

Effects of Collaborative Lesson Planning on Teacher Learning in the Practicum

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Planning, designing and reflecting on instructional processes are at the core of teaching competency (Terhart, 2000). Content-Focused CoachingSM (West & Staub, 2003) aims to assist the development of pedagogical-content knowledge and general strategies for lesson design and reflection (Staub, 2001). The activity settings of this approach to teacher development calls for teachers to be assisted in lesson planning, the enactment of lessons and the reflection on lessons. In contrast to the often dominant role of reflection in teacher training and professional development Content-Focused Coaching emphasises collaborative lesson planning. Student teachers are to think through their initial plans together with a cooperating teacher. They are thus introduced to realistic forms of planning and orchestrating lessons in authentic contexts.

The often made assumption that opportunities for practical experience are effective and sufficient to advance teaching competency has been criticised (e.g., Oser, 1997). Very little is known, however, on how specific design features of training settings affect the learning of student teachers.

This investigation researches the impact of an innovation in the practical training of student teachers at the “Institute Unterstrass“, which is part of the College for Teacher Education in Zuerich, Switzerland. As part of an experimental trial, during a semester student teachers were supported in new ways through collaborative lesson planning, based on the model of Content-Focused Coaching (West & Staub, 2003).

The main question to be answered is whether the newly introduced element of collaborative lesson planning had an effect on the professional learning of student teachers as perceived by student teachers and cooperating teachers. Based on student teachers’ and cooperating teachers’ answers to questionnaires for each day of practical training, the following questions are addressed: To what degree do student teachers and cooperating teachers rate the learning afforded through collaborative lesson planning to be helpful? Does the perceived usefulness of student teachers’ involvement in lesson planning differ when they only listen to the planning of a fellow student (bystanders)? How do student teachers rate the usefulness of their learning from teaching the lesson and from reflecting on the lesson in comparison to learning from collaborative planning? Are collaboratively planned lessons rated higher on instructional quality than lessons with no collaborative lesson planning? When asked to reflect on their

overall experience during the semester, what are aspects of the collaborative planning that student teachers and cooperating teachers most often mentioned to be helpful?

The mean age of the cooperating teachers (N=10) participating in this study is 45 years. On average, the cooperating teachers have been teaching for 19 years. The mean age of the student teachers involved (N=26) is 22 years. For each training lesson student teachers and cooperating teachers rated student teachers' learning from teaching the lesson, from reflecting on the lesson, and – in cases where implemented – from collaborative planning. In addition, each lesson was rated by the cooperating teacher for instructional quality.

The effect of collaborative lesson planning on student teachers' learning was investigated on the basis of a quasi-experimental design, systematically varying the element of the newly introduced collaborative lesson planning. Each student was assigned to at least one lesson in each of the following three conditions: with collaborative lesson planning, without, as a bystander of the lesson planning of a fellow student.

On the basis of the teaching assignment from the cooperating teachers, student teachers prepared an initial lesson sketch as a basis for the collaborative lesson planning. The week before the lesson was to take place, this plan was discussed with the cooperating teacher and together a final version was co-constructed.

The mean ratings of the learning benefit from collaborative planning, from teaching the lesson and from reflection on the lesson do not show significant differences over time. The mean benefit of collaborative planning for teacher learning is rated (1=not helpful, 2=a little helpful, 3=helpful, 4=very helpful) by both, students (M = 3.12) and cooperating teachers (M = 3.35) as helpful to very helpful. The ratings of student teachers and cooperating teachers do not show a significant difference. If student teachers attended to lesson planning as bystanders only, the benefit of this planning was rated to be less helpful (M = 2.3) for their learning than planning their own lesson. This difference is significant [$Z (N=17) = -2.592, p = 0.010$].

When students were assisted with collaborative lesson planning of their own lesson, they rated the usefulness of learning from the teaching of the lesson as the most helpful (M = 3.48), followed by learning from the collaborative lesson planning (M = 3.12). Learning from reflection on the lesson was rated (M = 2.5) least helpful. A Friedmann-test shows these differences to be significant [$\chi^2 (2, N=22) = 19,902, p < 0.001$]; all comparisons between pairs based on Wilcoxon-tests are significant as well.

When students did not participate in any collaborative planning, they rated the teaching of their lesson as more helpful for their learning (M = 3.2) than the reflection of their lesson (M

= 2.72). This difference is significant [$Z (N=20) = -2.272, p < 0.05$]. The same pattern of results holds for student teachers participating in collaborative lesson planning as bystanders. The assessments of instructional quality of the lessons by cooperating teachers shows that the quality of lessons assisted with planning were rated significantly better ($M = 4.06$) than lessons without collaborative planning ($M = 3.75$) [$Z (N=16) = -2.451, p < 0.05$].

Based on a content analysis of the answers to open questions with respect to the learning afforded by collaborative lesson planning, it can be concluded that both the student teachers and the cooperating teachers, in retrospect, think of the collaborative thinking through of instructional processes to be most helpful. Furthermore, for student teachers the opportunity for exchanging ideas was of high importance, while the cooperating teachers emphasized student teachers' gains in self-confidence.

The presentation will discuss the evidence for the fruitfulness of collaborative lesson planning to assist teacher learning, as called for in the model of Content-Focused Coaching (Staub, 2001).

Bibliography

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