Coming full circle: Using program alumni as cooperating teachers for the next generation of student teachers

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Abstract: Characteristics of cooperating teachers that lead to successful student teaching experiences and the benefits accruing to cooperating teachers were investigated in a case study. A unique aspect of this study was the focus on the use of cooperating teachers who are alumni of the teacher education program investigated. Cooperating teachers were surveyed and interviewed concerning what had best prepared them for being cooperating teachers, what benefits they gained from the experience, and what differences were found in working with student teachers from their own pre-service preparation program compared to other programs. Evidence-based conclusions indicated: (1) the most important factor in making an effective cooperating teacher is being prepared as a reflective practitioner; (2) the strongest benefit of being a cooperating teacher is having the chance to become more reflective about one's own practice; and (3) the most successful experiences for the cooperating teacher result when there is a strong alignment of theory and practice between the cooperating teacher and student teacher. Recommendations for using alumni cooperating teachers where possible, providing thorough preparation in

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
How can we make sure that student teachers receive the best possible support from their cooperating teachers? Student teaching is arguably the most important step in preparing excellent new classroom teachers. This small-scale case study investigated what characteristics of cooperating teachers lead to successful student teaching experiences and what benefits classroom teachers get from being cooperating teachers. A unique aspect of this study was the focus on the use of teachers who are alumni of the teacher education program with whom they are working as cooperating teachers. The results indicated the most important factor in making effective cooperating teachers is being prepared as reflective practitioners who consistently examine their own teaching. The strongest benefit of being a cooperating teacher is having the chance to become more reflective about one's own practice. And finally, the most successful student teaching experiences result when there is a strong alignment of values between the cooperating teacher and student teacher.
the expectations of the program for non-alumni teachers, and encouraging means to develop close relationships between cooperating and student teachers are discussed.

**Subjects:** Educational Research; Action Research & Teacher Research; Teachers & Teacher Education; Teaching & Learning; Continuing Professional Development

**Keywords:** cooperating teachers; student teaching supervision; reflective practice; student teaching guidance; student teaching mentorship

**1. Introduction**

Teacher education programs based at institutions of higher education are responsible for providing the best possible preparation for teacher candidates, including the opportunity to gain from multiple classroom experiences. Field experience, especially student teaching, is an integral part of preparation for successful teaching, as it facilitates transference of theory to practice while developing instructional and classroom management skills and the understanding of the needs of students and the school community. However, learning as simply applying and refining theories ignores the interactive and social nature of learning from experience facilitated by cooperating teachers. Focusing on reflective practice and relationship building enhances the experience. The purpose of this preliminary case study was to begin to investigate these processes during student teaching with a focus on the role of the cooperating teacher.

Ultimately, the student teaching experience is considered beneficial because, as Hammerness and Darling-Hammond (2005) note, “modern learning theory makes clear that expertise is developed within specific domains and learning is situated within specific contexts where it needs to be developed” (p. 403). With the knowledge of teaching emerging directly from the activity of teaching, student teaching provides prospective teachers with an opportunity to construct their own understandings of teaching based on the practical dilemmas they encounter in the field (Cuencu, 2011). In order to support this construction of deep understanding, educative supervision should use open-ended questions to get student teachers to develop their own ideas/reflections. In the program studied here, teaching is viewed as a complex intellectual, reflective endeavor involving continuous decision-making. Reflection is a special way of thinking about action and experience. When insights occur as a result of reflection, a learner is better able to create new knowledge from these experiences and to develop alternative ways of behaving.

In order to prepare effective teachers for the numerous contexts and complexities of today’s classrooms, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education’s (NCATE) Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) urged teacher education programs rich in clinical practice and partnerships with school districts to share responsibility for the development and support of productive new teachers. University supervisors and cooperating teachers should be skilled, reflective practitioners who are able to assess candidate performance, with student achievement at the center of all interactions (Bigham, Hively, & Toole, 2014). Therefore, teacher preparation programs founded upon a high number of “real world” experiences with public school students are most likely to provide future teachers with opportunities for reflection and the skills and background needed for effective teaching.

The increased emphasis on situated learning in clinical settings and the integration of reflective practice has led to increasing attention to the role of the cooperating teacher in teacher education (Gut, Beam, Henning, Cochran, & Knight, 2014). The literature confirms that the ability of the classroom teacher to function in the role of cooperating teacher is inherent to the success of field experiences (Baum & Korth, 2013). However, without a clear understanding of the ways in which cooperating teachers participate—or are expected to participate—in field experiences, it is difficult to know how best to support or facilitate that work. Therefore, it is important that researchers and practitioners alike move beyond simplistic conceptions to more detailed and nuanced understandings that both provoke and advance how the work of cooperating teachers is conceived and enacted.
According to Russell and Russell (2011), little research gives voice to the cooperating teacher; yet there is growing research demonstrating that the cooperating teacher–student teacher relationship enhances the growth and professional development of the more experienced cooperating teacher.

The purpose of this study was to determine what characteristics of cooperating teachers contributed most to successful student teaching experiences. Successful student teaching leads to the growth and development of the student teachers in the core areas of instructional planning, delivery and management of instruction, and assessment of student learning. I wanted to investigate the impact of having been prepared to teach in a small liberal arts college teacher preparation program with an emphasis on reflective practice on the subsequent role of being a cooperating teacher for student teachers from this same program. Teacher participants were surveyed and interviewed concerning three main areas of inquiry: (1) how their pre-service program prepared them for being cooperating teachers; (2) the impact being cooperating teachers had on these alumni and their teaching practice; and (3) how their experience as cooperating teachers for student teachers from their alma mater compared to working with student teachers from other programs.

These questions developed as a result of many years in which I was a college supervisor of student teachers for both the alumni cooperating teachers during their initial student teaching experience and later the next generation of student teachers assigned to these alumni cooperating teachers. I also supervised many student teachers paired with non-alumni cooperating teachers and began to see differences in the way the process impacted both the student teachers and the cooperating teachers. Research should connect teacher education program goals, student teaching, and outcomes of student teaching as much as possible to provide more useful knowledge to improve program effectiveness (Erbilgin, 2014). This study is in line with research that gives voice to cooperating teachers, exploring their perspectives on the cooperating teacher–student teacher relationship. Because the beginning teacher is impressionable and the clinical experience is pivotal to his or her development, it is critical to investigate methods or strategies that result in the cooperating teachers being the most effective partners possible for teacher candidates.

2. Literature review
Preparation of teachers is dependent on authentic practice in school settings. Cooperating teachers provide an important link in the developmental preparation of new teachers as a critical part of the capstone experience. In addition, the conceptual framework of the teacher preparation program at the center of this case study frames the approach to this research. The program’s conceptual framework is based around five dispositions that shape its coursework and clinical experiences. These are: (1) pre-professional characteristics; resourcefulness; responsiveness; teacher efficacy; and most relevant for this research, reflective self-assessment. Reviewing prior research in areas concerning the centrality of student teaching and the cooperating teacher with a focus on reflective teacher preparation, and the roles, characteristics, preparation for and impact of the experience for the cooperating teacher is valuable to framing the current study and interpreting its results.

2.1. Centrality of student teaching and cooperating teachers in reflective teacher preparation
Field experience is often considered the culminating capstone event for a teacher education program, as well as a critical milestone toward becoming an effective teacher. Student teachers also consider cooperating teachers to be one of the most important contributors to their teacher preparation program (Clarke et al., 2014). Therefore, the ways in which cooperating teachers participate in teacher education are significant. Typically, university teacher education programs select veteran or more experienced teachers to serve as cooperating teachers based on factors that may include prior collaboration, credentials, and teacher availability or willingness to work with a student teacher. Generally, the cooperating teachers are eager and willing to facilitate in this supervisory role. The ideal setting for the student teacher is one that is welcoming, accepting, and supportive (Russell & Russell, 2011).
The influence of the cooperating teacher has always been regarded as central within teacher education. Weiss and Weiss (2001) argued that it is generally accepted by students, teachers, and most faculty members that “co-operating teachers are the most powerful influence on the quality of the student teaching experience and often shape what student teachers learn by the way they mentor” (p. 134). Through the modeling of practice, cooperating teachers offer their student teachers important images of teaching. According to Cuenca (2011), cooperating teachers play a significant role in tapping into the affective and personal dimensions that are crucial when learning to teach. Field-based teacher education requires more than simply telling pre-service teachers how or what to teach. This is where the focus on the case study’s framework of reflective practice is evident.

The expectation that cooperating teachers ought to encourage and engage student teachers in reflective practice is evident in virtually every university’s student teaching guidelines and responds to university educators’ concerns about cooperating teachers’ emphasis on the technical, custodial, and managerial dimensions of teaching (Brodie, Cowling, & Nissen, 2009). Supervisory approaches that promote reflective teaching have little chance for success unless the university and school culture support reflection as part of everyday practice (Weiss & Weiss, 2001). In the program studied in this case, teaching is viewed as a complex intellectual, reflective endeavor involving continuous decision-making. Therefore, student teachers need to use complex and deep reflection in-action and on-action with the aid of the cooperating teacher and supervisor. Reflection can be an agent for informing, challenging, and transforming the norms of professional practice (Weiss & Weiss, 2001). If the broader goal of student teaching is to encourage prospective teachers to view teaching as an intellectual craft, as it is in the program in this case study, then the role of the cooperating teacher must be further explored beyond transmissive functions. Being more than just a conduit for conveying the knowledge of teaching during the student teaching experience, cooperating teachers must be conscious of the moves they make and the access they provide (or deny) student teachers to the work of teaching and teachers. As a key attribute in learning to teach from the socially situated activity of student teaching, legitimacy from the cooperating teacher is necessary and important commodity (Cuenca, 2011).

2.2. Roles and characteristics of cooperating teacher in the student teaching process

Cooperating teachers have been described in a number of ways, three of which have become commonly accepted within the teacher education community: classroom placeholder, supervisor of practica, and teacher educator (Clarke et al., 2014). This case study’s program sees cooperating teachers as teacher educators. This conception is similar to that of a coach, that is, someone who works closely with the learner in the relevant setting, encouraging, and eliciting the meaning that the learner is making of his or her practice. Ideally, cooperating teachers would model practice as students first enter the practicum setting and explore teaching in the classroom, and this would then be followed by a gradual move to a more reflective and independent way of engaging with student teachers signaling a shift from mimicked to more independent and reflective practice.

Effective supervision is dependent upon the accuracy of one’s judgment about the quality of performance and the ability to convey feedback constructively to the teacher candidate (Gareis & Grant, 2014). Kahan, Sinclair, Saucier, and Nguyen Caiozzi (2003) reported that even as student teachers’ knowledge and experience develops over the course of the practicum, cooperating teacher feedback remains largely fixed on the technical aspects of teaching. Kwan and Lopez-Real’s (2005) cooperating teachers paid overwhelming attention to providing feedback, not as imposing a particular form of practice but rather “in terms of helping student teachers develop their own strengths and improving their weak areas according to their own personality, character and ability” (p. 285). However, feedback that promotes deep and substantive reflection on practice by student teachers is rare (Clarke et al., 2014).

It is important to understand the characteristics that are necessary for effective cooperating teachers. These characteristics center on the teaching expertise and willingness to guide student teachers in reflective practice. Knox and McGovern (1988) assert that there are six critical
characteristics of cooperating teachers: (a) willingness to share knowledge; (b) competency; (c) willingness to facilitate growth; (d) honesty; (e) willingness to give critical, positive, and constructive feedback and (f) ability to deal directly with the student teacher. Some of the primary aspects of effective support models include making observations, providing feedback, and having time for the cooperating teacher and student teacher to discuss feedback and engage in reflection (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002). According to Ganser (1999), the cooperating teacher should optimally have anywhere from 8 to 15 years of teaching experience, including several years in the school in which they are currently working. Additionally, they should exhibit the following characteristics: (a) willingness, commitment, and enthusiasm; (b) the ability to collaborate with adults; and (c) the perception of teaching as a job they enjoy.

Additionally, Roberts and Dyer's (2004) model of cooperating teacher effectiveness includes five foundations that effective cooperating teachers use during the student teaching experience: instruction, advising, professionalism, cooperating teacher/student teacher relationship, and personal characteristics. A review by Jacobi (1991) examined guidance in the educational setting and defined three major categories of the cooperating teacher's role, which include personal support, role modeling, and professional development. Russell and Russell (2011) found that in-service teachers viewed their role in these relationships as a resource person, guide, role model, friend, and experienced professional. Cooperating teachers discussed the importance of collaboration, patience, good communication skills, trust, honesty, and respect toward the nurturing of effective support relationships.

2.3. Relationship building
Based on the prior studies described above, one important aspect of the cooperating teacher role that emerges is the nature of the relationship that he or she is able to develop with the student teacher and how this impacts socialization of the student teacher. According to Jones, Kelsey, and Brown (2014), the steps that underpin successful relationships between cooperating teachers and student teachers are personality, community and access, and trust and communication. Personality elements included compatibility, similar values, mutual interest in growth, successful conflict resolution, and appreciation of differences. Community and access elements included feelings of belonging and having access to cooperating teachers. Trust and communication elements were based on delegating responsibility, providing accurate feedback, and supporting student teachers to assume the role of teacher.

As part of this relationship building, cooperating teachers are important agents of socialization, and it is necessary that they are aware of the implicit and explicit messages that they communicate to student teachers and how these messages impact student teachers' learning. Research results highlight cooperating teachers' belief that they need to collaborate with the student teacher and the importance of maintaining good interpersonal relationships (Young & MacPhail, 2014). Communication leads to trust, and trust is essential for a positive experience, regardless of context. Without communication and trust, a successful student teaching experience is unlikely (Jones et al., 2014). To improve this support, researchers recommend (a) lengthening clinical experiences; (b) providing support for creating positive relationships and (c) providing professional development specific to each clinical setting (Gut et al., 2014). This will be explored in the case study reported here.

2.4. Preparation for the cooperating teacher role
In order to ensure that cooperating teachers fulfill the necessary roles and have the important characteristics, preparation for support comes from the teachers' own pre-service preparation as well as their ability to work with the university/college supervisor. As previously discussed, the programs explored in this case study has a conceptual framework that emphasizes reflective practice, so cooperating teachers must be familiar with this concept. Stegman (2007) argued for an essential position for cooperating teachers in guiding student teacher reflection. Furthermore, he documented specific strategies that enhance reflection: offering suggestions and observations from personal experience, providing supportive commentary, providing advice and insight, recommending
instructional and participatory strategies, and validating thoughtful lesson preparation. With a reflective focus, cooperating teachers can guide discussions and jointly develop and negotiate understandings of professional practice with their student teachers. When student teachers are engaged in reflection on their teacher practices in a learner centered supervision context, the practice can facilitate the development of their pedagogical techniques and conceptions (Erbilgin, 2014).

In general, understanding the university/college’s program expectations is another key to a successful experience. The most successful relationships are based on shared and common values, goals, and understandings. Numerous challenges to successful guidance can emerge when the personality and teaching approach of the cooperating teacher and the student teacher are not well aligned (Gut et al., 2014). Some teacher educators argue that in order to establish program coherence, cooperating teachers’ visions of good teaching must be consistent with those advocated by teacher preparation programs, otherwise learning to teach can be disrupted (Cuenca, 2011). A study by Al-Bataineh (2009) concluded that programs should inform cooperating teachers about the theoretical part of teacher training and preparation within the university in order to be able to match theory students learned at the university to practice. Cooperating teachers who understood the program better were the ones who were more satisfied with the teaching competence of their student teachers and with the program’s potential for ensuring the success of the students’ teaching career (Murray, 2013). Nielsen, Triggs, Clarke, and Collins (2010) found that tensions arose from the differing (and sometimes competing) value systems that university instructors and cooperating teachers hold. Finally, cooperating teachers that understood the role and duties required and instructional strategies that were taught in methods classes tended to model these strategies and allowed student teachers to implement the strategies in the lessons (Lu, 2010).

In terms of working in cooperation with the university/college supervisor, Clarke et al. (2014) study indicated that most cooperating teachers (92%) were equipped to work with student teachers through their own prior experience as cooperating teachers. 64% learned from reading the handbook and 50% learned from the student teachers. Other opportunities included learning through a brief orientation from the program (40%), through trial and error (38%), from peers (30%), and from program supervisors (28%). Wepner (1999) argues that “field experiences for the teacher-to-be must be reshaped to include open and frequent communication between the student teacher, the cooperating teacher, and the college supervisor to maximize the learning experience” (p. 82).

2.5. Impact on cooperating teachers of the experience

Learning during the clinical relationship is a two-way street, where both student teacher and cooperating teacher learn from the collaborative relationship. Cooperating teachers report several types of benefits from their relationship with their student teacher, along with some negative consequences. Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) reported that being a cooperating teacher may provide an opportunity for personal and professional development, and the relationships with junior colleagues can enable individuals in mid-career to enhance self-esteem and to pass on personal values and experiences to the next generation. Cooperating teachers learn through self-reflection and mutual cooperation. They also add to their knowledge through this interaction with novice teachers and university instructors. Russell and Russell (2011) reported that motivations for being a cooperating teacher included the desire to share their knowledge, gain knowledge on new trends in teaching, encourage new teachers, and collaborate with beginning teachers.

A key motivator for volunteering to be a cooperating teacher is an increase in one’s own professional knowledge as a result of the interaction with someone who is learning to teach. The most significant rewards often seem to be affective in nature (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). The majority of respondents in their study saw job satisfaction as their main benefit from being a cooperating teacher. Some interviewees felt they were part of the novice teacher’s success. A large part of the interviewees’ satisfaction from their relationship came from the interpersonal interaction with the novice teacher. It also enabled cooperating teachers to learn new things about themselves or refresh professional practices and perspectives they had neglected.
Additional benefits cooperating teachers gain include a chance to practice new instructional and classroom management strategies, as demonstrated by student teachers. Being exposed to the younger teacher’s point of view and academic knowledge, which includes current practices, up-to-date research, and theories was seen as a way to improve a cooperating teacher’s instructional practice. Campbell and Williamson (1983) found that working with student teachers allowed cooperating teachers to think more deeply about their own teaching, including exposure to new professional materials and the opportunity to spend more time on lesson and unit planning. Similarly, Hamlin (1997) showed that having a student teacher “helped [cooperating teachers] refine or review their knowledge of teaching methods” (p. 82). Cooperating teachers described the professional benefits of being involved in the supervisory process as providing them with exposure to a diverse range of teaching styles, leading them to become more reflective about their own teaching (Young & MacPhail, 2014).

Financial compensation was last on the list of benefits to cooperating teachers (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). They noted “it was nice to get something, but the sum did not come near to covering the hours devoted to mentoring and did not present sufficient motivation in itself” (p. 57). Negative consequences for the cooperating teacher have also been noted. It may present a drain on their physical and mental resources, and, in some programs, the cooperating teacher must allocate time from an already busy teaching schedule. Studies have indicated that some cooperating teachers experienced feelings of displacement and loss of privacy. These fundamental themes of reflective practice, relationship building, and professional development were explored in this study.

3. Study design
This case study used quantitative and qualitative data collected in fall 2014 with in-service teachers ($N = 10$) who had served as cooperating teachers for the teacher preparation program at their alma mater, a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. This case study focuses on a particular aspect of the student teaching experience (being a cooperating teacher for student teachers from your alma mater compared to student teachers from other programs) to gain a deeper understanding of how and why the impact of being a cooperating teacher affects participants. This knowledge can then be used to improve the cooperating teaching experience for both cooperating teachers and teacher education programs. Approval from the College’s Human Subjects Research Committee was obtained before data collection, and each teacher gave informed consent in order to participate in the project. (Survey and interview instruments are available upon request). Cooperating teachers shared their perspectives and described their experiences with student teachers. In an attempt to add to the existing literature base, surveying and interviewing this group of cooperating teachers provided a model for the further development and implementation of effective support programs for student teachers.

3.1. Research questions
(1) What elements of the cooperating teachers’ preparation program impacted these teachers’ instructional philosophy and practice?
(2) What were the positive and negative effects of being a cooperating teacher?
(3) How did working with student teachers from their own licensure program compare with working with student teachers from other programs?

3.2. Data collection and analysis
Two methods were used for data collection: (1) online surveys and (2) in-person interviews. Given that this is a small-scale, preliminary case study, the surveys were constructed to assure face and content validity. The survey and interview items were similar to items used in the authors’ previously published work (Ragland, 2015). Survey items included both forced-choice, Likert scale statements (4 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree) and open-ended response options. When respondents completed an item in which they chose from one or multiple predetermined responses, they were
given an opportunity to elaborate on their response, including their efforts, beliefs, and challenges in providing guidance for student teachers and the elements they considered key in their preparation for this process. The survey consisted of sections of questions on the teacher’s own teacher preparation experience with program elements and dispositions at the alma mater and their experiences as cooperating teachers both with students from their alma mater, and where appropriate, students from other programs. Complete survey is available upon request.

Quantitative analysis of the survey responses consisted of tallying response frequencies by rating for each listed item and rank ordering the items based on the tallies, as well as calculating percentages for each data field. According to Creswell (2005), “Instances where surveys are most suitable are to assess trends or characteristics of a population; learn about individual attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and practices; evaluate the success or effectiveness of a program; or identify the needs of a community” (p. 379). Relevant data are reported in Figures.

The purpose of the culminating, in-depth interviews was to more completely understand the meaning cooperating teacher participants made of their cooperating teacher experiences. Hearing from the teachers directly using their words and descriptions enabled a rich description of the process. Analysis of open-ended interview responses involved open and axial coding. This consisted of organizing responses into categories that matched the data collection areas. Selecting, refining, and positioning each category generated in open coding then created linkages between the categories. These were then amalgamated to fit a broader categorical structure in order to answer the research questions addressed in the study. Relevant data are reported in Tables.

4. Results
In order to examine the results of the data collection from participants who were alumni from the teacher preparation program that is the subject of this case study, a brief description of the important elements of that program is useful. The program's conceptual framework is based around five dispositions that shape its coursework and clinical experiences. These are: (1) pre-professional characteristics, such as reliability, seriousness of purpose, positive attitude, honesty, good judgment, openness to constructive criticism, flexibility, and commitment to growth; (2) resourcefulness; (3) responsiveness; (4) teacher efficacy; and (5) reflective self-assessment. In addition, all teacher candidates are double majors with a full major in Education as well as a full major in a content area. All candidates complete a 150-h fieldwork practicum placement in a diverse community setting a year before a 560-h student teaching placement.

4.1. Research question #1: What elements of the cooperating teachers’ preparation program impacted these teacher’s instructional philosophy and practice?
It is relevant to investigate the way in which the cooperating teachers were prepared as undergraduates and the impact this preparation had on the cooperating teachers' own teaching philosophy and practice because the ideas the teachers have about what good teaching is impacts what they look for in their student teachers and how they give feedback to them. General themes that emerged from the results to RSQ#1 were all aligned with the conceptual framework of the preparation program. Cooperating teachers emphasized the value they placed on reflection, that reflection made them more comfortable giving feedback and having open, collegial conversations with their student teachers, and that any mistakes are seen as part of a reflective learning process. Overall, the participants in the study felt the most important elements of their preparation was the knowledge they gained on instructional delivery, strategies and planning, but also how important it is to establish a positive learning environment and have a positive attitude toward students (see Figure 1). In terms of qualitative responses, one participant summed it up with the comment “being a confident, humane, well-trained teacher in the first place” was the most important preparation for being a cooperating teacher. Another of the most important elements of the framework of the alma mater’s program is the focus on the dispositions discussed above. These dispositions were mentioned by the participants as key to their preparation and their current teaching.
Among the program dispositions, the professional characteristics were clearly important to the cooperating teachers (see Figure 2). In both the survey and follow-up interviews teachers mentioned how important it was that they engage in reflective practice and understand the philosophy behind their instructional and management methods and are able to articulate the rationale behind these decisions. As one teacher commented, “[College’s] emphasis on responsiveness and reflection are also key components of having a positive impact on student learning. I am constantly monitoring students, both formally and informally, in an effort to see how they are responding to my instruction. Upon reflection, I consider whether a change in approach is necessary. [College] also reminded me to have a variety of approaches, and this is something that I am constantly working on. I always want to offer students a different approach throughout various parts of a unit, and I think this very much positively impacts student learning”. Their emphasis on responsiveness to students, building relationships with students and their work ethic and resilience were cited by the cooperating teachers as the foundation for their current practices that were formed during their pre-service preparation. They also pointed to the focus during coursework on establishing a positive classroom environment and the importance of their diverse, multiple classroom experiences that allowed them to practice self-reflection early on in their preparation.
Participants’ qualitative comments added more specifics that reinforce the importance of the conceptual framework of their preparation program that focuses on reflective practice, knowing oneself as a teacher, using a metacognitive approach to teaching, and understanding the rationale behind teaching methods (see Table 1). Representative qualitative responses demonstrated this: “What I liked about my teacher education classes was addressing the philosophical underpinnings for various aspects and approaches to teaching and learning. While such abstract thinking didn’t necessarily give me specific techniques or strategies, it provided an orientation and shaped a vision for making curriculum and instructional choices” and “The importance of reflection in improving one’s teaching practice has more enduring value than specific strategies and lesson plans. I appreciate that this was foundational in my work as a student.” In addition, teachers expressed appreciation for the program’s emphasis on professional characteristics, such as “The program helped me develop the ability to take initiative, develop content area knowledge in ways that support my teaching, and learn how to identify useful resources that enhance my students’ learning.”

Cooperating teachers also cited many of the elements of the conceptual framework of their teacher preparation program as being important, not only to their own teacher practices, but to their preparation to be a cooperating teacher as well (see Figure 3). Cooperating teachers focused on the importance of a metacognitive approach to teaching and reflection, being open to changes in

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**Table 1. Elements of teacher preparation program that impacted current practices**

| Elements of teacher preparation program that have impacted you most in your current instructional practices | N |
| --- | --- |
| Reflective practice/know yourself as a teacher/metacognitive approach to teaching/know the philosophy behind your teaching methods | 7 |
| Pedagogy courses/instructional practices, i.e. differentiation/grouping/UbD | 4 |
| Dispositions/open to learning new practices/work ethic/resilience/committee to professional growth | 3 |
| Clinical experience—fieldwork and student teaching/diverse, multiple experiences | 3 |
| Content courses/double major | 2 |
| Classroom management—different for different students | 2 |
| Metacognitive approach to teaching/reflection | 2 |
| Rigorous, high standards/writing intensive courses | 1 |
| Motivating, supportive faculty/small cohort/became a “teaching family”/collaboration and feedback/everyone was invested in each other | 1 |
| Be open to new ideas—changes in practice (e.g. CCSS) | 1 |
| Clinical experience—things created then I still use | 1 |
practice, being a well-prepared teacher in the first place, the desire to contribute to future teachers, and having strong leader/teachers as models. In addition, examining the qualitative responses revealed that participants focused on their own student teaching experience and its impact on their role as a cooperating teacher (see Table 2). Comments included: “I think that my own student teaching experience helped me to learn from my mistakes (as well as mistakes from my cooperating teacher) in order to help support [my student teacher].” Additionally, qualitative interview responses from participants pointed to the importance of the support they received from their cooperating teachers, of being given clear guidelines and expectations for the experience and of the balance between support and independence encouraged during the placement. The impact of the cooperating teachers’ student teaching experience can be seen in their description of their philosophy of being a cooperating teacher (see Table 3). Participants overwhelmingly cited that they believed their role was to provide enough support, but not “do it for them.” They believed a balance of support and independence was the most effective practice for cooperating teachers.

### Table 2. Impact of student teaching experience on being a cooperating teacher

| Impact of student teaching experience | N  |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Importance of support from CT/wanted more conversation w/ own CT | 4  |
| Importance of giving clear guidelines/expectations | 4  |
| Balance of support and independence/don’t tell them exactly what to do | 4  |
| Not overwhelming them | 2  |
| “tough love”/constructive criticism/high expectations | 2  |
| Being social/nice/get ST involved in the department | 1  |
| Be prepared, but be flexible | 1  |
| Keep same high standards | 1  |
| Not replicate the unsupportive experience I had | 1  |

### Table 3. Philosophy of being a cooperating teacher

| Philosophy of being a cooperating teacher | N  |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| Provide enough support, but don’t do it for them/balance of support & independence | 7  |
| Collaboration/partnership/coaching/open forum for reflection | 5  |
| Gradual take over with support/encourage them to take risks | 4  |
| Being positive and encouraging | 3  |
| Giving clear and constructive feedback | 2  |
| Build on ST strengths/help prioritize goals | 2  |

### Table 4. Impact being a cooperating teacher had on mentor’s professional development

| Impact being a cooperating teacher had on mentor’s professional development | N  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Made me more reflective/ affirmed my own practice/having a conversation w/ST about why something works helped to articulate your own practice/rationale for decisions | 6  |
| Reminded me to get back to what I know is good instruction, i.e. balance of DI & student centered/ art integration | 4  |
| Took lessons from ST to use later/new information | 3  |
| Used technology more often, e.g. Chromebooks—new ideas | 2  |
| Made me more aware of kids’ needs—watching from the back | 2  |
4.2. Research question #2: What were the positive and negative effects of being a cooperating teacher?

Overall, participants reported overwhelmingly positive effects from being a cooperating teacher. The main ideas that emerged from the results to RSQ #2 were that being a cooperating teacher affirmed their own teaching practices, reminded them to get back to what they know is good instruction, made them more reflective, promoted their own metacognition about their teaching, helped them articulate their own practice, and reinvigorated their practice with fresh ideas from the student teachers. Data from the surveys and interview reported below supports these ideas that are aligned with the conceptual framework of the preparation program.

Teachers strongly agreed that working with a student teacher was an important professional development experience and had a positive impact on their own teaching practice by affirming their instructional decisions and reminding them to get back to what they know is good instruction. Many qualitative responses from the cooperating teacher interviews revealed that their teaching practice had been reinvigorated. They got new ideas, up to date resources and new technology (such as the use of Chromebooks) from their student teachers. One cooperating teacher shared that she changed a long-standing research project in her course as a result of a new idea from the student teacher, and another indicated that ideas from the student teacher on art integration would become a part of her classroom practice in the future. In general, cooperating teachers later incorporated lessons and new information from their student teachers in their subsequent instruction (see Table 4). A teacher commented that “our conversations about teaching and learning were rich, and I hold onto the ideas I gained from him as I approach my students this year.” Another cooperating teacher commented that “I am not a model of organization, but I got some ideas to become better organized from my student teacher.”

Another strong theme that emerged from the survey and interview results is the reinforcement of their work as reflective practitioners, as they had been prepared to be in their pre-service program. Participants reported that the experience made them more reflective, promoted their metacognition about why they do what they do in their teaching, helped them articulate their own practice, and expanded their reflective ability about teaching in general and how to guide a student teacher (see Figure 4). Interview comments provided more specifics, such as “I learned so much about teaching and learning from observing [my student teacher] on a daily basis. I saw students that I hadn’t always been successful reaching come to life for him [the student teacher], as well as students who were lively for me take a bit of a back seat in the classroom. [He] and I would reflect on these things and try and motivate all students. It made me a better teacher once I took back control of the class.” Participants also “enjoyed having someone to talk to about their students, someone who cared about the students. These conversations felt natural and collegial.”

Figure 4. Impacts of cooperating teacher experience on mentor teacher.
The only negative effects reported by cooperating teachers related to the ways they might change their practices with future student teachers. These ideas included being more proactive with helping the student teacher with management problems, frontloading advice, and initiating more dialog with the student teacher. One teacher indicated that guiding a student teacher was a lot work if you get a student teacher who is struggling in the placement.

4.3. Research question #3: How did working with student teachers from their own licensure program compare with working with student teachers from other programs?

Participants rated the experience of working with a student teacher from the licensure program in which they were prepared (alma mater) as more positive than working with a student teacher from other programs in all areas surveyed (see Figure 5). Three key themes emerged from the data analysis. The positive nature of the experience stemmed primarily from an alignment of the philosophy and practice of the cooperating teacher and student teacher. The stronger preparation of these candidates and the ease of working with the college supervisor from their own licensure program were also mentioned. Cooperating teachers characterized the student teachers from the alma mater as more reflective, more prepared based on having more prior classroom experience, and teaching in a less “scripted” approach. These characteristics are in line with the philosophy of the alma mater, as described above. The student teachers also had high expectations for their pupils, as did the cooperating teachers for the pupils. Most importantly, cooperating teachers appreciated having the same values as the candidates, and the fact that their student teachers were open to constructive criticism.
The candidates were also characterized as hard-working and thorough individuals who took their job seriously and were well versed in theory and practice. Student teachers were not afraid to try their own ideas and find their own identity in the classroom. Finally, participants reported that they were better prepared by the college supervisor from the alma mater compared to other programs through the one-on-one orientation meetings with the supervisor, the use of a comprehensive handbook for the placement, and frequent meetings with the supervisor during the course of the placement (see Figure 6).

5. Conclusions
Three key themes emerged from the results of data collection addressing each research question and agree with previous research discussed in the literature review. First, the most important factor in making an effective cooperating teacher is being prepared as a reflective practitioner by the cooperating teacher’s teacher preparation program, as described by Weiss and Weiss (2001) and Stegman (2007). Related to this, the second theme is that the strongest benefit of being a cooperating teacher is having the chance to become more reflective about one’s own practice that agrees with studies from Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) Campbell and Williamson (1983) and Young and MacPhail (2014). Finally, the most successful experiences for the cooperating teacher result when there is a strong alignment of theory and practice between the cooperating teacher and student teacher, as well as the college supervisor. This agrees with studies by Gut et al. (2014), Al-Bataineh (2009) and Nielsen et al. (2010).

5.1. What preparation is best for an effective cooperating teacher?
Reflective practitioners who form relationships with their student teachers serve as the most effective cooperating teachers. Based on their pre-service preparation program, the cooperating teachers studied here came to value reflection in their own practice, and they subsequently passed this along to their student teachers who were most able to grow and progress through formative reflection during their student teaching experience. Reflection enables the cooperating teachers to be more comfortable giving feedback and having open, collegial conversations with candidates, as they are used to doing this with the pupils in their own classrooms. This conclusion agrees with Gareis and Grant’s (2014) study concerning giving constructive feedback to student teachers, as well as work by Knox and McGovern on feedback (1988).

Teachers prepared as reflective practitioners also see relationship building as the key to their success. Teachers with this philosophy and preparation see mistakes as part of the learning process that promotes adjustment through reflection, both for students and candidates. In addition, being open to experimentation with multiple instructional strategies is a hallmark of the reflective practitioner.

These conclusions agree with previous research that shows that when student teachers’ perceptions are not considered as a meaningful component of professional development, they are not likely to learn independent skills of reflection, inquiry, and analysis (Weiss & Weiss, 2001). In supporting reflection, a cooperating teacher potentially broadens her or his educative impact on the student teacher and may go beyond simply reporting on practice to a deeper consideration of that practice, enriching his or her own as well as the student teacher’s learning. The disposition for reflection and an expectation that cooperating teachers engage and support their student teachers in reflection is generally more of a university than school emphasis. Nonetheless, cooperating teachers as supporters of reflection are clearly a highly desired and an important form of participation in practicum settings (Clarke et al., 2014).

The alumni cooperating teachers in this study put into practice the emphasis of their preparation program on relationships, positive attitude, teacher efficacy and the importance of having multiple and varied fieldwork experiences. They understand, are attentive to and create a learning environment for student teachers grounded in these relationships. As discussed above, the emphasis in the pre-service program on the importance of relationship building with pupils served as a good model for the cooperating teachers for the importance of relationship building with their student teachers.
5.2. What is the strongest benefit of being a cooperating teacher?
Findings for this case study agree with previous research that indicates cooperating teachers are motivated by a wide range of both extrinsic and intrinsic factors such as an altruistic desire to help a new teacher, a feeling that working with a student teacher will improve their own school, the school system, and even society itself (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). In this case study, reinforcing the importance of being a reflective practitioner and continuing to improve one’s own teaching were found to be the main benefits of being a cooperating teacher. Participants reported that the experience affirmed their own practice and reminded them to get back to what they know is good instruction. The process enabled them to become more reflective and articulate more clearly their own practice through their discussions with their student teachers. They reinvigorated their teaching with fresh ideas from the student teachers who had recently been exposed to up to date resources and techniques, which also supports past research from Russell and Russell (2011).

These findings corroborate past research, such as studies by Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) Clarke et al. (2014) and Hamlin (1997) indicating that cooperating teachers are motivated by an opportunity to develop new ways of thinking and new insights. Working with a student teacher was viewed as a challenge and a learning experience. The benefits received include recognition and increased self-confidence in early career stages and legacy and renewal in later ones. The participants in this case study varied in years of teaching experience from seven to seventeen years, so both types of benefits were found.

In terms of areas of disagreement with previous research findings, only one area was found in this case study’s results. The cooperating teachers in this study did not report the negative aspects of being a cooperating teacher as cited in some previous research. They did not mention any problems with physical space conflicts in the classroom or violating rules of etiquette in the cooperating teacher’s classroom, as have been reported in previous studies, such as Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009). This is likely because most of the student teachers were prepared in the same teacher preparation program as the cooperating teachers. They had learned the same rules and space considerations, and this led to a lack of negative interactions in these areas.

5.3. What is the benefit of having cooperating teachers from the same preparation program as the student teacher?
Alignment of the philosophy and practice of the cooperating teacher and the student teacher is the key benefit of using cooperating teachers prepared in the same program as their student teachers. Responses to a study by Baum and Korth (2013) reflected the belief that cooperating teachers must feel connected and aligned with teacher preparation programs and must get the information and support they need so that student teachers get the high-quality field experience critical to their development as teachers. Participants in this case study were not reluctant to interact and learn from supervisors and student teachers because they know their backgrounds and needs. In some cases, the college supervisor of the student teachers in this case study was the same person who supervised the alumni cooperating teachers during their student teaching years before. The benefit of [this type of] formal pairing is that it allows the experience to be tightly aligned with organizational goals and needs (Jones et al., 2014). A shared repertoire of routines and rules of conduct (and interpretations thereof) through conversations about situated practice (Nielsen et al., 2010) are more easily facilitated by alumni of the program. One participant said that “it was good to be able to reinforce values that I knew [the student teacher’s] supervisor would be emphasizing” and “... especially the reflectiveness component. I was able to pose questions to help my student teacher be more reflective about their practice.”

Conversely, when goals and responsibilities are not clearly agreed upon, conflict among the participants is more likely to occur and the growth of the teacher candidate is likely to suffer (Weiss & Weiss, 2001). Without continuing communication between the university and the school-based teacher educators, the student teaching experience cannot be adapted to the needs of student teachers as individuals, their cooperating teachers or the children with whom they work. Because
they share a classroom together for an extended time, cooperating teachers stressed the importance of a good match between them and their assigned student teacher. According to cooperating teachers, the primary focus of the student teaching experience was helping student teachers learn how to operate independently in a classroom, (e.g. to plan and implement a unit of instruction) and manage both the classroom and time (Gut et al., 2014). By pairing our candidates with program alumni, both cooperating teacher and student teacher have this shared vision of good practice in common. “Keep[ing] the lines of communication open” between cooperating teachers and program faculty, and enabling cooperating teachers to feel connected to program faculty and have their questions answered by those most familiar with program details (Baum & Korth, 2013) is key and takes place in a situation where the cooperating teachers come from the same program and feel connected to and comfortable with the college supervisor and understand the program’s expectations.

The availability of the assessment criteria enhanced the legitimacy of the cooperating teachers by allowing them to focus and set targets, giving them new direction and structure in the supervision process (Young & MacPhail, 2014). We implement this in our program with a comprehensive handbook that includes the observation frameworks and evaluations used by the supervisor. We share this during a detailed, one-on-one cooperating teacher orientation process. Cooperating teachers give formal feedback at midterm and final evaluations and are encouraged to give written feedback frequently with a form found in the handbook. They know what we are looking for because they were assessed with these same evaluation criteria during their clinical experiences.

6. Recommendations

Through their guidance, cooperating teachers who welcome student teachers into their classrooms are engaged in determining the future of the teaching profession. Thus, teacher preparation programs and cooperating teachers must work collaboratively to create a quality field experience, sharing a commitment to identify mutual goals and purposes, common definitions, and consistent expectations (Baum & Korth, 2013). However, some cooperating teachers do not know how to work in alignment with their student teacher’s teacher preparation program. Some cooperating teachers do not model good practices (Lu, 2010). Using alumni as cooperating teachers can mitigate these issues and capitalize on the shared commitment to mutual goals and expectations. Additionally, using cooperating teachers who focus on reflective practice and relationship building enhances the experience.

Although this preliminary case study is based on a very small number of participants, and the results should be seen as tentative, the results generally agree with and support other larger scale research studies. The small number of participants in this case study is also a limitation on the generalizability of results. In order to confirm these preliminary results, replication of this research by larger programs would be a promising next step in the research. In addition, future studies on the impact of workshops and other forms of preparation for cooperating teachers would extend the knowledge of field. These will be suggested below.

Based on the conclusions of this case study that reinforce previous research, the following steps are recommended to provide the most effective student teaching experience for both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher that incorporates reflective practice and relationship building. First, using alumni who were prepared in the same pre-service program as cooperating teachers for the next generation of teacher candidates is preferred, if possible. It is important that all members of the team have the same philosophy of what makes good teaching and have the same expectations for success, as this agrees with findings from Gut et al. (2014), Al-Bataineh (2009), and Murray (2013). Second, if alumni are not available, it is necessary to formally prepare cooperating teachers by fully explaining the program’s philosophy and expectations for instructional practice. This allows a cooperating teacher from another program to gain some of the same knowledge as an alumni teacher would have. Finally, it is important that the cooperating teacher and student teacher establish a good working relationship before the student teaching placement begins, as previously
reported by Jones et al. (2014) and Young and MacPhail (2014). This case study extended these other studies by suggesting that this can be accomplished by having the cooperating teacher interview the prospective student teaching in advance of the placement being made. In addition, the student teacher should have time to observe and work in the student teaching classroom before the placement starts.

The most successful student teaching experiences for both cooperating teachers and student teachers are based on the alignment of teaching philosophy and program expectations among all parties involved. Teacher preparation programs and cooperating teachers must become collaborative partners and identify shared goals and expectations for the roles and responsibilities of all involved (Baum & Korth, 2013). Rozelle and Wilson (2012) found that student teachers often don’t implement the “reform” (student centered) methods they have learned in their methods courses during student teaching, but revert to copying their cooperating teacher’s method. This issue is avoided by using cooperating teachers from the same program as the student teacher because their teaching practices are aligned with the methods the student teacher has learned in coursework, as the cooperating teacher learned their practice in the same methods courses.

In addition to agreement on good instructional practice, the degree to which the cooperating teacher understands university expectations is essential. Gut et al. (2014) found that when expectations were clearly understood, cooperating teachers were more likely to have confidence in their ability to guide student teachers. Confident cooperating teachers who have a better relationship with their student teachers reported using a wider range of strategies. Our alumni cooperating teachers reported positive experiences for themselves and their candidates due to their understanding of the expectations because they have been through the program with these same expectations, thus obviating such a disconnect. The results of this case study agree with previous research in this area, such as Nielsen et al. (2010).

However, if using alumni cooperating teachers is not possible, it is essential to prepare the cooperating teacher by fully explaining the program’s philosophy and expectations for instruction practice and assessment of the student teacher’s progress. This reinforces a finding by Russell and Russell (2011) that workshops should be provided for cooperating teachers to better prepare them for the support of their student interns. Gut et al. (2014) recommended that to minimize the negative experiences of cooperating teachers, ongoing communication concerning changing expectations, such as the introduction of new performance-based assessments or the expansion of clinical experiences must take place. Cooperating teachers also benefit from professional development that shows them how to be more reflective regarding the nature and depth of feedback they provide, in order to address the complex responsibilities assumed by the student teacher. This is especially true if they were not prepared as reflective practitioners. This was not necessary in this case study, as all cooperating teachers were prepared as reflective practitioners because they came from the teacher preparation program studied here that is built on a conceptual framework that stresses the necessity of reflective practice.

However, because of this preliminary case study supporting the importance of this alignment, we have continued the time consuming practice for all our cooperating teachers of one-on-one orientations sessions, and have added group workshops to inform all cooperating teachers of the expectations and philosophy of the program. The focus for non-alumni is the program philosophy and expectations, while this can be done more quickly with alumni cooperating teachers. For all cooperating teachers, we started an edTPA (Teacher Performance Assessment) workshop to add new knowledge for veteran partners, since both alumni cooperating teachers and those from other programs are not familiar with this new capstone assessment completed during student teaching that is now required for licensure in our state. edTPA was not required during the cooperating teachers’ pre-service preparation, and we have found the formal preparation workshop on how cooperating teachers can guide their student teachers through this process is necessary to achieve the best results for our candidates and make the process less challenging and stressful for all.
This preliminary case study research has already impacted our teacher preparation program in a positive way and generated additional research studies. I have also conducted a post-placement research survey for cooperating teachers and student teachers on their experience with the edTPA during the semester. Based on this research, the success of our candidates with edTPA, and the results from this case study, we have added more on effective support in general to this cooperating teacher workshop, not just instruction in working with student teachers on the edTPA. Effective support requires the veteran teachers to be familiar with the needs of beginning teachers, teacher development, and a host of other topics related to facilitating the start of a teaching career. In addition, cooperating teachers should be proficient in skills typically associated with instructional supervision, such as systematic observation of teaching and conferencing skills (Ganser, 1999). With appropriate knowledge and training in the philosophy and goals of the teacher preparation program, in the basic principles and practices of effective guidance and supervision, and in a framework of effective teaching practice, cooperating teachers are more effective in their role and a more productive learning environment is attained (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002). Given the complexities of learning to teach, preparing cooperating teachers, not merely using them, seems like a worthwhile strategy to advance the quality of teacher education and the overall student teaching experience (Cuenca, 2011). Further research on how effective this new discussion on supporting student teachers in general during this workshop will be on both the cooperating teachers and the student teachers’ experience during the semester would be appropriate.

Finally, the results of this case study agree with previous research (Clarke et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2014; Young & MacPhail, 2014) on the importance of relationship building between the cooperating teacher and student teacher. This leads to recommendations that there should be an in person interview and some time to observe in the placement classrooms before the start of the actual student teaching semester. If student teachers do not believe they can approach their cooperating teachers, they will not progress to the next level: trust and communication (Jones et al., 2014). According to Bigham et al. (2014), school personnel do not typically interview teacher candidates prior to their acceptance as student teachers. Gut et al. (2014) suggest matching cooperating and student teachers, perhaps through interviews or other screening processes. In addition, they recommend that cooperating teachers and student teachers be provided with opportunities for relationship building prior to the beginning of the classroom experience. This would offer an opportunity for forming a deeper relationship and ultimately result in better support of the student teacher.

Our program does have prospective cooperating teachers conduct such interviews. In addition, candidates are placed in their future student teaching classrooms for a semester of observation and assisting before the student teaching semester. This was also supported by comments from participants in this study who encouraged their future student teachers to spend time with them before the placement starts to build trust and a shared vision, as we do in our program. Since we are a small program, we have the luxury of these procedures, but certainly a semester of observation and relationship building could be implemented in a variety of types of programs both large and small.

There is a critical need to explore the efforts of teacher education programs in providing preparation and support for cooperating teachers. A better understanding of what programs are doing and the circumstances that either promote or prevent them from implementing these worthwhile efforts can be beneficial to teacher education programs as we strive to enhance the quality of the capstone clinical preparation experience which is so critical to the future success of novice teachers. Future large-scale studies are recommended to add to educators’ knowledge of these important factors to improve the student teaching experience which is such an important aspect of teacher preparation.
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