past 40 to 50 years has created the "arrested development" we see in schools today (Dickinson & Butler, 2001).

Limitations

The relatively little time that teacher candidates spent discussing the impact that being observed by teachers other than their cooperating teachers suggested that this component of the study fell well short of what we were hoping to accomplish. In contrast, the candidates had a great deal to say regarding the experience of teaching with their university supervisor. Future research studies could benefit from conducting additional phases involving the different co-teaching models to inquire into any potential variations between and across co-teaching experiences. Although five co-teaching models were used in this study, candidates relied most heavily on Station Teaching (Meadow View) and One Teach, One Assist (Prairieland; see Figure

1). Moreover, infrequent and informal episodes of co-teaching occurred. Emphasizing the importance of co-teaching during initial meetings with the cooperating teachers and teacher candidates along with a greater emphasis on co-teaching within earlier clinical experiences may provide different and unique result. Yet there are implications for middle level education programs and teacher candidates enrolled in clinical courses, concerning teacher preparedness and professional growth. Future studies could benefit from large scale qualitative and quantitative research between multiple institutions, courses, and diverse teacher populations to examine potential variances between co-teaching model and between levels of preparedness for in-service teaching.

Implications for Future Study

The Unidentified Co-teacher

The notion that co-teaching is something that occurs between two teachers of different content/contexts needs to be considered. For example, when asked about her co-teaching identity, a math teacher reported, "Currently, I guess I would say no. Because I am the only one in my classroom" (Ms. Cori Dayle, personal communication, October 15, 2014). This response seems to suggest that this teacher's identification (or lack thereof) as a co-teacher is directly tied to physical space and the sharing of that space. It is less defined by what teachers do and more by traditional perspectives/models and of control and delivery.

However, co-teaching arrangements and movements need to include teacher candidates, collegiate instructors, and others who may intentionally share in the content planning, teaching, and assessment of middle schoolers in some varying way. Accordingly, the various definitions/models and the limited research concerning co-teaching among middle level faculty is dangerously inadequate. None of these takes into account the unfolding nature of co-teaching as it might occur among middle school teachers engaged in interdisciplinary teams.

A Framework for Co-teaching

Besides the benefits already shared, there are multiple and poignant dimensions that surface from the experiences between teacher candidates and university faculty. These particular dimension and benefits are almost non-existent in the literature on co-teaching. They include: (1) early clinical and co-teaching opportunities for teacher candidates; (2) going beyond observations and the norm by having a focus on co-teaching authenticity with teachers, students, and the school curriculum; and (3) increased faculty and cooperating teacher collaborations and partnerships or reciprocal co-teaching.

Our goal in conducting this study was to determine if and how providing co-teaching experiences enhances teacher preparation for teacher candidates, professional development for practicing teachers and university faculty, and improved instruction for middle grades students. This goal was realized and is seen in the many facets of data that emerged from the constituents involved. More importantly, we changed as a result of these experiences. This framework offers ideas for immersed co-teaching experiences as described; on-going conversations between constituents; and a process that encourages examination of pedagogical approaches and self-reflexivity. This framework provides evidence of self-affirming efficacy for faculty, teacher candidates, and cooperating teachers; and it provides an impetus for stronger relationships among these constituents.

Recommendations

As many middle grades schools find themselves facing serious economic and organizational challenges, brought by state and federal mandates for standardization (Ruder, 2010), researchers and teachers are faced once again with threats to the features of middle grades education. Accordingly, "The traditionally student-centered mainstays of middle level education are in danger of being dismantled one program at a time" (Ruder, 2010, p. 1). If we are to stay the course and continue to build strong middle grades education schools and programs, we must recapture the heart and soul of the middle school concept: interdisciplinary teaming. There is certainly a need for heightened awareness of interdisciplinary teaming, as equally the need for schools to reevaluate their use and understanding of co-teaching and common planning time. Yet our urgency to extend the high-quality use and understanding of teaming only becomes matched when we enrich our teachers and teacher candidates with middle grades pedagogy and with the lessons learned on the benefits of co-teaching.

References

Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). (2010). *This we believe*. Westerville, OH: Author.

Beane, J. (1997). *Curriculum integration: Designing the core of democratic education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Beninghof, A. M. (2012). *Co-Teaching that works: Structures and strategies for maximizing student learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. New York,NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voice. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.), (pp. 651-680). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Clarke, A., Triggs, V., & Nielsen, W. (2014). Cooperating teacher participation in teacher education: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 84*(2), 163-202.

Conderman, G. (2011). Middle school co-teaching: Effective practices and student reflection. *Middle School Journal, 42*(4), 24-31.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dickinson, T. S., & Butler, D. A. (2001). Reinventing the middle school: A proposal to counter arrested development. *Middle School Journal, 33*(1), 1-13.

Eisner, E. W. (1998). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Ellis, J., & Bogle, D. (2008, November). *Placement-an unforeseen casualty of No Child Left Behind*. Paper presented at Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators, Myrtle Beach, SC.

Friend, M., & Bursuck, W. M. (2011). *Including students with special needs: A practical guide for classroom teachers*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Heck, T. W., Bacharach, N., & Mann, B. (2010). *Enhancing student teaching through co-teaching*. Retrieved from http://www.education.purdue.edu/oppl /2011-2012/Co-Teaching_About.pdf

Hildenbrand, S. M. (2009). Designing effective experiences for preservice inclusion teachers for co-teaching: An action research study. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester) Retrieved from http://gradworks.umi.com/3367263.pdf

Hurd, E. (2010). Confessions of belonging: My emotional journey as a medical translator. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 783-791. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1177/ 1077800410383117

Hurd, E. (2012). A framework for understanding multicultural identities: An investigation of a middle level student's French-Canadian Honduran-American (Mestizo) identity. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 7*(2), 111-127.

Hurd, E. (2013). Lessons learned: A case of one teacher's common planning time experience. In S. B. Mertens, V. A. Anfara, Jr., M. Caskey, & N. Flowers (Eds.), *Common planning time in middle level schools: Research Studies from the MLER SIG's national project* (pp. 149-168). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Hurd, E., & Weilbacher, G. (2014). Sowing weeds of change. *Education Week 33*(29), 22-24. Available:

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014 /04/23/29hurd.h33.html

Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2005). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Mertens, S. B., Anfara, V. A., Jr., Caskey, M. M., & Flowers, N. (2013). *Common planning time in middle level schools: Research Studies from the MLER SIG's national project*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Miller, J. (2008). Teams in action. *Middle Ground, 11*(4), 37-38.

National Middle School Association (NMSA). (1991). *Professional certification and preparation for the middle level: A position paper of National Middle School Association*. Columbus, OH: Author.

National Middle School Association (NMSA). (2009). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.

Ruder, R. (2010, April). Dismantling of the middle school. *Middle Ground Magazine, 13*(4), 25.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*(2), 63-75.

St. Cloud University State teacher Quality Enhancement Program. (2012). *Co-teaching*. Retrieved from http://www.stcloudstate.edu/soe/tqe/coteaching/default.asp

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *38th annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2016* (U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-OSE-12-C-0031). Washington, DC: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS).

Retrieved from: http://www2.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2016/parts-b-c/38th-arc-for-idea.pdf

Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., & Nevin, A. I. (2008). *A guide to co-teaching: Practical tips for facilitating student learning* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Villa, R. A., Thousand, J. S., & Nevin, A. I. (2013). *A guide to co-teaching: Practical tips for facilitating student learning* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Weilbacher, G., & Tilford, K. (2015). Co-teaching in a year-long professional development school, *School-University Partnerships, 8*(1), 37-48.

Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.