Three-Way Conferences Facilitated by Program Supervisors: Student Teachers' Perceptions

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This is a phenomenological study exploring student teachers' perceptions of three-way conferences during student teaching. Two preservice student teachers in the stage of pre-practicum and four in practicum (5 females and 1 male; Caucasians; undergraduates) in an early childhood teacher education program were purposefully selected, interviewed, and observed. They were student teaching in urban and suburban public schools in New England. Other data sources included field notes and program documents. Results indicated that three-way conferences provided opportunities for connection, mediation, navigation, affective support, clarification, reflection, and information sharing for the three parties, and could potentially help enhance the field experience.

Introduction and Literature Review In human group dynamics, the relationship in a company of three can be multifaceted (Luft, 1970). Three is a number for side taking and shifting as well as a number for collaborating and balancing, depending on how people in the group manage their relationship. With these complex relationships among three, communications hence play a vital role to success. In preservice teacher education where student teachers practice teaching in the classroom and form a relationship of three with cooperating teachers and program supervisors, conferences are part of the mechanism for communication. It is believed that conferences, if held regularly in a place where distractions are eliminated, can provide a valuable agency for constant feedback and encourage an exchange of ideas (Weller, 2001).

A precondition to a successful field experience in a teacher education program lies in a mechanism that fosters good communication and mutual decisions on expectations for all stakeholders (Davis-Wiley, 1993). This mechanism is found in three-way conferences reported in few preservice teacher education programs (Lu, 2004, 2007b). Three-way conferences are conducted on a scheduled basis and serve as a vehicle exclusively dedicated to communication among the student teaching triad, namely the student teacher, cooperating teacher, and program supervisor.

Three-way conferences, formal or informal, exclusively focusing on communications over field practice in general, have received little attention in empirical studies. Although the communication among the triad is important, nonetheless, as far as conference or communication in pre-service teacher education is concerned, supervisory conferences, i.e., pre or post clinical observation conferences, remain the focal concerns and interests of practitioners and are well tended by researchers (Bertone,

Chalies, Clarke, & Meard, 2006; Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009; Lopez-Real, Stimpson, & Bunton, 2001; McCullick, 1998; Ongel, Capa, & Vellom, 2002; Tsui, Lopez-Real, Law, & Shum, 2001). This type of supervisory conferences are usually held between the supervisor and the student teacher or between the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher (Coulon & Byra, 1997; Page, Page, Workentin, & Dickinson, 1994), or even among the student teacher, the cooperating teacher, and the university supervisor (Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009). Regardless of the participants, the communications in supervisory conferences mainly focus on student teachers' teaching performances (Soulon & Byra, 1997; Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009; Page, et al., 1994).

In light of the dearth of empirical finings, the goal of this paper was to explore the attributes of three-way conferences for the student teaching triad via student teachers' perspectives. The overarching inquiry question guiding the study was: How important is it to have three-way conferences in student teaching?

Literature Review

An important component of a successful field experience lies in trustful relationships among the student teaching triad, deriving from open and honest communications. Unfortunately, literature is filled with reports that the program supervisor and the cooperating teacher almost have a superficial relationship (Slick, 1998b) and involve in power games (Veal & Rikard, 1998). It is reported that the program supervisor and the cooperating teacher hardly share a common viewpoint with each other on what the student teacher should do or not do or even how they should evaluate the student teacher (Lu, 2007a; Slick, 1998a). For example, In a study on a university-school partnership, Shen (2002) reported that the communication among the triad in a Professional Development School (PDS) setting happened in an informal day-to-day

contact, which is not advantageous to develop a shared perspective among all stakeholders.

Further, a study on teacher internships investigated the interactions in a supervisory model (Davis-Wiley, 1993). The university supervisor met with student teachers as a group on a weekly basis for academic purposes and regularly dropped in to visit the classroom formally and informally. She also met with all cooperating teachers once a month to problem solve and update the practicum status. In addition to the university supervisor meeting with individual groups, there were no scheduled three-way conferences for all parties to share thoughts. Should they ever meet together, it took place only when needs arose. Therefore, the researcher highlighted the findings that cooperating teachers were kept informed by but not communicated with the university supervisor and that some student teachers hoped to have cooperating teachers that were more companionable and willing.

Still another researcher, Nolan (2000), described his experiences in conversations among the triad as "free flowing." In their conversations, they mainly focused on teaching events or on individual children, and hence there was no structured agenda and each of the triad was free to direct the flow of the conversation. Finally, Gimbert (2001) reported that the three-way conferences held in a Professional Development School were evaluative and suggested that the conferences become means that promote professional and personal growth.

As shown in the literature, three-way conferences may have been used in some teacher education Programs. Nonetheless, they have hardly been identified as focal interests in studies.

Methods

This paper, focusing merely on three-way conferences, was part of a larger

phenomenological study that investigated student teachers' perceptions of program supervisors' roles in the field experience. The core interest of a phenomenological study is to explore participants' subjective lived experience (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Seidman, 2006). It is believed that the reality of an institution is co-constructed by people who work in the context and interpret it based on their subjective lived experience, as opposed to be constructed by the goals and guidelines set up by the institution alone (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, in order to examine the attributes of three-way conferences, the researcher strived to explore the reality using varied sources of data – interviews, field notes, and program documents. In addition to support explaining results, program documents were used to portrait the study setting in the section below as well.

Study Setting

The study setting was an elementary teacher education program in a research-oriented university in New England in the United States. This was a one-year intensive preservice teacher education program. After admitted to the program, student teachers started Tier I, the pre-practicum semester, practiced and observed teaching in elementary classrooms for two and a half days in the first semester, in addition to taking other courses on campus. When they passed the first semester, they moved toward Tier II, the practicum semester, when they student taught full days in the classroom and took the remaining courses on campus in the evening. After a year of study, they received a teacher certificate and an education minor.

In this program, program supervisors, primarily graduate teaching assistants and retired school teachers, are required to facilitate three-way conferences at the beginning, mid-way, and end of the semester in addition to other supervisory conferences that they hold with student teachers alone. In order for three-way

conferences to occur, the program supervisor ensures to contact the cooperating teacher to secure the first meeting at the beginning of the semester. This step is important and has to take place as early as possible, because it helps break the ground for student teaching and establish goals and scheduling for the entire semester.

At this first meeting, all members have to come with specific expectations for themselves and for each other. The student teacher also comes with a Plan of Action that clearly explains his/her goals and actions for the semester, shares it at the meeting, and receives feedback from the cooperating teacher and the program supervisor. They also review and sign the State Certification form.

The second three-way meeting is held mid-way through the semester. At the meeting, they revisit the student's goals and the certification form. Moreover, they will discuss a plan of next steps should they identify problems.

The final three-way meeting is held some time at the very end of the semester. This is when the student teacher is prompted to reflect upon the field experience by making sense of its meaning and identifying his/her strengths and areas for further growth. The meeting ends in signing the student teacher off this experience if she passes it.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed in the recruitment of six participants from two tiers of student teachers. These participants were recruited through the introduction of university supervisors. Consideration was given to where the participants student taught – in urban, suburban or rural school areas.

Four participants were from Tier II who had experiences in both tiers and two others from Tier I. Among them, Lynn and Angel (pseudonyms) were in Tier I pre-practicum and Kay, Ron,

Sandra, and Ezzell (pseudonyms) from full-day practicum. One of them was male and five female; all Caucasians. They were junior or senior undergraduates.

Data Collection Procedure

Data sources included interviews, observations, and program documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. A semi-structured question protocol, constructed based on the literature and the researcher's professional insight, was used to maintain the quality of interview and probing questions were posed to participants to seek clarification or further explanation during or after interviews. All interviews were audio taped and verbatim transcribed. Interviews were held where and when was convenient to each participant.

Observations occurred when a three-way conference was implemented among a participating student teacher, his/her supervisor, and his/her cooperating teacher. The researcher played a non-participatory role taking notes on the side. Documents, such as a program handbook and conference report forms, were collected to reveal the goals and guidelines of the Program.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a continuous process using multiple strategies. First, Strauss and Corbin's (1996) coding techniques and procedures were applied to explore and examine the data's related dimensions and properties. Then, Spradley's (1980) domain analysis were used to specify attributes and semantic relationship of the data. Therefore codes were formed and categorized from meaningful chunks of words or phrases. Using these strategies, initial data analysis started immediately after the first transcript was completed. Rough categories were formed and diagramed according to the data analyzed. Further, using Constas's (1992) Documentational Table for the Development of Categories, sets of data categorization were constantly compared and contrasted so as to engender the final categorization. Additionally, critical colleague friends were consulted to reshape and reflect the concept of categorization. Finally, the results of this study were compared with the program guidelines in the belief that people work in an institution may interpret their experience differently than the expectations of the institution (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Seidman, 2006).

Results

The findings were analyzed and synthesized into seven categories. The categories were ordered based on the numbers of participants' remarks that described the attributes of the three-way conferences. The attributes of the three-way conferences included: (a) connection, (b) mediation, (c) navigation, (d) affective support, (e) clarification, (f) reflection, and (g) information sharing.

Connection

Sandra, a practicum student, considered that a three-way conference served as a time when the three parties "can all contact, sit down, and just have that meeting." Ron, another practicum student, echoed Sandra's point and stated, "A three-way conference is a time to have that connection." Sandra further stated that it was "a good time that the cooperating teacher can talk to the supervisor and the student teacher."Lynn, a pre-practicum student, thought that a program supervisor was "kind of like a middleman… going back and forth." "Sometimes you might not feel comfortable getting feedback from your cooperating teacher," as Ron described; then the program supervisor "plays a middleman."

In addition to be a middleperson between a student teacher and a cooperating teacher, data from observation field notes also indicated that a program supervisor was considered as a person

who would shuttle between the school and the university. For example, Lynn and her cooperating teacher complained about the Integrated Day[1] to the supervisor and said that it came all too early. Further, Kay's cooperating teacher complained to the program supervisor that the program was less responsible for student evaluation this year. Finally, Ezzell's cooperating teacher urged the supervisor to tell the program that student teachers were not prepared enough for teaching reading.

Mediation

Working with young adults is different than working with young children and it can be challenging for cooperating teachers sometimes. Should issues come up, the program supervisor is believed to be the one that mediates between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher when needed. As Ron, a practicum student, believed that the program supervisor could address some issues. He stated,

> In a three-way conference…Dawn [his program supervisor] addressed about it… she makes you talk. She makes you bring up issues… They (referring to program supervisors) take the hearing and tone it down and say it a different way. They try to knock it down. They try to really help you.

Kay, a practicum student, also believed that "three-way meetings are to make sure the [cooperating] teacher and the student teacher are on a good working cooperative level."

Lynn, a pre-practicum student, believed that one of the purposes of three-way meetings was

"to open up each other honestly." She stated that "my cooperating teacher became more direct and more professional." According to Lynn, the authority of the supervisor was present at the meeting because both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher appeared to believe their opening up at the meeting would make a difference. Ezzell, a practicum student, also stated that her supervisor would "make sure that we are on the same page… to know what's going on and that we are all getting along."

Navigation

Participants believed that the purpose of three-way conferences was to steer the student teaching course along the semester. Being a pre-practicum student, Angel was in the field for the first semester. With little knowledge of what the field experience was like, she wanted to know what she might get and be expected from the cooperating teacher and she believed that this could be learned through three-way meetings. She believed that a program supervisor tracked if "there is anything we need to work on." Angle argued for her point: "It is to make sure that the cooperating teacher is also invested." She elaborated her concern, "It's important because if you are with a cooperating teacher who is looking for a help… or … who is not a part of role model…it could be not as effective, or not as good an experience to a pre-practicum student." Hence, Angel believed that "the meetings are to see if there is anything that hasn't been great, anything that needs to change."

Sandra, a practicum student, described what happened in their meetings, stating, "We're all sitting together, hearing it together as how the semester is going, how the student progress is going." As far as semester action plans were concerned, Ezzell, a practicum student, was positive that at the meetings her supervisor would "check up to make sure that I'm fulfilling my aims that I have made in the beginning for the semester."

1 - The Integrated Day was a curriculum integrated day for which two or three practicum student teachers worked together to plan a thematic unit integrated contents in all subject areas and implemented it in a class consented by the cooperating teacher. It was a culminating project in the practicum semester.

Student teachers were concerned about how much teaching they could have with the cooperating teacher. They believed that a supervisor was the person who should, according to Kay, a practicum student, make sure that things were "going on in the class" and that student teachers were "being able to teach".

Speaking about what she thought if there were no three-way conferences, Kay stated:

> It would be harder, especially for a new cooperating teacher. It would be harder for her to understand how if she should be doing with the student teacher. I think it's the best helpful when the program supervisor can say, ok, this should be happening next and this is what's going on for the cooperating teacher to know about.

Overall, the participants demonstrated enthusiasm to learn the best in student teaching. The program supervisor was then viewed as the person who could really help to ensure the probability of teaching in the classroom.

Affective Support

Examples from the data demonstrated that a three-way meeting became a place where all three shared their thoughts and feelings. In one meeting, Ezzell, a practicum student, talked about one rough Friday when she went home and said that she cried for two hours because of a messed-up math class. Hearing this, her cooperating teacher felt sorry and said to her, "Oh, I felt sorry to hear this. You should have let me know. Let me know if it happens again." Ron, a practicum student, regarded himself as a person who was tough for himself. He shared his experience stating, "Sometimes I saw a lesson as not a good one as what I wanted, while having a meeting, having the cooperating teacher come back and tell me that I was too tough for myself and that

children were actually learning was beneficial for me."

Field notes showed that program supervisors and cooperating teachers started to have active conversations at three-way conferences when they got to sit down and talk. Sandra, a practicum student, felt this sharing important because "the program supervisor got to understand the cooperating teacher's personality when we all talk." She continued,

> It's an important piece of the puzzle to really know how the student [teacher] interacts with the [cooperating] teacher… whether it is positive or negative. A three-way conference also helps the student teacher and the cooperating teacher know each other better.

Clarification

The data of field notes demonstrated that three-way conferences served as a place for clarifying issues developed among the triad. For example, Kay, a practicum student, and her program supervisor had a conversation on a unit writing. She then mentioned that the last video-taped lesson was blurring. Her program supervisor explained the problem and promised to tape her next lesson. Another example was that Ezzell, a practicum student, apologized for not having an aim for her teaching, while her program supervisor explained why she forgot her camcorder with her for the observation and promised to video tape her next lesson. A further example was that Dawn reiterated her role as a program supervisor to Ron, a practicum student, and his cooperating teacher, because there appeared to be some misassumptions about it. Dawn stressed that she didn't mean to refer to any person, but that she just wanted to clear out her responsibility. These examples indicated that there were situations coming up among the three and a specified meeting time served as an ideal arena to get things straightened.

Reflection

According to field notes, student teachers were asked to reflect upon their strengths and areas for growth in each three-way conference agenda. This reflection differs in nature in that it refers to the student teacher's general performance in the field, as opposed to the reflection that focuses on lesson planning or teaching performance in pre or post supervisory conferences. Kay, a practicum student, liked this reflection and stated, "I think it's very good to be self-reflective" at the meeting. Ezzell, another practicum student, shared her thoughts about this reflection:

> I like it when my resource person (Program supervisor) asks, "What do you think your strengths are? And what do you think your weaknesses are?"… Because they made me think. I also like hearing my cooperating teacher share what she thought I was doing well and what I needed to improve on.

Ezzell continued to have a vivid description of her feelings at hearing what her cooperating teacher had to say:

> It's kind of like you want to cover your ears, but you want to see it; you want to hear it at the same time. It's kind of like a scary movie. You don't want to watch it, so you kind of like peeking out. You kind of like apprehensive, a little nervous at what she is going to say. But at the same time, you want to hear it; you want to know how she really feels.

In three-way meetings, by inviting student teachers and cooperating teachers to talk about student teachers' strengths and weaknesses, the program supervisor helped the student teacher grow professionally. Kay, a practicum student, had this to share,

> Talking about that part is the most influential on my teaching because it's not just talking about what you are good at and what you are not good at. It's really talking about what you can do and to whom you can use those in your teaching, how you do use those in your teaching already and how you can work upon them more. I think that really helps you become a better teacher…listening to the strengths that other people notice, and listening to the things you can improve upon really…brings them to the surface more and helps you teach better next time using your strengths.

However, not all cooperating teachers were prone to comment on this area of student teachers. Sandra recalled that, the cooperating teacher was "not a type of person to give praise," when she was a pre-practicum student teacher. It wasn't until the time when her supervisor asked her cooperating teacher how she thought of Sandra's positive aspects, her cooperating teacher "at that point would provide the positive feedback. That made me happy." Ron personally did not feel comfortable talking about his own strengths and areas for growth but he enjoyed hearing the cooperating teacher say. He stated,

> I don't like to talk about myself. I never feel comfortable with my strengths and weaknesses. It's just who I am. So for me to hear my cooperating teacher sharing my strengths and weaknesses is definitely beneficial to me.

Data in field notes indicated that the reflection part was the time when the three parties interacted enthusiastically and this activity warmed up the air and that cooperating teachers tended to raise more strengths than weaknesses.

Information Sharing

The three-way conference, according to the handbook, is set up the way that everyone has to share what has happened, what went well and what not, what is to come and what should be done. As a corollary, a three-way conference serves as a place where the triad distributes information to each other. Angel, a pre-practicum student, contended that the first meeting was to "set up an introduction between the supervisor, the student teacher, and the cooperating teacher… to debrief what's going to happen… and to go over the system." Being a pre-practicum student, she believed that it was important "especially when a student teacher and a cooperating teacher were in the beginning stage of working with each other in the classroom." Kay, a practicum student, stated that "the program supervisor brings in a lot of information for us to know about, and if we have any questions about the Program, the supervisor will try to find the answer the best way he or she could."

The program supervisor was, as Lynn, a pre-practicum student, stated, "close associate to my professors." Lynn believed that the program supervisor and the professors "work[ed] together." Through the meetings, program supervisors knew well about student teachers and they should be able to go to the program to let the professors know "what the students really need to work on… and what the students are doing really well", as Kay pointed out. Kay also contended that a program supervisor should inform things that "the cooperating teacher might not know about for the Program."

Discussion and Conclusion

To answer the inquiry question of how important it is to have three-way conferences in student teaching, the results generated seven attributes. These attributes include (a) connection, (b) mediation, (c) navigation, (d) affective support, (e) clarification, (f) reflection,

and (g) information sharing. In comparison with a shallow interaction among the triad in informal contacts (Nolan, 2000; Shen, 2002)), student teachers in this study perceived three-way conferences facilitated by the program supervisor providing a variety of support to foster the field experience.

The results of this study demonstrate that a three-way conference provides a platform for the triad to connect each other, to resolve issues, and to keep on the track. Entering the practicum classroom, a student teacher becomes a person learning in both places – the school and the university. Traditionally, the program supervisor comes in the classroom mainly to make sure that student teachers get to teach and reflect upon their teaching (Lopez-Real, Stimpson & Bunton, 2001; Slick, 1998a; Tsui, et al., 2001). This instruction-oriented appearance in the classroom, therefore, leads to a relationship between the program supervisor and the cooperating teacher that is oftentimes limited to only saying hello (Slick, 1998a). Opposed to the traditional relationship, the results indicate that three-way conferences allow the triad's communications to get extended and focus on student teachers' overall performance in the field and all parties get to express what they might not share privately. This type of communications is important because people from two different institutes can sit down and have open and frank exchange of rules and expectations, which enables all stakeholders to feel safe and oriented. Therefore, if some issue arises among the triad, the three-way meeting serves as a juncture to mediate the conflict. Also, the program supervisor can take this opportunity to ensure that everybody is on the right track.

Three-way conferences facilitate the triad to support each other emotionally, to know each other, to reflect, and to share information. According to the results, through open and trustful communication, the triad learns about others' needs and as a result is able to provide support to the needing ones. Moreover, the three-

way meeting allows people to get clarified when miscommunication or misunderstanding arises. Also, the three-way conference allows student teachers to reflect upon their overall performance in the field and to officially receive comments from their cooperating teacher, who in most cases will encourage them and praise their strengths. This opportunity is important as it is an open communication where all three members get to hear the same reflection each has to share. Finally, three-way conferences serve as a vehicle where everybody shares information pertinent to the field, when new information comes up. Put together, these attributes indicate that three-way conferences are open, communicative, informative, supportive, corrective, and reflective. With these characteristics, three-way conferences appear to potentially enhance the overall field experience.

Further examination of these attributes as a whole, it is found that these attributes in a deep sense all link with the word "communication." This linking makes sense because none of the identified attributes would establish without the element of open and trustful communication. This type of open communication indeed allows these attributes to develop and help establish a healthier relationship among the student teaching triad. These results support the literature that, with all complex possibilities of relationship derived from a company of three (Luft, 1970), open and trustful communication may be the best strategy to help build up a healthier relationship in the learning community (Davis-Wiley, 1993).

This study also examined a programmatic mechanism that is not only constructed by the goals and guidelines of the program but also the student teaching triad, the people that work in the institutions (Seidman, 2006). The results, nonetheless, indicate a discrepancy between student teachers' perceptions and some goals and guidelines prescribed by the program. According to the program handbook, it is required that the State Certification Form be reviewed, evaluated,

and signed at each of the three-way meetings. Also, all members are expected to be prepared with expectations for themselves as well as for the student teacher when present at the meeting. However, findings indicate that participants did not mention anything about these topics.

To justify the discrepancy, several inferences were proposed as follows. First, student teachers might have taken the conferences at the level of professional communication, instead of the level of evaluation. Even though they were required to sign the Certificate form, the process probably was made such that student teachers did not feel it as an evaluation but a reminder for improving or confirming performance. Should this inference hold true, then it would be helpful for this experience, because under this circumstance student teachers would feel safer and be more willing to be open for recommendations.

In addition, the student teachers shared more about what they could actually achieve in learning to teach than what they would expect from one another. This result could have been influenced by the fact that the major focus at the conferences was on the student teacher and that the student teacher was the center of the conversation. This collective behavior probably had outshined what a three-way conference prescribed by the program should be like. As a corollary, when reflecting upon this experience, participants focused on their learning to teach. Finally, as indicated by the positive attributes that participants perceived, three-way conferences might have been considered as a support to help improve personal and professional development, instead of an additional pressure and load added by the program.

This paper adds to the literature in that it identifies the attributes of three-way conferences based on student teachers' perceptions. Limitations, nonetheless, lead to suggestions for future research. First, future study is suggested to have a larger number of participants. Further,

it would be helpful for future research to include other stakeholders, such as cooperating teachers and program supervisors, as participants, which would enrich the overall portrayer of the topic.

To conclude, the three-way conference, though designed to be program-function-oriented, is deemed as a beneficial support for the student teaching triad due to its open attribute. In comparison with three-way conferences that are free flowing (Nolan, 2000), this study indicates that with structured agendas, the scheduled conferences are focused and beneficial for all members that participate. Using open communication, three-way conferences potentially promote mutual trust and enhance positive relationship. Therefore, in order to promote a more meaningful field experience for all stakeholders, purposeful three-way conferences appear a good avenue to take.

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