

Partnering Educational Leadership and Teacher Preparation Programs Via a Two-Way Model of Support for Reflective and Authentic Virtual Classroom Observations

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Effective field supervision of preservice teachers has numerous challenges, including a recent shift in how supervision is being conducted due to Covid-19. To address these challenges, faculty members from an educational leadership and teacher preparation program, respectively, developed a model of supervision involving educational leadership and teacher candidates. Through this two-way model of support, and with expressed IRB approval, candidates from both programs partnered to implement virtual classroom observations and post-conferencing to encourage authentic and reflective instructional feedback. Albeit this initial sample is small, early results from this model suggest benefit to the preparation of educational leaders and teachers.

Introduction

This paper is intended to provide a conceptual overview and examination of the innovative work being conducted during a planning phase of this supervision model. The goal of this review of literature was to examine the traditional student teaching triad (student teacher-university supervisor-classroom mentor), its organizational dynamic for pedagogical development of teacher candidates, and examples of disruption to this traditional approach to classroom supervision and feedback. We also examined the literature on the use of evidence-based practice for virtual classroom observations. Additionally, we examined reflective and authentic feedback with developing teachers. As the COVID-19 global health pandemic continues, it is unknown if we will be able to return to traditional in-person instruction soon (Hailey et al., 2020) and this in turn, will impact the traditional classroom observation process between school leader and pre service candidate. Additionally, to note, the need for

educators to connect curriculum to practical application through an online or hybrid learning environment instead of a traditional in-person classroom was a considerable challenge compounded with uncertainties (Hodges et al., 2020). Our project emerged from this challenge.

Review of the Literature Moving Beyond the Traditional Student Teaching Triad

We sought to examine the operationalization of the traditional student teaching triad as reliance on this triad (student teacher-university supervisor-classroom mentor) is the most common form of supervision of pre-service teachers (Yee, 1968). Pennington et al., (2020) noted a global theme describing the benefits of a traditional student teaching triad include quality feedback, support, and collaboration. Researchers have found that the benefits of this triad can be jeopardized without proper communication and expectations of the roles

of each member (Askins & Imwold, 1994; Johnson & Napper-Owen, 2011)

Conversely, the global theme describing the drawbacks of this triad experience was made up of four categories: unrealistic experience, laziness in preparation, lack of quality feedback, and personality mismatch. Researchers, Sarnoff & Ellerbrock, recommended providing in-service training to optimize the triad experience. Poorly defined roles of participants in the traditional supervision triad can lead to the development of a hierarchy and potential imbalance of power; imbalanced relationships within the triad can create strained relationships that negatively impact preservice teachers' clinical experiences. Further, they also suggested a restructure of teacher preparation, by considering a re-examination of these traditional supervision structures (Sarnoff & Ellerbrock, 2020). The relationship between the feedback giver and receiver is a critical factor in determining the quality of the feedback and likelihood that the application of the feedback would lead to implementation or change in practice as the power dynamic can potentially impede the effectiveness of the feedback (Won et al., 2019).

Additionally, because the strength and nature of school-university partnerships varies widely from preparation program to preparation program, it can be difficult to determine the ways existing boundaries are shaping the roles of those involved in these traditional student teaching triads (Hozebin, 2018). Also important to note, according to the author, is working in a collaborative triad can be challenging as terminology in this work can be confusing, roles and responsibilities can be blurred, and expectations ill-aligned. Thus, this research is essential in understanding ways this traditional triad can be augmented or improved by providing alternate and innovative models of supervision (Elfrinato

et al., 2020), such as this two-way model of support for supervision proposed in this research.

Evidence-Based Practices for Virtual Classroom Observations

Observation is a valuable tool that promotes collegial efforts to improve teaching and learning experiences in preparation programs at institutions of higher education (Andrew et al., 2021). The unprecedented transition to online learning left many to speculate that online learning is a much weaker alternative to traditional face-to-face classroom instruction (Vu & Fisher, 2021). However, the authors noted if properly arranged and done right, even in emergencies without any anticipation, virtual field experience for preservice teachers could be beneficial. Further, these researchers found academic performance in the virtual field experiences was equivalent to their peers in the previous semester who had regular face-to-face field experiences (Vu & Fisher, 2021).

Cole & Kimble (2021) noted that intentionality in the creation of online experiences for pre-service teachers can serve to provide effective support for their development. Virtual observations, in particular, have become more common in teacher preparation (Lynch et al., 2021) While there be some arguing against virtual supervision of teachers there is a growing body of research indicating potential benefits and best practices of virtual observations (Carlin et al., 2013)

For example, in a recent study, participants identified several benefits of virtual observation included increased feedback and communication during observations and the flexibility provided by virtually supervising student teachers with distant placements made scheduling and class time conflicts less of an issue (Lynch et al., 2021). In considering developing effective

virtual observation practices, it is important to examine the importance of the role of the observer or supervisor. The role of the principal is vital in terms of their skills and competencies during normal situations as principals must provide a positive environment for teachers to improve competence in teaching and learning and this is even further compounded during this current health pandemic, forcing a deeper examination on observational practices.

Reflective and Authentic Feedback

Classroom observation and feedback is intended to help pre- and in-service teachers improve their instruction and increase student learning (Won et al., 2019). Reflective and authentic feedback is most effective and beneficial in impacting teacher performance by conferencing to engage the teacher in self-reflection and to establish collaboration between the supervisor and teacher that focuses on the teacher's growth (Danielson, 2007). However, as found, reflective practices must be more heavily nurtured in preparation programs to encourage this in teaching practice (Stevenson & Cain, 2013). Additionally, the challenge of a successful feedback loop is to establish trust, which should include the spirit of shared participation and effective communication. Having an authentic and meaningful relationship grounded in ongoing professional collaboration and action facilitates a student teacher's sense of belonging in the field and can impact their development in positive ways (Walker & Ardell, 2020). Effective feedback assists in differentiating with specific classroom practices and is helpful in making self-reflection more streamlined (Hozebin (2018). Furthermore, *actionable* feedback from those observing the lessons allows teachers to strengthen their practice through self-reflection. However, the researcher also noted, "...the lack of consistent, meaningful

conversations and the reluctance to have difficult conversations have been ingrained into school culture and have gone on for too long" (Hozebin, 2018, p. 46). The model we propose serves to enhance those meaningful conversations and allow space for authentic reflection.

Teacher candidates should be engaged throughout their preparation programs in learning how to develop reflective practices and to actively analyze the impact of their instruction on student learning (Sturkie, 2017). Additionally, feedback that was reflective and authentic resulted in the teacher candidates' developing awareness of reflective practice. These reflection practices led to greater contemplation of impact on students' academic improvement, teacher candidates' acknowledgment of the relatedness of theory to practice, and teacher candidates' changes of their awareness of the reflection process throughout their clinical experience ceasing a growth in teacher candidates' pedagogical skills (Sturkie, 2017).

There is a definite benefit to the school leader as the provider of authentic feedback as part of their development as instructional leaders. Specifically, the notion of 'pedagogical leadership' includes principals' skills in conducting classroom observations and communicating about teaching and learning issues, which should be considered when shaping the professional growth of school leaders and this can be achieved through meaningful classroom observations (Arlestig & Tornsen, 2014). The authors defined a pedagogical leader as having the "means to focus on the core task of schooling – continuous student learning in relation to academic, social, and civic objectives" (p. 857). Additionally, a well-trained pedagogical leader can create the opportunities to enhance the conversation about the core of teachers' work using dialogue and boundary setting as evidence-

based practices to enhance teaching and learning, specifically conducting classroom observations (Arlestig & Tornsen, 2014).

Collaborative Preparation of Leadership and Teacher Candidates

"One of the skills necessary to be an effective school leader is the ability to effectively provide instructional leadership, including coaching and feedback to teachers and instructional staff" (Lewis & Jones, 2019, p. 1). With this in mind, it is imperative that preparation programs incorporate opportunities to develop these practical skills, such as teaching observation and feedback, into coursework for both leadership and teacher candidates. Jones & Ringler (2018) posit that knowing the theories of instructional coaching is not enough, as there is a need for *practice* of these feedback skills. In their work, they found that practicing principals noted that observing teacher candidates over time allowed for the establishment of a professional relationship that was collaborative in nature and impacted their own professional development. Thus, they argue, course learning objectives need to provide the opportunity to experience opportunities for potential educational leaders to practice their skills and engage in reflections. Lastly, the authors found participants practicing and engaging in virtual feedback sessions believed that their virtual coaching sessions were moderately to extremely effective (Jones & Ringler, 2018).

Development of Positive Mentor Relationships

Preservice teachers need to receive targeted feedback and attention from a mentor who gets to know their instructional strengths and weaknesses, beyond what a single observer can give (Richards & Sinelnikov, 2019). Their work also found a

positive relationship between the presence of a mentor and job satisfaction. Additionally, practical implications of these findings include helping shape new teachers' experiences by providing supports for new teachers regarding self-efficacy and mentorship, which in turn, could help retain new teachers (Dorner et al., 2020). Our development and examination of this two-way model of support for supervision is intended to contribute to this body of literature, creating pre-service mentors that can support the development of teacher candidates in effective online settings.

Methods/Process

Set-Up and Development of the Model

University faculty from an Educational Leadership Preparation Program and Preservice Teacher Preparation Program respectively, after continued dialogue, noted the challenges that Teacher Preparation Providers are experiencing in effectively supervising and observing preservice teachers in the field and given the current health crisis, Covid-19, these challenges have been further compounded (Hughes, 2021). Additionally, Educational Leadership Preparation Providers noted their LCs were having difficulties fulfilling required supervised field experience hours with practical and relevant experiences. Furthermore, as many school districts moved to a fully online or hybrid delivery model amidst the recent health pandemic, conducting classroom observations and engagement in leadership tasks presented another layer of challenges. Faculty capacity, time management, and shortage of effective supervisors called for evidence-based practices that were innovative to best serve those in our leadership and teacher preparation programs. A discussion between faculty ensued as to how to re-evaluate the limited resources and opportunities we had to attain the most positive outcome in preparing

aspiring school leaders and teachers for their future work in classrooms. To address this challenge, the researchers proposed a two-way model of support for supervision with the goal of having LCs in their preparation program partner with TCs to conduct virtual classroom observations and engage in authentic and reflective feedback conferences via this proposed Practitioner-Based Mentor-Teacher Candidate Model.

This model is “practitioner-based” in that these LCs are practicing teachers in the field seeking licensure in educational leadership, and as such serves as mentors to the TC who can conduct virtual classroom observation using a state-mandated assessment system and engage in authentic and reflective feedback sessions. This would allow the LCs to serve as mentors and instructional leaders through authentic classroom settings to get experience in conducting classroom teacher evaluations. This supports LCs in satisfying their required field experience hours required by the state licensure agency to obtain state certification and prepares them for their future professional roles as school leaders. TCs, in turn, would engage in the observation and post-conference meetings to receive reflective and authentic feedback from current practitioners working in the field, augmenting feedback provided by the university supervisor and clinical supervisor, augmenting that traditional supervision triad.

The model we designed paired LCs with TCs during the final student teaching experience. Through this model, the observations performed by the LCs were not consequential to the TC’s course grade, thus creating a non-threatening environment absent of the power dynamic inherent in the traditional student teaching observation triad. The observations performed by the LCs only served to provide another perspective on the TCs practice. To be assured that the LCs were prepared for the task of observing and evaluating instruction, they were required to

engage in five hours of training on topics related to: effective observation skills, conducting effective conferences with teachers, and training on the observation instruments used by university supervisors in the college. These instruments are modeled after the state-mandated teacher evaluation, so the LCs were also gaining practice with instruments they will likely be using in their work as educational leaders through this experience. Once this training was completed, the LCs were provided an entire class lesson recorded by the TCs paired with them via the virtual platform that already existed within the teacher preparation program. The TC also submitted the formal accompanying lesson plan. The LC read the lesson plan, observed the TC’s pre-recorded lesson, used the observation instrument to prepare formal feedback, and then arranged a virtual feedback session with the candidate. These conferences were designed to explicitly address the observation of the lesson and its relationship to the standards on the observation instrument and to provide instructional feedback to the TC.

Results/Findings Implementation

The researchers collectively reviewed the pre-recorded classroom lessons and aligned lesson plans as well as the one-hour recorded virtual post-conference. Themes and patterns were identified to delve deeper into how this two-way model of support for supervision may be beneficial to both the LC and the TC. The major themes expressed were as follows: the benefit and potential of reflective and authentic feedback; the benefits of collaborative preparation of leadership and teacher candidates; and the development of positive mentor relationships.

Highlights from post conferences indicate this model was positively received and provided benefits to both groups involved. It is important to note here that

these conferences were authentic and unscripted. The researchers did not participate in or observe the conferences in real-time. We observed a recording of the completed conference at a later date. During the post conference, as evidence of supervision best practice, the LCs asked the preservice teachers to first reflect on their lessons themselves before providing any formal feedback. The TC was asked to reflect on their instructional decision-making, student engagement, assessment of student understanding, and to give an overall evaluation of their performance. The LCs asked thought-provoking questions for the TCs to encourage thinking critically. In many instances, the LC suggested ways to modify the lesson and asked thought-provoking questions and inquired about depth of knowledge connected to theory. Topics noted as part of the discussion included: questioning strategies via this depth of knowledge, strategies learned in teacher preparation courses, student engagement and classroom management ideas, assessment strategies, lesson planning, differentiated instructional ideas, and professional goals and aspirations.

The LC provided very practical advice but went beyond with not just a focus on the standards (examined the evidence-based practices being implemented) but also providing a very interesting perspective as a practicing teacher in the field. Overall, the post-conferencing resulted in very positive feedback and the session concluded with inquiries about TC's plans after graduation and ideas for effective job searches. Additionally, the LC offered professional and practical advice and agreed to serve as a reference believing that the TC would be an excellent new teacher in the near future, establishing a personal and professional connection. Responses from the participating candidates indicated great satisfaction with the experience.

This was provided by the Educational Leadership Candidate:

I met with the (teacher candidate). He gave a lesson on Civil Rights History to a Junior US History class. It was a 90-minute block class. I evaluated him using the Intern Keys form and wrote it up for him on the form. The whole process took me about 3.5 hours minus the online preparation training videos and articles. He and I spoke for just under an hour on a zoom call. During that time, I first asked him questions and let him respond. Then, we went through the TKES one by one and I gave him encouragement on what he was doing well. I didn't give him any major suggestions as he really showed great poise, planning, and implementation of his plan. At the end, I did give him a couple things to think about that might change up the lesson if he does it again.

This was provided by the Teacher Candidate:

My experience working with the leadership candidate during the Fall 2021 semester, is one that I feel will go a long way in terms of my future in the teaching profession. Feedback was given in a rubric, but also through a conversation over zoom which I found to be one of the most important aspects of this experience. Considering I will be interviewing for a job in the coming months, I felt it was very helpful to converse with someone already in the field. This also allowed me to build a connection with someone in the field who may be able to help with finding a job, or anything similar.

Overall, the goal of this two-way model of support for supervision was to provide an opportunity to share ideas between novice

and experienced educators in a safe and non-threatening environment. We have asked the participants to follow up with reflection questions to further garner their perceptions of the experience. These questions can be found in *Appendix A*. To determine the participants' perceptions of this experience and to ascertain ways to strengthen this model, we interviewed the respective candidates. We designed a set of open-ended questions, designed to delve deeper into responses from the interviews and chose to interview each participant separately and then once together in virtual settings. The semi-structured nature of the questions allowed for the participants to offer feedback on this model for future development. We are currently involved in the interview process with these candidates and are currently working to continue to examine this model and have sought input from our constituents on their perceived benefits of this model as well as potential challenges that may arise.

Discussion/ Implications for Practice and Future Research

We acknowledge that we need a more exhaustive process to include additional LC/TC to better understand the effectiveness of the model, however, as stated earlier, our intentions with this work are to provide a conceptual overview and examination of this supervision model in its planning phase. Future research is being conducted to continue implementing this two-way model of support for supervision with Educational Leadership and Preservice Teacher Candidates to examine their collective experiences. The intention is to implement this model beyond the researchers' work and adopt it systematically as pedagogy to be utilized collegewide through the partnership of Educational and Teacher Preparation programs and the researchers are in continued discussions with their internal and

external constituents including colleagues, stakeholders, and professional organizations.

Thus, we plan to continue at the Leadership and Teacher Preparation Program level but move into a district/school model where teachers are encouraged and compensated for conducting classroom observations of teachers in their school. Acknowledging that often there is a disconnect between what school leaders think teachers should do and what we are actually doing in the classroom and in turn, we aim to bridge that missing piece so everyone is on the same page. Addressing this gap in the process is essential to the conduct of effective classroom supervision, and this two-way model of support may be the key to closing this gap and serve as a model to foster improved teacher and administrator relationships.

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Appendix A

The following are questions for the Leadership Candidate Focus Groups:

1. How did this experience support your preparation as an effective educational leader?
2. How did this experience (the training and implementation) develop your skills at teacher observation? How prepared were you on the instrumentation? How confident do you feel to take on the role of observing teachers in the field?
3. How did this experience (the training and implementation) develop your skills at conducting teacher feedback conferences? How did this experience contribute to your confidence in conducting feedback conferences with teachers?
4. What is your overall evaluation of this experience as an embedded task in your leadership preparation?
5. How could this experience be strengthened to be more impactful for your preparation?
6. In what other ways could partnering with teacher candidates be beneficial to your leadership preparation and development?

The following are questions for the Teacher Candidate:

1. How did this experience support your preparation as an effective educator?
2. How did this experience develop your instructional skills? How prepared were you to engage in this discussion? How confident do you feel in delivering instruction?

3. How did this experience develop your comfort with teacher feedback conferences led by an administrator?
4. What is your overall evaluation of this experience as an embedded task in your teacher preparation?
5. How could this experience be strengthened to be more impactful for your preparation?
6. In what other ways could partnering with teacher candidates be beneficial to your leadership preparation and development?
- 7.

*Questions for the focus group (combined): These questions will be open ended, designed to delve deeper into responses from the interviews.