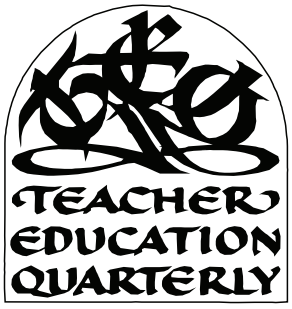

Do You Really Want to Do This?

Teacher Candidate Perspectives on Imperfect Placements

Kathleen Olmstead, Jennifer Randhare Ashton, & Christian Peter Wilkens

Abstract

The clinical internship—also called student teaching—represents one of the most important experiences of teacher preparation programs nationwide yet remains not well understood. This article focuses on the experiences of teacher candidates who have struggled in their schools. Here we present data from a survey administered to 107 undergraduate and graduate teacher candidates (49 in elementary grades, 58 in secondary grades); we find that 7/107 (6.5%) respondents indicated imperfect placements. We then present data from semistructured follow-up interviews with those who struggled, using a constant comparative method for coding and analysis. Participants described five main categories of imperfection in clinical internship: *overwhelming responsibility*, *a lack of support*, *negative mentors*, *overly controlled*

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or constrained teaching contexts, and *poor or negative feedback about teaching*. We discuss what these findings might mean and suggest that inclusive coteaching models have the potential to ameliorate some imperfections, perhaps ultimately improving the work of the teachers our students become.

Introduction

Each year, teacher preparation programs in the United States send tens of thousands of teacher candidates out to schools and communities across the nation, ostensibly to learn how to teach (National Council of Teacher Quality, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). What happens when those teacher candidates arrive is critically important, because as Goldhaber, Krieg, and Theobald (2017) pointed out, "for most prospective teachers, the student teaching requirement is the single prolonged experience they will have in an actual classroom before the management and learning of students becomes their primary responsibility" (p. 326).

For the purposes of this article, we use the term *clinical internship* to represent the culminating experiences at the end of a teacher preparation program—often still described as student teaching. We use the term *teacher candidate* to represent students completing clinical internships; these teacher candidates are often described in the literature as student teachers. We also use the term *mentor teacher* to represent the primary school–based teacher educator—often referred to as the cooperating teacher in the literature.

The clinical internship represents the most substantial field-based component of teacher preparation programs nationwide; the U.S. Department of Education's most recent Title II report indicates that teacher candidates spent an average of 525 hours on site in K–12 classrooms as part of their preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). We are also accumulating evidence that clinical internship experiences have an influence on eventual teacher effectiveness (Goldhaber et al., 2017). Although the mechanisms at work are not yet well understood, it appears that teacher candidates' learning in schools with strong cultures of teacher collaboration, demonstrated student achievement gains, and high teacher retention rates are subsequently more effective at raising student achievement in their own classrooms (Ronfeldt, 2015). It also appears that the relationship between a teacher candidate and the mentor teacher has a powerful impact on the clinical experience (Bodger, 2016; Izadinia, 2017). The clinical internship experience, in a real sense, shapes what apprentice teachers become.

Yet it isn't clear that teacher preparation programs structure clinical internship experiences with uniformity—nor do we have any reason to think they would, if given the chance. State standards for teacher certification vary widely, and our K–12 schools are locally run, diverse institutions by almost any measure—structure, standards, history and geography, funding and other inputs, student and teacher composition, and a range of student outcome measures (U.S. Department of Edu-

cation, 2016). This is congruent with what the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2018) considers essential to a teacher education program's success—maintaining local flexibility in clinical practice administration to meet the needs of each program's unique community and context. The numbers alone suggest that there is little chance of common experience among teacher candidates in the United States. Furthermore, many teacher preparation programs deliberately emphasize preparation for teaching in specific contexts, for example, schools serving rural students or school systems without strong records of student achievement gains (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2016). Many teachers have expressed preferences to work in schools with demonstrated challenges for a range of reasons both personal and professional (DeBose, 2016; Podolsky, Kini, Bishop, & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Walsh, Putman, & Lewis, 2015). And it is undoubtedly true that there is little uniformity of mentoring skill among the United States' estimated 3.5 million public school teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Table 105.40).

It appears likely that teacher candidates facing different challenges develop different skills—yet we know little about the process from the standpoint of teacher candidates themselves and very little about what teacher candidates learn while in placements that are less than ideal. What does it mean to spend hundreds of hours (or more) with mentors who do not collaborate, or in classrooms where students do not learn, or in schools that teachers leave year after year? What do teacher candidates take away from the clinical internship experience? Our goal in this article is not generalizability but instead to add to our current knowledge base the voices and experiences of those teacher candidates who have gone out to learn to teach—and who have run into challenges along the way. Thus the research questions that guided this study are as follows:

> How common are teacher candidate struggles—with mentoring, adult or student relationships, or classroom responsibilities in their clinical internships?
>
> How do teacher candidates describe their learning in placements where students, teachers, or schools themselves struggle?
>
> What are teacher candidates' experiences negotiating the complexity of the teacher candidate–mentor teacher relationship?

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism is central to the authors' understanding of teaching and learning and one framework that we believe allows us to explore theoretical and practical benefits of clinical practice as a collaborative apprenticeship. Social constructivism views the process of learning as developing through shared agency between the learner and instructor, who co-construct knowledge (Adams, 2006). A social constructivist framework for teaching and learning requires both parties

to have time to talk, listen, and observe (Adams, 2006). Because learners are positioned as active constructors of knowledge through social interaction, interpretation, and understanding, social constructivism views the creation of knowledge to be inseparable from the social environment (Vygotsky, 1962; Woolfolk, 1993). Last, we note that social construction of knowledge is facilitated when collaborators and knowledge are well matched; an expert cannot simply create another expert by telling a novice what they know.

Just as teachers must be prepared to teach, learners must be prepared to access new knowledge and skills. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) provides a useful lens for helping us to understand how a collaborative approach to clinical internship can either work or fall apart, depending on the match between co-constructors. Vygotsky (1978) described the ZPD as nascent functions that are actively in the process of maturing; we believe this view can prove useful in examining what happens to teacher candidates during imperfect placements. We return to consideration of active knowledge construction and ZPD in the analysis that follows.

Also influencing our thinking regarding teacher candidates' learning is Lortie's suggestion that unlike many other occupations, teacher candidates have experienced the apprenticeship of observation—many having spent a great portion of their lifetimes as students in schools observing and interacting with teachers (Borg, 2004). Teacher candidates both rely on and extend these experiences as members of a social community of students, learners, and, eventually, teachers (Wenger, 1998). It has also been suggested that mentor teachers become who they are as mentors as a result of their own social experiences as mentees and through their participation in a community of practice (Lunsmann, Beck, Riddle, Scott, & Adkins, 2019).

Review of the Literature

According to Stanford University's 2014 *edTPA Annual Administrative Report*, more than 600 teacher education programs in more than 40 states participate in the edTPA, a performance assessment designed to measure effective teaching for beginning teachers. The overall edTPA passing rate reported (based on the recommended national standard of 42) is 72% (Stanford University, 2014). While almost 30% of students score poorly on the edTPA, we seldom hear of teacher candidates' lack of success in the classroom during clinical internships. Indeed, only about 1% of teacher candidates in teacher education programs fail (Johnson & Yates, 1982)—yet we know that many of our students experience difficult clinical internship placements. However, the research on such placements is limited and, in many cases, outdated. Accordingly, in their call for more research, Wilkens, Ashton, Maurer, and Smith (2015) concluded that there is "little useful information just now about what sorts of imperfections and pressures allow a teacher to develop resilience and a healthy flexibility, nor what sorts are likely to be harmful" (p. 332). This information is

sorely needed to inform teacher preparation programs, enabling them to better screen appropriate placements as well as support all teacher candidates—especially those who may struggle. So, what do we know about why teacher candidates may struggle and sometimes fail?

The work of Henry and Weber (2010) suggested that the brisk and challenging transition from student to teacher candidate can be troublesome, while Ritchie and Wilson (1993) proposed that the dichotomy between many teacher education programs' constructivist stance and teacher candidates' own personal enculturation into schooling can be a worrisome factor. Dresser (2012) suggested that "the dissonance between their own philosophy of education and that of their schools" (p. 77) can cause anxiety. Additional anxiety is created in this era of high-stakes testing and accountability where "as demands upon teachers have evolved, and the scrutiny increased, so have the expectations for teacher candidates," causing even more pressure (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2018, pp. 7–8). Other researchers have argued that inadequate teacher preparation programs (Borko et al., 1992) or challenges with managing both instruction and difficult student behaviors (Doebler & Roberson, 1987) may be problematic elements of the clinical internship experience. However, Borko and Mayfield (1995) suggested that inadequate conversations—those often lacking deep discussion of teaching and learning—between teacher candidates and mentor teachers or university supervisors are troublesome. This is supported by the research of Valencia, Martin, Place, and Grossman (2009), who also argued that lack of feedback for teacher candidates has negative consequences in learning to become an effective teacher.

Additionally, Sudzina and Knowles (1993) have proposed three distinct causes of teacher candidate failure. The researchers concluded that these causes can be (a) personal, including conflicting personalities; (b) professional, including instructional differences; and (c) contextual circumstances, including philosophical conflicts. This is supported by the work of LaBoskey and Richert (2002), whose research highlighted the poor outcomes of what the researchers deem "discrepant placements" and the harmful implications these placements might have on both teacher candidates' desire to teach and efficacy in teaching. Interestingly, in a literature review conducted by Clarke, Triggs, and Nielsen (2014), the authors noted a troublesome lack of "invited participation" (p. 187) or shared authority between the university representatives and mentor teachers.

So, we have some variable ideas about why teacher candidates may struggle or fail. However, there is perhaps another larger element at work here, and that may be the model of clinical internship itself. While teacher candidates throughout the United States are typically compelled to participate in a variety of formative clinical internship experiences, these field experiences vary and are often disconnected from the culminating clinical internship, which is understood to be the hands-on practice with *real* students, in a *real* classroom (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2010). And over the years, the traditional clinical internship model has varied little,

usually proceeding from observation to gradually expanded (earned) autonomy in the classroom, culminating in sole classroom responsibility by the teacher candidate for some defined time frame—always bound by the judgment and supervision of a mentor teacher.

Consequently, researchers like Gallo-Fox and Scantlebury (2015) have suggested that this traditional clinical internship model "establishes a power differential between candidates and experienced teachers, and privileges independent teaching over opportunities to engage in professional discussions with colleagues" (p. 324). Gallo-Fox and Scantlebury suggested that one resolution of the power differential and isolation problems is a shift to a coteaching model during the clinical internship experience. Coteaching has been promoted as a model of praxis in clinical internships for almost a decade (Bacharach et al., 2010; Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015; Soslau, Gallo-Fox, & Scantlebury, 2019). Other recent work has suggested that at least some of the problematic power differential/isolation challenges of the clinical internship may be mitigated by paired placements, with two clinical interns paired with a single mentor (Bodger, 2016).

Clinical Internship Within a Coteaching Framework

Originally used in inclusive education as a model for collaboration between general and special educators working together in the same classroom to meet the needs of an ability diverse student body, coteaching can take on a variety of different forms in practice. Friend and Cook (2000) identified six primary approaches to coteaching that range from minimally to intensely collaborative with varying degrees of shared responsibility that all require high levels of trust and commitment. Guise, Habib, Thiessen, and Robbins (2017), building on the work of others (Bacharach et al., 2010; Badiali & Titus, 2010; Friend & Cook, 2000), defined coteaching in the clinical internship context as an experience where "both the pre-service and cooperating teacher are engaged in student learning at all times through daily co-planning, co-instructing and co-assessing" (p. 370). The authors suggested that a strong model of coteaching can provide a positive impact on learners' academic performance as well as provide greater support for teacher candidates over the traditional clinical internship model. Research has shown that students educated in a classroom with a teacher candidate as a coteacher outperformed those in non-cotaught classrooms (Bacharach et al., 2010; Emdin, 2007). Additionally, there appears to be evidence that coteaching works to alleviate wait time and enable students to "get help when they need it" (Bacharach et al., 2010, p. 12), therefore more effectively meeting the needs of the diverse learners in many of today's classrooms. Because of the collaborative and inclusive approach that we take to teacher preparation here at the College at Brockport, we discourage the traditional "solo week" approach to clinical internships and situate our clinical internship as an apprenticeship with heavy reliance on collaboration and coteaching.

However, while research on coteaching is favorable, coteaching is not without challenges. Those who coteach must navigate and resolve issues like buy-in from both participants (Bacharach et al., 2010), equal voice (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015), and the allocation of sufficient needed coplanning time during busy school days (Howard & Potts, 2009). Furthermore, as in any successful professional relationship, coteaching requires good communication and a degree of compatibility (Mastropieri et al., 2005).

Methods

This study was completed at the College at Brockport, one of New York's original State Normal Schools (chartered to prepare teachers in 1866; Gigliotti, Leslie, & O'Brien, 2006). The college is located in western New York, near the city of Rochester; it has offered traditional teacher preparation programs for more than 150 years and has extensive ties to nearby rural, suburban, and urban school districts. Participants in this study included 107 undergraduate and graduate students of the Department of Education and Human Development, who completed semester-long (15-week) clinical internship placements in fall 2015, spring 2016, or fall 2016.

The College at Brockport places teacher candidates in dozens of different schools in rural, suburban, and urban environments within a radius of roughly 50 miles beyond the college. These schools, like the students they include, are diverse. As a broad descriptor, below we use the New York State Education Department's Need/Resource Capacity Index. The index is intended to represent "a measure of a district's ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources, [and] is the ratio of the estimated poverty percentage . . . to the Combined Wealth Ratio" (for more detail on the index, see New York State Education Department, 2012, p. 1).

Participants in this study were initially asked to complete a brief, 13-item survey during a midpoint (7-week) workshop provided to all teacher candidates (see Appendix A); they were recruited in person by the authors, with no incentives provided. This 13-item survey was co-constructed by the authors, with the intent to identify teacher candidates for follow-up semistructured interviews (see Appendix B). Readers should note that there is no extant screening instrument for imperfect clinical experience placements with published measures of reliability (nor do we publish any such measure for our own use here, as our intended use was not generalizability); our goal was simply to identify students for follow-up interviews. We administered the same survey and posed the same semistructured interview questions to teacher candidates from all three semesters studied. The final sample of participants represented 79% of all College at Brockport elementary and secondary teacher candidates between August 2015 and December 2016 (107/135 total). Participants included 49 teacher candidates preparing for certification in elementary grades (1–6) and 58 teacher candidates preparing for certification in secondary grades (7–12); the latter group included candidates preparing to teach

in a range of content disciplines, including mathematics, science, social studies, English, Spanish, and French. Because the college only runs inclusive teacher preparation programs, all participants were also preparing for teacher certification in special education at the appropriate level. Participants included 75 women and 32 men; average age for all participants was 24.3 years on the first day of clinical internship (range, 20.3–52.4 years). Of the full sample, most (n = 87, or 82%) participants were placed in average needs/resource capacity districts (this classification, made by the New York State Education Department, 2012, is intended to represent "a measure of a district's ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources").

Once consent to participate had been given, surveys were sealed and kept confidential from the authors, mentor teachers, college supervisors, and the college's Field Experience Office during the remainder of the clinical internship semester. On completion of the clinical internship, these paper surveys were analyzed by the authors and used to identify prospective interview participants as part of the purposeful sampling procedure homogenous sampling—where participants who share a similar defining characteristic are selected to be invited to continue on in the study (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Participants who responded with a rating of 1 (*never*) for *any* of the following survey items were recruited for semistructured interview participation, as these participants could best provide information to help the researchers gain an understanding of clinical internship placements perceived as imperfect:

Q2: My cooperating teacher is a good teacher.

Q4: My cooperating teacher enjoys working with students.

Q5: My cooperating teacher provides constructive feedback about my instruction.

Q6: My cooperating teacher is optimistic about the teaching profession.

Q10: My cooperating teacher assumes responsibility for all learners.

Q13: My cooperating teacher is a good mentor.

Our rationale for selection of response ratings of 1 (*never*) rather than 2 (*rarely*) rests on clarity and concision. We chose to deliberately examine in depth only those placements where perceptions of a mentor teacher were easy to interpret and obviously negative. The meaning of a "never" response is commonly understood by both respondents and survey administrators—unlike "rarely" or "frequently," whose meaning is often subject to individual interpretation. A placement featuring a mentor teacher perceived, for example, "never" to enjoy working with students was precisely what this article intended to explore.

These semistructured interviews (see Appendix B) were audiotaped to allow for accurate transcription and coding and, as with surveys, were kept confidential from mentors, college supervisors, and the Field Experience Office. Although participation in the semistructured interview was voluntary, participants were provided

$5.00 gift cards to the campus bookstore following participation. The sample group of those completing semistructured interviews included seven teacher candidates, three in elementary grades and four in secondary grades. Those interviewed included six women and one man; average age for interviewees was 25.3 years (range, 20.3–45.9 years on the first day of clinical internship). Of the interviewed sample, six participants were placed in average needs/resource capacity districts (86%), while one participant was placed in a low needs/resource capacity district (14%).

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to conceptualize the data. Open coding, developed from ideas embedded in the data, and in vivo coding, which embraced participants' voices, were both used to identify and interpret concepts as well as represent participants' feelings, emotions, and perceptions of their clinical internship experiences (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). The researchers relied on the constant comparative method, an iterative analytic process, to discover themes and explore relationships that emerged from the coding and analysis of the data (Glesne, 2011). Olmstead carried out the initial and focused coding—reading and rereading transcripts, establishing initial codes, and reducing codes into emerging themes. Then, Olmstead met with Ashton, who checked for trustworthiness and authenticity to strengthen the integrity of the findings (DeCarlo, n.d.). Next, the researchers used memos, evolving diagrams, and researcher discussion to aid in further examining the interconnectedness of the emerging themes (Saldaña, 2009). To understand the researchers' representation of the data, it is important to note that the researchers' codes were meant to capture the essence of student conversation and that the inquiry was designed not for generative purposes but rather to build idiographic knowledge (Anney, 2014). Large quotes of teacher candidate dialogue were maintained and used both for the purposes of conserving student voice and illustrating the themes discussed. Thus block quotes may contain data that have been simultaneously coded, acknowledging that qualitative data do not always have precise boundaries (Saldaña, 2009) and that multiple codes may be entwined within larger quotes.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 indicates that, on average, mid-placement teacher candidate survey participants (n = 107) were quite positive concerning aspects of placement safety, mentoring, optimism, inclusion, and mentor relationships. The vast majority of participants (n = 78, or 73% of our sample) responded 3 (*frequently*) or 4 (*always*; on a 4-point scale) to *every single prompt*, allowing us to conclude that most teacher candidates in our sample reported that their clinical experience placements were supportive, good places to learn to teach. Mean responses for each item are also

quite high—evidence to us that teacher candidate perceptions of their placements were, on the whole, positive.

Table 1 also shows that the highest overall item response mean was for item Q1, "I feel safe in my placement" (mean of 3.9 on a 4-point scale); items concerning classroom responsibilities (Q3, "My responsibilities in the classroom are important") and mentor relationships (Q11, "My SBTE [cooperating teacher] and I have a good relationship") also generated high response means for the sample group as a whole. The lowest overall item response mean was for item Q7, "I was prepared for student teaching" (mean of 3.3 on a 4-point scale). This latter item, Q7, generated nine responses of 1 or 2 on a 4-point scale, but the item wording left us unclear whether responses were about the clinical internship placement or the teacher preparation program prior to clinical internship. Out of our 107 survey

Table 1
Teacher Candidate Survey Responses

Survey Item	Mean of whole sample of teacher candidates[a]	Mean of teacher candidates selected for semistructured interviews[b]
Q1: I feel safe in my placement.	3.9	3.8
Q2: My cooperating teacher is a good teacher.	3.7	2.6
Q3: My responsibilities in the classroom are important.	3.8	3.6
Q4: My cooperating teacher enjoys working with students.	**3.7**	**2.6**
Q5: My cooperating teacher provides constructive feedback about my instruction.	**3.5**	**2.1**
Q6: My cooperating teacher is optimistic about the teaching profession.	**3.6**	**2.3**
Q7: I was prepared for student teaching.	3.3	2.3
Q8: The curriculum used in my classroom is appropriate.	3.6	3.0
Q9: I am knowledgeable about the content I am expected to teach.	3.5	2.6
Q10: My cooperating teacher assumes responsibility for all learners.	**3.6**	**2.5**
Q11: My cooperating teacher and I have a good relationship.	3.8	2.9
Q12: My cooperating teacher models good classroom management.	3.7	3.1
Q13: My cooperating teacher is a good mentor.	**3.6**	**2.5**

Note. Authors recruited participants for semistructured interviews if they responded to any bold items with a score of 1. 4 = always. 3 = frequently. 2 = rarely. 1 = never. $N = 107$.
[a] $n = 107$.
[b] n = 7.

responses, the most frequently reported low (1 or 2) rating was for Q5, "My cooperating teacher provides constructive feedback about my instruction." Here 18 teacher candidates (17% of our sample) responded "rarely" or "never."

For those teacher candidates selected for semistructured interviews (n = 7), Table 1 shows that mean item responses were lower across each item compared to the sample as a whole. These lower mean scores were by design, as participants were recruited for semistructured interviews on the basis of a 1 rating for any select item (Q2, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q10, and Q13). As with the complete sample group, the semistructured interview group affirmed that their clinical experience placement felt safe (mean response of 3.8 for Q1, "I feel safe in my placement") but demonstrated notably lower mean responses to several of the other items about mentoring, feedback, good teaching, and responsibility for all learners.

Our selection rationale for the semistructured interview sample was that a response of "never" for any of the above was evidence that, from a teacher candidate's perspective, their experiences were not universally positive or supportive. We sought, via the interview process, to understand their survey responses and to be able to share their perspectives about the clinical experience, about their mentors and schools, and about what they were learning along the way.

Semistructured interview prompts enabled teacher candidates to share their experiences; our intent was to explore the perceptions of those who had expressed challenge or disappointment. Readers are reminded that the vast majority of teacher candidates reported positive experiences. In analyzing the data, we have identified five factors related to teacher candidates' expressions of disappointment with their clinical experience placements and their unmet expectations of the clinical experience. The teacher candidates reported feeling (a) overwhelming responsibility, (b) lack of support, (c) discouraged from teaching, (d) controlled and/or constrained in the classroom, and (e) that feedback received was poor or inadequate.

Perceptions of Overwhelming Responsibility: "It Was All on My Shoulders"

Several teacher candidates reported that they were overwhelmed by the challenges of teaching, planning, and assuming classroom responsibilities. As Patrick, a teacher candidate in a third-grade placement, explained, "It was literally all left on my shoulders." Patrick continued,

> There were so many times he [the mentor teacher] just wasn't in the classroom. I want to say by the third week, I was running everything, which I mean, I don't know if that's normal for other candidates, but also planning the majority of things.

Learning to be a teacher was a solitary and daunting experience for Patrick.

Similarly, Bella, a teacher candidate in first grade, talked of the overwhelming stress. "I was taking on a huge chunk of the duties . . . and then it got to be more and more, so like her [the mentor teacher] just kind of giving me stuff to do," said

Bella. She continued to talk about the teacher's lack of support, frustrated that her mentor teacher was "just sitting on her desk the entire day." Next, Bella expressed her concerns about the unnerving responsibility. "A lot of stuff is put on me, like if something happened, it was my fault or it was something I wasn't doing correctly, but I was still in my learning phase," she explained. This internalizing of imperfections was addressed in previous work by Wilkens et al. (2015). The authors suggested that for many teacher candidates, "the failures of their schools become their own; chaotic classrooms become their fault; difficult or disappointing relationships with mentor teachers became evidence of general unworthiness," thus leading to the isolation and discouragement reported by the teacher candidates we interviewed (Wilkens et al., 2015, p. 331).

We noted that the pressure that both Patrick and Bella describe was exacerbated by the expectations of the edTPA, a performance-based certification exam teacher candidates compose throughout their clinical internships. Patrick talked of this demanding time: "[It] was horrible in the beginning, because with the edTPA and, you know, all the requirements expected of me, it was just horrible." Patrick felt he was unable to talk to his mentor teacher about being overwhelmed. "It's kind of an awkward thing to do, like to talk to your teacher, your supervisor and say, 'You know, like you're giving me too much work,'" said Patrick. "You know maybe you should do some of your own work, because I have my own work to do. . . . Like I have to do my own edTPA, [and] *your* work."

Negotiating all of the responsibilities of the classroom while simultaneously fulfilling teacher certification exam requirements resulted in what was perceived as a challenging and stressful clinical experience for the teacher candidates interviewed. This finding corresponds with the work of Wilkens et al. (2015), who, building from Lazarín and Center for American Progress's (2014) testing overload report, proposed that today's accountability era, with its high-stakes testing and performance exams for teachers, has a dramatic impact on how teacher candidates learn during their experiences in classrooms. This simultaneous pressure from both the K–12 and higher education settings can be detrimental to teacher candidates' experiences, as noted in our findings.

Perceptions of Lack of Support: "Thrown to the Wolves"

In addition to feelings of immense responsibility—being responsible for planning for and running a classroom while negotiating the demands of the high-stakes testing—teacher candidates with imperfect placements reported that they were often left alone in the classroom and felt unsupported. Jodi, a teacher candidate in a ninth-grade science classroom, described her experiences: "His [the mentor teacher's] philosophy was that I would take over classes pretty much immediately and start teaching." Jodi described her mentor teacher's "sink or swim" mind-set. Jodi said,

> I was thrown in with really very little sort of knowledge of what I was supposed to be doing. . . . It is tough going into student teaching if you are expected to be teaching right away if you do not know the curriculum you're supposed to be teaching.

Likewise, Patrick was disappointed to work with a mentor teacher whom he felt "was not a good mentor." Patrick described his experience as being "thrown to the wolves" because he had to "do everything on his own." There were so many times Patrick's mentor teacher was not in the classroom. Patrick recalled, "It's like, what is he doing? You know, where is he? So I would say no, he's not a good mentor." Indeed, lack of support and lack of mentoring seemed to cause a lot of distress. Bella also talked of her unmet expectations and disappointment. "A lot of times I thought she'd [the mentor teacher] be there for me more than she was," Bella said. "I thought, you know, student teaching was going to be this great coteaching experience, which it should have been."

Teacher candidates in our program may see the value in coteaching experiences, perhaps in part due to the special education methods classes required for all teacher candidates at the College at Brockport, which include robust discussions of the benefits of coteaching. This perspective may have led to expectations that the clinical experiences would include supportive, guided experiences where coplanning, coteaching, and cooperative reflection happen regularly, and perhaps an increase in frustration if that coteaching (and its related practices) did not occur, as indicated by Bella.

Feeling Discouraged About Teaching: "Spewing Negativity"

Unfortunately, quite often, the group of teacher candidates interviewed discussed being discouraged by their mentor teachers' negative outlooks of the teaching profession. Marcy, a teacher candidate in a sixth-grade classroom, explained,

> Honestly, almost every day I heard her make some sort of negative statement about the teaching career itself and what it's become over the past few decades. There was actually even a point where her and the coteacher that I worked with throughout this placement kind of asked me, "Do you really want to do this?" I understand where they are coming from, but it is just disheartening to have the veterans that you're with, that are supposed to be inspiring you, to really want to push you to go into this career kind of just spewing all this negativity *all the time*.

Similarly, Bella was disturbed by her mentor teacher's attitude and recounted a particularly terrible moment when her mentor teacher told her, "See how stressful this job is? You definitely should second-guess going into this profession."

Likewise, Patrick was also upset by his mentor teacher's complaints about teaching. Patrick's mentor teacher made comments like "I can't wait to be done." Though teacher negativity often comes from larger, dominant discourses (such as media coverage of teachers in unsafe schools, or those expected simply to teach to

various tests), most teacher candidates have been aware of such negative coverage for years and have chosen the profession anyway. Perhaps more corrupting than negative press about the work is when the negativity comes (unexpectedly) from mentor teachers, who are supposed to be mentors but may be, as Poth (2018) described, "disappointed and disillusioned teaching professionals who have felt let down, powerless, and/or blamed for any number of education-at-large's collective failures" (p. 13). Frequent exposure to antiteaching comments and negative outlooks on teaching as a field served to demoralize and worry the teacher candidates.

Feeling Controlled and Constrained in the Classroom: "He's Old School"

Several teacher candidates mentioned that they felt controlled or constrained in the classroom environment due to philosophical differences in teaching pedagogy and practice, particularly the absence of a social constructivist perspective. This lack of a "shared vision of teaching" as well as the power differential inherent in the teacher candidates' relationships with their mentor teachers denied teacher candidates their agency (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015, p. 335). Consider Marcy's frustrating experience in a sixth-grade classroom:

> It's a very business-like relationship for her [the mentor teacher], between her and her kids. There's not a lot of room for fun. There's not a lot of room for excitement. . . . I feel like our personalities just didn't mesh. That our teaching styles just don't go together, and that my beliefs about what the *heart of actual teaching is* are different from hers, and that made the placement very difficult. . . . She's very tight with her classroom management. . . . There's no room for talking out of turn. There's no room for the kids having an engaging conversation . . . and that's just not how I feel teaching should be.

Similarly, Serena talked about the lack of freedom in her student teaching setting and of feeling controlled. "So, it was a bit of a struggle to get control of the classroom, because he didn't want to give it up," said Serena. "And he was very old school, and 'this is how you have to do it,' so I didn't really do *how I would teach*. I had to follow his model." Serena explained that it was a great challenge to work in this rigid environment because her mentor teacher "has his own mind-set" and feelings about "this is how it has to be done." Serena was discouraged that her mentor teacher "didn't really welcome" her own mind-set. These perceptions of being controlled or constrained resulted in discomfort and lack of a sense of agency for many of the teacher candidates interviewed; they were unable to utilize their own teaching styles to "be themselves" in the classroom.

Perceptions of Poor or Inadequate Feedback: "She's Incredibly Harsh"

The last major contributing factor to influence teacher candidates' negative

perceptions of their placements was the quality and quantity of feedback teacher candidates received from the mentor teachers. The following example is Marcy's interview response to the researcher's prompt—"my cooperating teacher provides constructive feedback about my instruction":

> Very rarely. And the reason I say that is because 9 times out of 10 her feedback was incredibly harsh with me. She didn't treat me like a teacher candidate. She treated me as somebody who should already know all of the answers. . . . It was very difficult. It made the placement very difficult for me, because I felt there was very little that I was doing correctly and up to par.

Likewise, Serena described her experience working with a mentor teacher who repeatedly expressed that he "really didn't want a student teacher." Serena described the mentor teacher's feedback:

> He did provide constructive feedback to my instruction, but he never really gave me any positives. It was kind of, "You need to work on this, work on this, work on this." And it didn't come out until the end of the semester that I was actually doing something right. And it made for a long semester, just because I didn't know really if I was doing anything right. And it would be like, "Well, they [students] didn't do this. They didn't understand this. They kept asking me this question," so it kind of made me second-guess myself, if I knew the content or anything.

Although several teacher candidates experienced what they perceived to be extremely harsh criticism as illustrated by Marcy and Serena, Patrick was concerned about the poor quality of his mentor teacher's feedback. Patrick found the feedback insincere and perhaps self-serving. Patrick believed his mentor teacher wanted him to do all of the "work" in the classroom. Patrick explained,

> A lot of it [my mentor teacher's feedback] was sugar-coated maybe. . . . I don't think I'm the greatest teacher, so I don't know if that was just because my lesson plans were good, or just because, you know the laziness [of my mentor teacher] or whatever, you know.

The teacher candidates we interviewed had unmet expectations of constructive feedback from their mentor teachers. These reasonable expectations of constructive feedback were articulated by Fisher and Frey (2015), who argued that all teachers deserve "honest, humane and growth producing conversations" (p. 53) on a regular basis. While humane and constructive feedback may seem like a basic element of the mentor teacher–student teacher relationship, Clarke and Elfert (2015) reminded us that many mentor teachers are poorly prepared to engage with teacher candidates and that professional development for mentor teachers is infrequent at best.

While our data suggest that teacher candidates with placements perceived as imperfect make up the minority of clinical internship experiences, we must carefully consider the thoughts of Wilkens et al. (2015) as a call to action to assist those teacher candidates who experience placement difficulties:

> And when we fail to help teacher candidates successfully navigate even the worst placements with a shred of desire and optimism about their future work, we face an uncertain loss: Did we just lose a teacher who might have meant the world to one student? Hundreds of students? More?

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher candidates' perspectives of imperfect placements, thus the data collected were limited to students' perceptions of the events that occurred in their clinical internship placements; data from other agents like the mentor teachers and field supervisors were not taken into account for this study. Therefore we must consider questions of "respondents' subjectivity" (Plano, Clark, & Creswell, 2015, p. 469). Further study incorporating triangulation of data sources like field observations as well as mentor teacher and field supervisor interviews could add greater dimension and diversity of perspectives to the study of student teaching placements perceived as imperfect.

Another limitation of the work is that teacher preparation programs have a limited set of demands they can reasonably place on school partners. While improved screening, training, or support of mentor teachers in the field may provide a partial answer to some of the problems of imperfect placements, it is not clear that the supply of strong mentors willing to host teacher candidates adequately matches the number of teacher candidates heading out to schools each semester. For the foreseeable future, it appears likely that teacher preparation programs will continue to send teacher candidates into imperfect placements. Teacher preparation programs will need to continue to identify mechanisms that improve candidate supports, mentor teacher relationships, and, ultimately, the experiences of students in P–12 schools.

Implications

While the vast majority of our teacher candidates report positive clinical internship experiences and satisfaction with their placements, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of placements perceived as imperfect. We have come to the realization that while our program promotes the coteaching framework of instruction, our clinical internship placements have continued to follow a more traditional apprenticeship model where after a short time of observation, the scaffold is removed, and teacher candidates are expected to go out on their own and "solo" teach. As Bacharach et al. (2010) suggested, "this model of learning to teach in isolation should no longer be an unquestioned practice" (p. 3). The voices of the teacher candidates amplified in this article have encouraged us to reconsider the problematic practices of this traditional clinical internship model.

While the preceding findings are specific to our program, the challenges are unlikely to be unique. In what follows, we consider implications for work preparing

teacher candidates, with an eye toward improvement and, perhaps, avoiding the pitfalls and discouragements described herein.

Programmatic Improvement Suggestions

We identified social constructivism as the theoretical framework for this article; such a framework specifies that knowledge is built socially. Warford (2011) has argued that the ZPD is collaboratively produced in the interactions between a learner and more learned others and that the learning produced is, at its core, dialogic. We recognize precisely such a collaborative opportunity in virtually all clinical internship scenarios; there is a natural alignment between a social constructivist framework and the opportunities provided in these apprenticeships.

Yet our findings show that some teacher candidates—a small but important percentage—struggle with various aspects of their placements. These struggles tell us that we can and should improve what we do with teacher candidates. How? First, we must consider "changing the face of student teaching," as Bacharach et al. (2010, p. 3) suggested. One option for a changed face of clinical internships could be the adoption of coteaching as an essential component throughout the internship experience. Coteaching can be, in a very real sense, the ZPD as outlined by Warford and can be seen as a tool to help us understand the complexity of the apprenticeship process as teacher candidates interact with classroom teachers within the context of the active school environment through collaborative planning, teaching, and evaluating.

Initiating a coteaching model with *shared authority* to build *shared visions* of teaching could have many benefits. While not without problems, research has confirmed that coteaching is mutually advantageous to both teacher candidates and students in the cotaught classrooms. Benefits include higher academic achievement and improvement in student behavior (Bacharach et al., 2010) as well as an alleviation of many of the challenges that arise during more traditional clinical internships (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015), described by our teacher candidates as "being thrown to the wolves" and having it "all left on my shoulders."

Additionally, we must consider designing and providing professional development for mentor teachers new to the coteaching model to (a) train mentor teachers in the coteaching framework, (b) practice providing growth-producing and compassionate feedback, and (c) provide thorough discussion of disposition expectations for mentor teachers to mitigate the problem of "spewing negativity," which serves to demoralize teacher candidates. Our final suggestion for improvement is implementing teacher candidate self-advocacy workshops to help teacher candidates (a) build their sense of agency, (b) communicate effectively yet professionally, and (c) build resiliency to mitigate "reality shock"—the overwhelming feeling many new teachers have when they confront the "significant discrepancies between what they envisioned . . . and what they are actually experiencing during their first year of professional teaching" (Kim & Cho, 2014, p. 67).

Lingering Questions

While we know adopting a coteaching framework for clinical internships is both a worthwhile and a necessary venture, we have several lingering, unresolved questions regarding the actual implementation of a successful coteaching model:

> How can we identify partner schools with climates or structures that can provide a clinical internship experience that supports the development of coteaching?
>
> How can we promote or provide professional development to partner schools/ mentor teachers regarding tenets of the coteaching model?
>
> If and when teacher candidates encounter the kinds of challenges discussed herein, how can we effectively and efficiently provide support? Which challenges are professionally productive, and which ones are toxic?

Our questions have, at their core, concern with *relationships*. Our findings indicate that, when teacher candidates struggle, they do so because relationships aren't working. While we have suggested that a coteaching model may be a particularly productive approach for improved learning experiences during clinical internships, one clear take-away for any teacher preparation program is that nurturing good relationships—especially those between mentors and teacher candidates—lies at the core of improved work. So, if we cannot, in the end, prevent each instance of "being thrown to the wolves," we can at the very least help our teacher candidates avoid the metaphor in the first place—to see the work as less a *mortal* than a *meaningful* struggle on the way to joining the profession we hold dear.

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Appendix A
Student Teacher Survey

	[Always]	*[Frequently]*	*[Rarely]*	*[Never]*
I feel safe in my placement.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher is a good teacher.	4	3	2	1
My responsibilities in the classroom are important.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher enjoys working with students.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher provides constructive feedback about my instruction.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher is optimistic about the teaching profession.	4	3	2	1
I was prepared for student teaching.	4	3	2	1
The curriculum used in my classroom is appropriate.	4	3	2	1
I am knowledgeable about the content I am expected to teach.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher assumes responsibility for all learners.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher and I have a good relationship.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher models good classroom management.	4	3	2	1
My cooperating teacher is a good mentor.	4	3	2	1

Random Identifier [for PI use only]:

Appendix B
Semistructured Interview

1. Please tell me about your survey responses.
    a. Q2: My cooperating teacher is a good teacher.
    b. Q4: My cooperating teacher enjoys working with students.
    c. Q5: My cooperating teacher provides constructive feedback about my instruction.
    d. Q6: My cooperating teacher is optimistic about the teaching profession.
    e. Q10: My cooperating teacher assumes responsibility for all learners.
    f. Q13: My cooperating teacher is a good mentor.
2. If you could describe your student teaching placement in one word, what would that be?
3. If you could describe your SBTE [mentor teacher] in one word, what would that be?