

THE STUDENT AND COOPERATING TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

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The relationship between the student teacher and cooperating teacher is important in the student teaching experience in Family and Consumer Sciences. This paper provides an overview of a phenomenological study conducted to examine the nature of the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher in facilitating the student's professional development. The five student teachers participating in the study were taught from a critical science perspective. If the curriculum perspective held by the student teacher and cooperating teacher are in conflict there may be difficulties for the student teacher. Themes identified are related to (a) the purpose and outcomes of the student teaching experience, (b) the relationship between the student and cooperating teacher, and (c) the knowledge and skills of the student teacher.

The relationship between the student teacher and cooperating teacher is a significant component in the preservice education of teachers. If the perspective of the cooperating teacher conflicts with the perspective learned by the student teacher, this relationship does not permit a smooth transition for the student teacher. Critical science is one perspective in Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Education (Brown, 1978; Brown & Paolucci, 1979). As we move toward this perspective preservice teachers must be prepared to use critical science-based concepts for both planning and implementing instruction. The student teaching experience is an important part of the student's preparation, and requires that cooperating teachers have an understanding of this approach. This paper gives an overview of a study conducted to examine the nature of the student teaching experience, and more specifically the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher in facilitating the student's professional development. One specific objective was to examine the patterns or types of knowledge which are supported in the student teaching experience. The critical science perspective represents alternative forms of knowledge which have not been emphasized in the past.

The Critical Science Perspective

Curriculum orientations, or beliefs, held by a teacher are important to the practice of teaching. Traditionally, home economics has been approached from an empirical-rational perspective where emphasis is placed on factual and "how to" knowledge and skills. Subject matter includes foods and nutrition, clothing, housing, parenting, family relationships, and child development. In a critical science approach emphasis is placed on both subject matter and processes, that is, intellectual and social skills (Brown, 1978; Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Johnson & Fedje, 1999). Important concepts in the critical science-based perspective include recurring concerns of the family, work of the family, practical reasoning and family systems of action. Preservice teachers and cooperating teachers need to have an understanding of these concepts in order to be able to plan and implement instruction based on a critical science perspective. A teacher with a more traditional orientation may hold different educational beliefs than a teacher with a critical science orientation. Ideally, a teacher's orientation is reflected in practice. If a

cooperating teacher holds a different orientation than the student teacher, it is possible that conflict may result.

Social Relationships and Knowledge Formation

The social relationship between the student teacher and cooperating teacher are important in knowledge formation. Moore (1992) proposed a model to examine the relationship of the site supervisor and student intern as related to the forms of knowledge and practice which are implemented. Knowledge and practice can be fixed (rote, certain, used according to mandated practice) or flexible (transformative, situational, amenable to additions or change). Relationships are hierarchical (controlled, distribution of knowledge is static and delivered top-down) or collegial (participatory, knowledge is widely distributed across roles, all members can participate in its creation and use). An example of a hierarchical relationship is illustrated by the cooperating teacher who tells the student what and how to teach, or how to resolve problems, based on the cooperating teachers' own practices. In a more collegial relationship, the student and cooperating teacher work together to determine what should be done with regard to teaching or problem resolution.

The constructivist learning perspective also emphasizes the social relationship between the teacher and student and building of knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Good & Brophy, 1994). In the social constructivist view, learning is advanced by: (a) exposure to new input from others, creating an awareness of what is unknown and therefore leading to the expansion of cognitive structures; (b) exposure to new ideas that may contradict one's own beliefs and cause a reexamination and restructuring of beliefs; and (c) communication of one's own ideas to others which forces articulation and sharpens conceptualizations. As a result of such social interactions cognitive structures become more fully developed.

A balance of multiple forms of knowledge/practice may be important in the student teaching experience. However, establishing this balance may be difficult. The student teacher and cooperating teacher relationship is sometimes described in conflicting ways: mentor vs. tormentor, reciprocity and tensions, harmony of dissonance (Enz & Cook, 1992; Graham, 1993; Sudezina, Giebelhaus, & Coolican, 1997). Cooperating teachers may perceive their role in different ways, for example, as a model, mentor, guide, or facilitator (Koskela & Ganser, 1998). Ideally, the relationship would help the student develop reflective practice (Stern, 1997). Understanding the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher is important in facilitating the student's development.

In the student teaching experience alternative curriculum perspectives may be held by the student teacher and cooperating teacher. Alternative curriculum perspectives represent different patterns or types of knowledge which are emphasized in teaching practice. One way these perspectives are communicated is through the dialogue and actions of the student teacher and cooperating teacher. This social relationship impacts the knowledge and practice emphasized within the experience. The student teacher's and the cooperating teacher's interpretations of this social relationship are subjective. Understanding the nature of this relationship is important to the preparation of FCS teachers.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the student teaching experience in Family and Consumer Sciences. Specific objectives included the following:

1. Gain an understanding of the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher in FCS.
2. Identify patterns or types of knowledge which emerge in the student teaching experiences, and the meaning of those experiences to undergraduate learners.
3. Identify patterns or types of knowledge which are emphasized by the cooperating teacher as being meaningful to undergraduate learners.
4. Examine the social construction of knowledge through the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher.

A phenomenological research perspective was used to explore the nature of the experiences of the student and cooperating teacher. Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

Interviews were conducted during the 1997-1998 academic year with five student teachers. All participants were female and ranged in age from 22-25 years. The student teachers were taught critical science-based concepts as part of their undergraduate course work. Student teachers were interviewed at the beginning of the semester, mid-semester and after the student teaching experience concluded. Each interview was approximately one hour in length.

Interviews were conducted by the primary investigator. Interview questions included:

- How would you define FCS?
- What are the important ideas that you like students in FCS to learn?
- What are some key events that stand out in your mind about student teaching?
- In what ways was student teaching a positive experience?
- What could have made the student teaching experience better?
- Describe the ideal relationship between a student teacher and cooperating teacher?
- What was the relationship like with your cooperating teacher?
- What ideas, skills or knowledge will you take with you to a new position?
- What gaps do you think you still have?

Each student teacher completed experiences at both the middle and high school levels (eight weeks at each site), and therefore, worked with two different cooperating teachers. All ten cooperating teachers were interviewed after the completion of the experience. Interviews were conducted by an emeriti professor in FCS Education and were approximately one hour.

Interview questions included:

- How would you define FCS? What are important ideas that you would like students in FCS to learn?
- Why did you agree to be a cooperating teacher? As a cooperating teacher, what were highlights of the experience for you? What do you believe were highlights of the experience for the student teacher?
- Describe the ideal relationship between the student teacher and cooperating teacher. Describe your relationship with the student teacher.
- In what ways did you interact with the student teacher? In what ways did you help the student teacher grow professionally?
- What questions or concerns did you have before the student teacher started? While the student teacher was at the setting? After the student teacher left the setting?

Interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Transcripts were returned to the teachers to review with an opportunity to indicate desired changes in order to accurately reflect the teachers' intended meanings. The reviewed transcripts were then analyzed for themes.

The ten cooperating teachers in this study were also female and had completed from 8-31 years of teaching experience (an average of 18.6 years). Each participated in ongoing course work beyond their B.S. degree but had varying experiences related to the critical science perspective. The majority of the teachers were experienced in working with student teachers; nine of the teachers had worked with a student teacher previously (an average of seven student teachers over their career).

Themes

The overall theme of this study was that the student and cooperating teacher's relationship was important to the professional development of both the preservice and inservice teacher. The meaning and nature of the experience, however, were different. Themes related to (a) the purpose and outcomes of the student teaching experience, (b) the relationship between the student and cooperating teacher, (c) the knowledge and skills of the student teacher.

Purpose and Outcomes of the Student Teaching Experience.

For the cooperating teachers in this study the student teaching experience provided a way of examining one's own knowledge and practice. For example, one cooperating teacher, Sarah, stated the following:

. . . What I gained from my student teacher was looking through the eyes of a beginner, and not, you know, after 25 years of teaching. You don't realize you become so set . . . and it opens your eyes all of the sudden that this is what the beginner is seeing for the first time. . . .

The student teaching experience was also perceived as an opportunity for the student teacher to bring new knowledge to the cooperating teacher. The student teaching experience was further described as an opportunity to contribute to the professional development of the student teacher and as an opportunity to contribute to the profession more broadly.

For the student teachers, the experience was primarily perceived as an opportunity to apply knowledge learned as well as a career affirmation experience in order to "see if I like teaching." It was also described as an opportunity to provide the cooperating teacher with new knowledge or information. Ashley shared the following at the beginning of the semester:

I think that she does have the expectation that I'm going to have all these new and good ideas. . . . After awhile [she has done] the same things over and over again, you know, she's looking for the new ideas. And I think she does think that I'm going to bring those to her. . . and I thought 'well, I hope she's not disappointed.'

Relationship Between the Student and Cooperating Teacher.

The cooperating teachers described an ideal relationship with the student teacher as being based on components such as good communication, trust, and respect. Their actual relationship, however, was described as including both personal and professional dimensions. From a personal perspective, eight of the cooperating teachers described "friendships" with the student teacher; two relationships were not characterized in that way. The cooperating teachers also described a professional relationship by providing support, direction or guidance related to teaching. These two perspectives are illustrated in the following example by Kirsten:

I think we had a good relationship. I think it was a relationship where there were some times when I had to tell her something that maybe she didn't want to hear but I think she respected that and she listened. . . . I think we had good rapport. I didn't want it to be a mother and a daughter [relationship] but I think that she respected me as a teacher and as her teacher, and but yet we know we had a good time and laughed and had fun together.

For the student teacher, the ideal relationship with the cooperating teacher was described as based on good communication, understanding, and support for teaching. However, the actual relationships which were described included both personal and professional dimensions, but they were much more diverse than what the cooperating teachers described.

Student teachers described the personal dimension of their relationships as ranging from including friendships to no perceived friendships. An important finding is related to the professional dimension. Student teachers described they received support for teaching but also, in some instances, described confusion or conflict regarding FCS curriculum, teaching methods, and/or classroom management. One student teacher, Ashley, described the relationship in a positive way, which supported her teaching:

. . . For the most part, [the cooperating teacher] and I got along great. . . . She had file drawers full of materials that I could look through and she just let me go on my own to plan and, if I had questions then I would seek her help. . . We had it established that if I had questions I would come to her and ask; otherwise she would just let me on my own to work and figure things out.

Another student teacher, Nicki, who perceived no friendship with the cooperating teacher, experienced confusion regarding “what do to” about content and activities. She worked with Kirsten who perceived they had “good rapport” (described in the section above).

. . . I got mixed signals because she said that I could do whatever I wanted, but on the other hand she said ‘This is what you have to cover today, [because the other teacher] is covering this, and you also need to cover this, and these are the activities you need to do.’

Knowledge and Skills of the Student Teacher.

The cooperating teachers perceived the student teachers as knowledgeable. Concerns related to the student teacher's understanding of adolescents and teaching content at appropriate levels, and planning in a timely way. Jill, a cooperating teacher, stated:

. . . It seems the concern that I've had most recently would be that . . . sometimes they fly by the seat of their pants a little more than they should. . .

There were also limited concerns regarding gaps related to technical skills, (e.g; sewing skills) or subject matter knowledge, (e.g.; in-depth knowledge of the birthing process). The cooperating teachers described no concerns related to the student teacher's ability to incorporate critical science-based concepts, such as work of the family, family systems of action, or practical

reasoning. In some instances, the teachers shared that they wanted additional information regarding critical science-based perspective.

In contrast, the student teachers' descriptions about their knowledge and skills about teaching ranged from confidence to lack of confidence. Linda, a student teacher, described her confidence:

[In student teaching I learned about] . . . organizing lesson plans, organizing myself so that I'm ready to teach. . . I think that I definitely learned how I like to be prepared in order to teach at [the first site] I was just able to get everything prepared well in advance so there really was no excuse that I wouldn't be ready to teach.

The student teachers described limited concerns related to gaps in technical skills or subject matter understanding. This had been an issue prior to the student teaching semester which emerged during class discussions. While the cooperating teachers did not see the student's knowledge of critical science concepts as a concern, student teachers did talk about their concerns related to (1) degree of their own understanding related to critical science-based concepts, and (2) how to implement critical science-based concepts due to perceived constraints, (e.g., lack of knowledge, lack of teacher support). Emily shared the following:

. . . I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing. We come in with all of these things that were supposed to tie in with work of the family . . . [and I] just don't see how [I would] be able to do it with the way the teacher wants it taught [from a traditional perspective].

Discussion

The broad purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the student teaching experience in FCS. One specific objective was to gain an understanding of the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher in this experience. According to Moore (1992), the social relationship between the student teacher and cooperating teacher are important in knowledge formation. In this model, relationships were described in hierarchical and collegial dimensions. In this current study, however, the cooperating teacher and student teacher relationship was not clearly described by the participants in these dimensions. The term "friendship" seemed closest to that of a collegial relationship in which support and guidance were provided by the cooperating teacher. The student teacher who perceived "no friendship" with the cooperating teacher, described characteristics that were more hierarchical in nature, for example, in directly telling the student teacher specifically "what to teach."

Two additional objectives in this study related to the identification of patterns or types of knowledge which emerged in student teaching experience, the meanings held by the student teacher, and emphasis placed by the cooperating teacher. Moore (1992) linked social relationships to alternative dimensions of knowledge and practice: fixed and flexible. Although in-depth examples did not emerge from the interviews, illustrations of both fixed and flexible knowledge/practice were described. The application of fixed knowledge was emphasized by the student teachers. For example, for all of the student teachers the study, the experience was predominately an opportunity to apply knowledge already learned. Cooperating teachers raised concerns regarding flexible knowledge and practice. For example, concerns were raised about

the student teachers' understanding of adolescents and adapting content at appropriate levels within the specific setting.

Knowledge is also represented in the curriculum orientation which is held by the student teacher and cooperating teacher, and the ways in which knowledge is put into practice. In a traditional perspective emphasis is placed on specific subject matter and learning factual knowledge and skills. In a critical science perspective emphasis is placed on recurring concerns of the family and learning both subject matter and processes. In this study, "grand tour" interview questions were designed to elicit broad answers to gain better insights regarding participants' orientations and teaching practices. Questions about critical science were not asked directly so participants would not be led to a specific answer.

Surprisingly, a predominate theme did not exist regarding the implementation of critical science-based concepts by both the cooperating teachers and student teachers. The critical science approach is still relatively new to FCS and descriptions of conflict between orientations was anticipated. Student teachers did describe some concerns related to their own understanding and opportunities to implement the critical science perspective. It is important to note that the cooperating teachers perceived the student teachers as being knowledgeable but questions still remain as to what knowledge is being emphasized with the student teaching experience.

The last objective of this study was to examine the social construction of knowledge through the relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher. A constructivist learning perspective suggests that learning is promoted through experiences such as exposure to new ideas, contradiction of beliefs, or communicating ideas to others. Ideally, a constructivist learning orientation would seem ideal in facilitating the student teachers' development. Limited examples were identified in this study which suggested why this approach was implemented. Cooperating teachers described the experience as a way of examining their own knowledge and practice through "new eyes." As indicated earlier, a contradiction of curriculum orientations or beliefs was anticipated, but this did provide the opportunity to influence the experience in a positive way. The student teachers in this study may not be at a conceptual level to fully communicate differences in curriculum orientations and practice to the cooperating teacher.

The relationship between the student teacher and cooperating teacher is important to professional development of the student teacher. Relationships perceived as being more collegial appeared to facilitate development. The student teacher and cooperating teacher may hold alternative orientations about FCS which may influence the implementation of critical science-based concepts.

Implications for Practice and Research

The themes of this study suggest that the nature of the relationship between the student and cooperating teacher are important to professional development but further attention may be needed to assist both preservice and inservice teachers in examining, planning and implementing the critical science perspective. Student teachers may need further assistance in developing skills in communication regarding their curriculum perspective. Prior to the student teaching semester, both the student teacher and cooperating teacher should examine alternative relationship models which support professional development. The student teachers and cooperating teacher should also examine their curriculum perspectives and potential differences, and establish structures for implementing instruction based on these perspectives.

Additional research is needed regarding the critical science perspective and relationships which support professional development for preservice and inservice teachers in FCS. Further research is also needed regarding the knowledge and practice supported in student teaching experiences including the school setting as well as University structures. In addition, research is needed to further examine the transition of FCS from an empirical science-based perspective to a critical science-based perspective.

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