

Increasing the Influence of University Supervisors During Student Teaching

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study surveying student teachers (N = 128) from two universities who reported a significantly greater influence by university-based supervisors on their teaching when they had taken a class with the supervisor prior to student teaching. The student teachers were more likely to report implementing university teachings and using supervisors' advice than if they had not taken a class with that supervisor. These findings have important implications as they suggest a greater transfer of learning from the university to the classroom, producing student teachers who are willing to incorporate and implement university-based practices in a new context.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate for more highly qualified teachers has forced teacher preparation programs to reflect, rethink, and reform their methods for training new teachers. New or additional classes, higher standards, and increased numbers of standardized tests (e.g., Praxis exams) are all being implemented in an effort to develop stronger, more effective programs with the expectation of improving teacher quality and student achievement.

Student teaching, often the culminating experience of preservice teachers' education, allows students to connect research to practice in an authentic setting (Zeichner, 2002). Thus, strengthening the student teaching experience is viewed as a key component to improving teacher education. Ongoing partnerships with schools, full-year internships, pre-student teaching placements, and extended field experiences are among the efforts to reform and improve the student teaching experience (e.g., McKinney et al., 2008; Devlin-Scherer, Mitchel, & Mueller, 2007; Latham & Vogt, 2007).

Additionally, in an effort to nurture and secure master cooperating teachers, education programs are attempting to raise the bar regarding who can qualify as a cooperating teacher. Prior research indicates that cooperating teachers are seen as the most important figure in student teaching because student teachers often emulate their cooperating teachers, even when the instructional methods conflict with what is taught at the university (Glenn, 2006; Koeppen, 1998; Metcalf, 1991; Su, 1992; Zheng & Webb, 2000). For example, Bates and Burbank note that "student teachers quickly accommodate to classroom practices...without considering the impact on student learning" (2008, p. 31). The student teachers often believe that the classroom teachers have "real" experience and know better than their university education faculty (Marks, 2002).

The role and influence of the university supervisor within the student teaching process is frequently ignored or discounted, often by both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher (Marks, 2002). A lack of impact on the student teacher has led some researchers to imply that university supervisors are superfluous (Metcalf, 1991; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Instead of providing additional insights and support, university supervisors are viewed as "inspectors" rather than collaborative

partners (Ongel, Capa, & Vellom, 2002) and are seen as less qualified than cooperating teachers to grade student teachers (Zheng & Webb, 2000). Research on improving communication among the triad of student teacher, university supervisor, and cooperating teacher, or balancing this triad's power structure, has often indicated that the university supervisor is the weak link (Silva, 2000; Tsui et al., 2001; Wilder & Croker, 1999).

The other side of the debate posits that university supervisors are very important in "supporting student teachers' implementation of recent reforms and theories learned in coursework" (Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009, p. 94). This transfer of learning from the university to the classroom can be impacted by university supervisors when: (a) a positive relationship exists between the student teacher and the supervisor; (b) the student teacher recognizes the supervisor's expertise and professionalism; (c) the supervisor is accessible; and (d) the supervisor consistently holds the student teacher to university expectations as they are expressed in university education classes or in a student teacher handbook (Marks, 2002). Additionally, university supervisors appear to provide emotional support needed for student teachers to acclimate to the initial hurdles encountered in student teaching (Caires, Almeida, & Martins, 2010; Caires & Almeida, 2007). More generally, instructors fulfill a variety of roles that can influence student teachers. They serve as experts on course content, as learning facilitators, curriculum developers, mentors and role models, resource providers, and supporters and nurturers of students. An effective student-teacher relationship can have a pervasive impact on the social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral lives of students. Student teachers considered their university supervisors' "personal features," including being supportive, non-judgmental, and helpful, to be essential to overcoming obstacles and maintaining their emotional balance during student teaching (Caires & Almeida, 2007).

In clinical psychological research, the concept of therapeutic alliance suggests that the relationship between the counselor and the client is a key factor in the success of therapy (Krupnick et al., 1996). Similarly, the bond between instructor and student may enrich and influence the student's life and may also lead to an increased amount of transfer from that instructor's teaching to the student's own classroom practices. This bond may be especially important because the social and emotional experiences upon entering student teaching are often unexpected by the student teacher. Their self-view as teachers change due to the "reality shock" (Caires et al., 2010). Their high self-expectations and belief that "they know and control all the facets of the profession and of the school ethos" (Fernandez & Erbilgin, 2009, p. 17) are challenged by the realities of the classroom. These changes in self-perception leading to teacher socialization can be attributed to the Sociocultural Theory of Learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1934/1962).

According to the Sociocultural Theory, knowledge about teaching is socially constructed between the learner and the community around them: Preservice teachers are processing ideas, beliefs, and practices from the communities in which they are involved. While at the university, this community consists of faculty, fellow education students, and other university-based inputs. Once in the school classroom, however, the context that the student teacher operates in has changed. Now their community consists primarily of classroom teachers, students, and parents.

While the university supervisor bridges these communities, the influence of his or her "voice" within the student teaching community is ambiguous. With the overall goal of investigating whether certain university procedures can increase the influence and effectiveness of the student teaching experience, two intermediate questions became the focus of our study. First, is there a difference

between student teachers who had previously taken a class with their university supervisor compared to those who had not in regard to the student-teacher relationship; willingness to take advice; likelihood of the using university-taught methods; and overall perception of the university supervisor's knowledge of pedagogy, content, and the "real" classroom? Second, is there a correlation between student teachers' relationships with their university supervisors and their likelihood of using university-taught methods in their classrooms, accepting their university supervisors' advice, and valuing their university supervisors' knowledge? These two questions taken together show how the relationship between supervisors and student teachers affects the transfer of learning from university to school classroom and thus shed light on the effectiveness and influence of university supervisors.

Method

Based on findings in a previous qualitative study (Marks, 2002), we developed a survey focusing on student teachers' relationships with their university supervisors, their perceptions of their university supervisors' knowledge, and the amount of influence they felt their university supervisors had on their practices in the classroom. Further, we wanted to see if these perceptions were more positive if the student had previously taken a class with the supervisor. Questions about the student teachers' perceptions of their cooperating teachers were included to provide a comparison group, and prior research showed generally positive relationships with and strong influence of cooperating teachers (Glenn, 2006; Koeppen, 1998; Metcalf, 1991; Su, 1992).

The specific survey questions stem from the qualitative dissertation by one of the authors (Marks, 2002). This dissertation was conducted at an institution unrelated to the ones sampled in the current study. In the dissertation, the three students who were supervised by a professor with whom they had previously taken classes followed university protocol, used their supervisors' ideas more, and found a "middle ground" when expectations from their cooperating teacher and their university supervisor clashed. The rapport and respect for their university supervisor meant that the students often saw failing to meet his expectations as a personal breach in that relationship. In contrast, the two students who were supervised by someone they had never taken a class with followed what their cooperating teacher expected and only did the minimum needed to appease their university supervisor so that they could pass. Criticisms from their cooperating teacher, including "the university supervisor has no idea of the reality of schools," not only went unchallenged when the student teacher had no prior relationship with the university supervisor, but was often echoed by the student teachers. The questions on the survey for the current study focus on particular aspects of the student teacher-university supervisor-cooperating teacher dynamic that were brought up in comments from the qualitative case studies. This current study focused on whether the university supervisors' effect on student teachers is more widespread and stronger than previously recognized.

Although survey items were not pilot-tested, we chose two small universities that each has 4-year teacher education programs. One is a state-funded university, originally a Normal School with a primary mission of training teachers. The other is a small branch campus of a state-affiliated university that focuses more generally on liberal arts education. Participants from the first university (N = 65) completed paper copies of the survey during seminars that followed their student teaching placements; this resulted in obtaining 94% of the surveys. Students from the second university (N = 38) did not have post-placement seminars and were asked to complete the survey online; we received 28% of the

surveys from this university. Because of the disparate response rates, planned direct comparisons between the two institutions were not possible.

Participants included student teachers ($N = 103$), 68 of whom were focused on elementary certification, and 35 focused on secondary certification across the disciplines. Only one had placements at both levels; we did not include this singleton's data within our study. Almost 80% of the student teachers were female. Nearly 75% were traditional students, age 22–23 during student teaching. There was another cluster ($N = 15$) of student teachers between 7–25 years older. The mean age was 24.86 ($SD = 5.93$). All surveys were anonymous, and we assured the student teachers that their responses would not be shared with their university supervisors and would not affect their grades.

The participants responded to various statements on a seven-point Likert Scale. These statements were combined into four areas of opinion regarding their student teaching experience. For each area, we separately measured the students' opinions of their two types of mentors, specifically their university supervisor and their cooperating teacher. The four areas were the student teachers' relationship with their mentors, the student teachers' perceptions of their mentors' knowledge (both pedagogical and content), the student teachers' respect for and application of advice from their mentors, and the student teachers' use of various strategies and resources from their mentors. The Likert Scale was merely labeled "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" at the endpoints. We randomly ordered the statements as not to force consistency from the students. Likewise, we wrote statements in both positive and negative language so that the desired answer could result either on the left or right end of scale responses. Two open-ended questions about the qualities that promoted or demoted their relationships with their respective cooperating teacher and supervisor were included on the survey; however, their responses merely supported prior research (Caires & Almeida, 2007; Caires, Almedia, & Martin, 2010), suggesting that the university supervisors provided emotional support. As their responses did not focus on the main questions of this study and mirrored the findings of prior studies, we chose not to include the responses in this paper.

At both universities, two types of supervisors were overseeing the students: course instructors who are assigned to supervise student teachers and faculty hired solely to supervise student teachers. The two groups of supervisors generally work independently of each other rather than working as team-supervisors. Differences in the types of supervisor were not analyzed in this study.

We investigated the differences between elementary and secondary responses. Because only 35 of the 103 students were secondary, the power was not large enough to reliably interpret the results. Further, only three variables of the eight we focused on showed differences between the groups; thus, the following analyses combine both elementary and secondary groups.

Results

Students' Perceptions of University Supervisors

How student teachers view their university supervisor appears to be related to whether they use ideas they have learned at the university. Students reported that when they have a positive relationship with their supervisors, they are significantly more likely to use university-taught methods in their classrooms ($r = .380, p < .001$); take their supervisors' advice ($r = .475, p < .001$); and view their supervisor as very knowledgeable regarding content, methods, and students in the "real" classroom ($r = .723, p < .001$) (see Table 1 for correlations). Further, when student teachers viewed their supervisors as knowledgeable, they were more likely to report using university-taught practices in their classroom

($r = .365, p = .001$) and using the supervisors' advice ($r = .518, p < .001$). Lastly, student teachers who reported taking supervisors' advice were also more likely to report using university-taught practices ($r = .410, p < .001$).

Table 1
Correlations Among the Target Variables

| Target Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|--------------------------|-----|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Relationship | | | | | | | | |
| 1. University Supervisor | --- | .118 | .723*** | .049 | .475*** | .073 | .380*** | .165 |
| 2. Cooperating Teacher | | --- | .007 | .388*** | .026 | .398*** | .196* | .388*** |
| Knowledge | | | | | | | | |
| 3. University Supervisor | | | --- | .198* | .518*** | .201* | .365*** | .123 |
| 4. Cooperating Teacher | | | | --- | .117 | .900*** | .146 | .435*** |
| Advice | | | | | | | | |
| 5. University Supervisor | | | | | --- | .244** | .410*** | .279** |
| 6. Cooperating Teacher | | | | | | --- | .227** | .279** |
| Resources | | | | | | | | |
| 7. University Supervisor | | | | | | | --- | .289** |
| 8. Cooperating Teacher | | | | | | | | --- |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Students' Perceptions of Cooperating Teachers

Correlations between student teachers' perceptions of various aspects of their cooperating teachers were comparable to the correlations between perceptions of aspects of their university supervisors (see Table 1). For example, student teachers who view their cooperating teachers as knowledgeable reported accepting and implementing their advice ($r = .900, p < .01$) and reported positive relationships with them ($r = .388, p < .01$). Thus, for student teachers, viewing mentors as knowledgeable, having a positive relationship with them, and implementing advice given by them are correlated.

Supervisor and Cooperating Teacher Comparisons

The perceived knowledge level of the university supervisors ($M = 5.98, SD = 1.20$) was rated unexpectedly higher by the student teachers than the knowledge level of the cooperating teachers ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.19$). This difference in perceived knowledge is significant, $t(129) = 7.150, p < .001$ (see Table 2). Interestingly, the students teachers' perceived relationship between themselves and their university supervisor ($M = 6.37, SD = 1.17$) and their relationship with their cooperating teacher ($M = 6.22, SD = 1.34$) were equivalent ($t(124) = 1.014, p = .312$).

Table 2
Comparisons Between Supervisors and Cooperating Teachers on the Target Variables

| Variable | University Supervisor | | Cooperating Teacher | | <i>t</i> (129) | <i>p</i> |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|----------------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Relationship | 6.37 | 1.17 | 6.22 | 1.34 | 1.014 | .312 |
| Knowledgeable | 5.98 | 1.20 | 5.03 | 1.19 | 7.150 | <.001 |
| Advice | 5.78 | 1.06 | 5.09 | 1.15 | 5.665 | <.001 |
| Resources | 5.02 | 1.24 | 5.62 | 1.49 | -4.129 | <.001 |

Student teachers reported that they were more likely to take the advice of their university supervisor ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.06$) than that of their cooperating teacher ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.15$). This unexpected difference in accepting advice is significant ($t(128) = 5.665$, $p < .001$). However, student teachers reported they were more likely to use cooperating teachers' resources and examples ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.49$) than those from university classes, books, and notes ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.24$); again, the difference is significant ($t(129) = 4.129$, $p < .001$).

We examined whether the willingness to take university supervisors' advice but to use the cooperating teachers' resources was simply a result of students' trying to achieve a high grade. For both universities, the university supervisor issues grades with input from (but not jointly with) the cooperating teacher. However, student responses strongly indicate that they did not implement university-taught strategies they disagreed with ($M = 6.023$, $SD = 2.42$) and would implement their university supervisors' suggestions even if the university supervisor were not present to see it ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.51$). Thus, the data suggest that student teachers' implementation of strategies was not merely based on desiring a good grade.

Student teachers who were more likely to report using their cooperating teacher's advice were also more likely to report using their supervisor's advice ($r = .244$, $p < .01$) and report using university-taught methods ($r = .227$, $p < .01$) in their classrooms. Student teachers who viewed their supervisor as being knowledgeable were more likely to view their cooperating teacher as knowledgeable ($r = .198$, $p < .05$) and reported using their cooperating teacher's advice ($r = .201$, $p < .05$). The student teachers' willingness to use university-taught ideas during student teaching correlated with their relationships with the cooperating teachers ($r = .196$, $p < .05$) and their stated willingness to use their cooperating teachers' advice ($r = .227$, $p < .05$). These correlations could suggest that obtaining good advice from one source promoted students' eagerness to gain good advice from all possible sources; it could also suggest that some students were more willing to obtain ideas from any source.

The Effect of Prior Relationship With University Supervisor

Using one-way ANOVAs, we found some significant differences between the student teachers who had taken a class with their university supervisors prior to student teaching versus those who had not. Students who had taken a class from their university supervisor perceived a more positive relationship with that supervisor ($F(1,123) = 16.805$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .120$) and viewed their supervisor as more

knowledgeable ($F(1, 128) = 17.85, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .122$). Their previous working relationship made them more willing to take and apply advice given by their university supervisor ($F(1, 128) = 14.17, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .100$), but that working relationship didn't have as much effect on their likelihood of taking ideas and resources from the university classroom to their teaching classroom ($F(1,128) = 2,752, p = .100, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .021$).

Interestingly, the working relationship between university supervisor and student teacher carried over to the relationship between the student teacher and cooperative teacher. Student teachers who had taken a class from their university supervisor prior to the student teaching experience were also likely to view their cooperating teachers as more knowledgeable ($F(1, 128) = 6.64, p = .011, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .049$) and reported taking their advice more often ($F(1, 128) = 5.98, p = .016, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .045$) as well, although the effects were not as large. The effect of having a class with the university supervisor did not carry over to the perceived relationship between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher ($F(1, 128) = .230, p = .632, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .002$) or to the likelihood of the student teacher using the resources provided by the cooperating teacher ($F(1, 128) = .031, p = .862, \text{partial } \eta^2 < .001$).

Conclusions

Because prior research suggests that student teachers perceive their cooperating teachers as the key influence during the student teaching experience, we expected several variables to correlate with that perceived influence. As in previous work, we found that students were more likely to use ideas and resources from their cooperating teacher during their student teaching experience. However, we found several areas where the student teachers' perceptions were not higher for their cooperating teacher than for their university supervisor. Our student teachers rated the perceived knowledge level of the university supervisors higher than the knowledge level of the cooperating teachers. They also reported being more willing to take the advice of the university supervisor than of the cooperating teacher.

We also found a new aspect of the student-supervisor relationship that is important. Many positive results in our data suggest that having taken a class with their university supervisor prior to student teaching yields positive results in many aspects of the student teacher's experience. Student teachers who took a class with their university supervisor reported better relationships with them, saw them as more knowledgeable, and were more likely to report acceptance and implementation of their advice. Further, when student teachers had previously taken a class with their supervisor, the student teachers reported viewing their cooperating teacher as more knowledgeable and taking their advice more as well. The influence of the prior scholarly relationship seems to be somewhat separate from the student teachers' perceived personal relationship with the university supervisor, since students reported equally good personal relationships with their university supervisor and their cooperating teacher. They did, however report an increased positive personal relationship with the supervisor.

We recognize that the self-reporting nature of these surveys is a limitation in that what student teachers believe they are doing and what they actually are doing may not correspond. However, students' intentions and impressions of their actions in the classroom are an important first step in examining their actual actions.

We recognize, too, that our study is a broad, general one. We do not take into account the unique characteristics of individual supervisors, the classes taught by these supervisors (in terms of the types of classes and when in a student's career they were taken), and the varying effectiveness of the supervisors. This limits the specificity of the conclusions that we can make from our study. For

example, the relationship between student teachers' views on university supervisors and their views on cooperating teachers were positively correlated in unexpected ways. This may indicate that the supervisors' knowledge and insights allowed the students to see the expertise of the cooperating teacher and/or promote their acceptance of advice from their cooperating teacher; conversely, some students' inexperience may have led them to view everyone as knowledgeable.

Many unanswered questions arose during our analysis. These include whether the status of a supervisor (as a professor or a school-based employee working for the university) makes a difference in terms of either relationship or transfer of learning and whether the course and timing of that course makes a difference. For example, would the amount of influence differ if the supervisor were a full-time professor who taught the methods course the semester prior to student teaching versus if the supervisor were an adjunct with whom the student took an introductory course during his or her freshman year? Likewise, we wondered if the age or gender of the supervisor was a variable corresponding to the transfer of learning. Would it matter if the supervisor were a younger, newer faculty member of the same gender versus an older, more experienced faculty member of the other gender? Lastly, we wondered if the relationship was a dynamic one, transforming over the student teaching period, with more university supervisor influence in the beginning and more cooperating teacher influence later.

Future work could also use previous research on the variables useful to building the clinical psychology therapeutic alliance to building a teacher-student alliance. Is it more important for the university supervisor to be friendly and approachable, or to generate respect with some personal distance? This may help further define the difference between the "relationship" that students seem to perceive as equally good with their university supervisor as with their cooperating teacher, and the professional or scholarly relationship that guides students during their student teaching experience.

We recognize that implementing a requirement for student teachers to take a course from their university supervisor prior to student teaching may prove difficult when adjuncts or full-time supervisors are the main supervisors for student teachers. However, despite this, it may be worthwhile to analyze the rotations and policies in order to link faculty with their previous students. If this were not possible, which it may not be at some universities, a one-credit colloquium or a series of group meetings could be implemented the semester prior to student teaching for the pre-student teachers and their supervisors. This colloquium or set of meetings could focus on professionalism, certification mandates, legal aspects of teaching, or other practical matters for pre-student teachers and could build the desired rapport.

Our analysis suggests that some type of faculty consistency in a program that builds rapport is beneficial for student teachers. However, how the program is designed will vary greatly depending on the teacher education policies and program construction. This study is merely a small piece of a greater discussion about student teaching supervision and the context in which student teaching occur. It is not meant to definitively provide answers, but instead to promote greater discussion and inquiry into the design of the student teaching experience as it relates to university supervisors' influence.

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