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Christina C. Pfister
The College of Saint Rose, pfisterc@strose.edu

Sophia Paljevic
New York City Public Schools, sophiapaljevic@gmail.com

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A Cooperating Teacher, a Supervisor, and a Critical Confidant: Moving Toward a New Model of Support for Student Teachers

Christina C. Pfister
The College of Saint Rose
Sophia Paljevic
New York City Public Schools

Extensive research has found that student teaching is a challenging experience for pre-service teachers (PSTs). This paper proposes a new model for student teaching where PSTs have a cooperating teacher, supervisor, and also a special mentor called a Critical Confidant. We collected survey data over the course of three consecutive semesters to determine PST's perceptions. Results indicate that PSTs found having a Critical Confidant to be an overwhelmingly positive experience; PSTs felt safe because of the non-evaluative Critical Confidant role. They appreciated support from someone who had more experience but who was not yet an expert teacher. Implications and recommendations for future study are included.

Keywords: Student teaching, critical confidant, pre-service support, challenges

Introduction

A pre-service teacher (PST) typically experiences student teaching just prior to graduation from his or her teacher preparation program. Student teaching has long served as a culminating experience in the preparation of a PST and is an important experience to help PSTs prepare for their own classrooms (Brown, Lee, & Collins, 2015).

Starting a teaching career in a positive way is important because it may increase the likelihood that a PST will stay in the field of teaching. Studies indicate that up to half of teachers who start their teaching careers, leave during their first five years (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Ingersoll, 2012). Some of these teachers remain in education-related fields such as school administration, but many leave education all together. The literature on the challenges faced by novices is extensive (e.g., Brown, Bay-Borelli, & Scott, 2015; Fry, 2010; Fuller 1969; Fuller & Bown, 1975; Gratch, 1998; He & Cooper, 2011; Ryan, 1986;

Veenman, 1984). The number of challenges faced by novice teachers suggests that becoming a teacher is challenging and difficult. A strong and successful experience as a PST may help the novice teacher be more successful.

Given the high stakes nature of student teaching and the potential it has for impacting a PST's future career, it stands to reason that PSTs need support during the student teaching experience. In fact, Houck and Chiodo (2009) suggest that the current ways of supporting PSTs may not be sufficient; they call for teacher educators to better understand how they can support PSTs.

Background Literature

Although there are various formats to student teaching, most programs use a structure in which there is a cooperating teacher who hosts the PST, and a supervisor who visits the classroom regularly to provide feedback supplemental to that of the cooperating teacher. Preparation programs vary, but student teaching is often the first time PSTs are responsible for extensive lesson planning and assessment of children and in the classroom daily (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012).

PSTs generally begin student teaching by doing observations of the classroom and progress rapidly to taking over more and more of the teaching responsibilities (Burstein, 1992; Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015). La Paro et al. (2014) note that student teaching is a time when the PST becomes a part of the classroom, takes on the responsibilities of the cooperating teacher, and develops skills and knowledge in planning, implementing lessons, and assessment of those lessons. The PST also must be able to collaborate with other professionals within the school. The quickness of the student teaching experience makes for a quick and sometimes steep learning curve.

In addition to daily teaching and planning expectations, PSTs are often tasked with creating a professional portfolio or other capstone experience, and, in some states, may face challenging teacher certification examinations or teacher performance assessment. The combination makes the student teaching experience very important in preparing the PST to enter what research has shown is likely to be a challenging first few years in the field.

While student teachers often describe their experiences as one of the most valuable of their entire preparation programs (Burstein, 1992; Kuriloff, 2013), it can also be challenging and stressful (Berridge & Goebel, 2013; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Huisman, Singer & Catapano, 2010; Kuriloff, 2013; Onslow, Beynon, & Geddis, 1992; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). The fact that novice teachers have challenges and need support has been extensively reported in the literature (e.g., Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Kelly, Gningue, & Qian, 2013; Lortie, 1975; Moir & Gless, 2001). Over the last thirty years mentoring has increasingly been used to help novice teachers cope with the challenges of their first teaching positions. Generally, mentoring programs are

seen as a way to combat the problem of novice teacher attrition, but as researchers note, the problem of attrition can actually begin during the teacher preparation program itself (Berridge & Goebel, 2013; Jasper & Foster, 2010). While mentoring programs are useful for those who have actually entered the teaching profession, having a better experience as a PST and developing a more accurate understanding of the full range of teaching responsibilities may help address the issue of novice teacher attrition. Although there are a wide variety of support mechanisms for novice teachers, generally the only formal supports available to PSTs are their cooperating teachers and supervisors, both of whom typically have a role in evaluating performance.

Teacher education programs are organized to have cooperating teachers and supervisors help to guide the PST. The support structure can be immensely helpful, but also may present challenging relationships for PSTs since cooperating teachers and supervisors are also the people who evaluate PST teacher candidacy. Student teachers may find that they do not always want to share their concerns and stress with those who also serve in the role of evaluator (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). In addition, PSTs may find that their personality and teaching style do not mesh well with their cooperating teacher or supervisor. Having a difficult relationship with a cooperating teacher can make student teaching a very challenging experience (Rhoads, Samkoff, & Weber, 2013). This can leave a PST in need of more support help during a time when s/he may feel most vulnerable.

Success in student teaching determines whether the PST will graduate and receive teaching certification (Burststein, 1992) so discussing perceived weaknesses or shortcomings with those professionals evaluating him/her may not feel safe. Similarly, working closely with someone who does not share the same personality, teaching style, or professional stance can make for a very difficult experience. Although the relationships between PST, cooperating teacher, and supervisor poses challenges, the student teaching model has not changed appreciably since it was introduced nearly 70 years ago (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2015).

Throughout the preparation program, PSTs must generally rely on their college-assigned cooperating teachers and supervisors. In many ways, the cooperating teacher that a PST encounters during student teaching serves as an initial mentor as the PST enters the teaching field (Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Smith & Avetisian, 2011). The college supervisor also plays an important role in aiding and guiding the developing student teacher (Basmadjian, 2011). While novice teachers typically have a mentor assigned to guide them (e.g., Huling-Austin, 1989; Izadinia, 2015; Pogodzinski, 2014; Odell, 1990; Street, 2004; Wang & Odell, 2002; Young et al., 2005) and may also rely on the support of their professional colleagues to provide formative feedback and informal assistance

(Du & Wang, 2017; Friedrichsen, Chval, & Teusher, 2007; Pogodzinski, 2014), mentors and colleagues are generally not supervising the novice teacher (Desimone et al., 2014). PSTs face an uneven power dynamic in their relationships with their support systems throughout the student teaching experience (Patrick, 2013). By definition, student teachers receive formative feedback and are also supervised by their cooperating teacher and college supervisor. This can make sharing concerns or asking for help seem less desirable (Butler & Cuenca 2012; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012), leaving student teachers with stress (Berridge & Goebel, 2013) and unsure of where to turn for support.

When seeking guidance, PSTs may turn to their peers; however, these peers are also experiencing student teaching and likely share some of the same concerns and struggles. As such, peers may not be in the best position to offer the kind of support and guidance PSTs need. Houck and Chiodo (2009) categorized problems PSTs experienced and looked at who PSTs turned for help with these problems. They found that PSTs turned to peers for support nearly 38 percent of the time. Requests for help went to supervisors, cooperating teachers, or others in the school environment less than two thirds of the time. With more than one third of PST help requests going outside of the structured support system indicates that there is a strong need for support from those other than a cooperating teacher or supervisor.

In an effort to provide an additional layer of support for PSTs, the authors began this project with the idea of creating a “peer mentor” for PSTs. However, the definitions of “mentoring” and being a “peer” make this an impossible combination. One cannot be both a peer—a person on the same level—and a more experienced person acting in a mentoring role. Additionally, to be most supportive and useful, a person more knowledgeable than a peer should fill the mentoring role. We abandoned the notion of a peer mentor and developed the concept of the *Critical Confidant*.

Critical Confidant

Our conception of a Critical Confidant is similar to and extends what Day (1999) refers to as a critical friendship. Day (1999) offers the following definition: “The critical friend is recognized as having knowledge, experience, and skills which are complementary” to the individual receiving the support (p. 44). Day compares mentors with critical friends noting that the critical friendship differs from a mentor-mentee relationship in that in a critical friendship there is a partnership among equals rather than one more knowledgeable partner, as exists in a mentoring relationship. The critical confidant relationship is different from the one that a cooperating teacher or supervisor has with a PST, as the cooperating teacher or supervisor are much more experienced professionals and are evaluating the PSTs performance as they give feedback and guidance. Given

the challenges of teaching in the 21st century, we believe PSTs need additional support from a safe source, in this case support from someone who is not an evaluator and/or someone who is has closer proximity to the difficulties a student teacher may be experiencing.

The idea of having a Critical Confidant just a few years older and slightly more experienced ties into Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. Initially developed by the psychologist during his work with children, the advantage of working with someone just a bit more advanced than oneself became an important finding in the current study.

Research Methods

Critical Confidants were recruited from a pool of recent graduates who had been active members of our college community. As students, they had frequently volunteered their time to attend Open Houses for prospective students and other similar events. We approached these particular recent graduates because we believed they might be willing to assist PSTs as they acclimated to the profession. We explained the project including what their role would be and invited them to participate. All Critical Confidants were practicing elementary teachers with one to five years teaching experience. Participants were just a few years older than the traditionally-aged PST participants and had graduated from the same teacher preparation program; they were familiar with the structure of the program and requirements.

PSTs entering their student teaching semester were invited to have a Critical Confidant assigned to them. Critical Confidants were asked to email their PST during the first week of the semester to introduce themselves. Following this, directions for the pairs were kept to a minimum so that they could determine for themselves what worked best in the development of their relationship. PSTs and Critical Confidants were free to speak as often as they deemed helpful and could decide how they wanted to communicate (e.g., phone call, text, in person meeting). The PST set the agenda and determined what topics s/he wanted to share and receive support.

Our research question for this study was, "How does having a Critical Confidant aid a student teacher?" Sub-questions included finding out how often PSTs contacted their Critical Confidant for support and how useful they felt having a Critical Confidant was. We posed these questions as a way of gauging each PST's opinion as to the usefulness of having a Critical Confidant. For example, we came with the assumption that a PST who found the support helpful would be more likely to contact their Critical Confidant frequently.

Context and Participants

To provide context for this study, our private college has a total enrollment of approximately 4,000 students and is located in a mid-sized city a few hours from several major metropolitan areas. The School of Education prepares teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels to work with young children, elementary students, and secondary students. Many students are first generation college students and, due to economic constraints, find that they need to work part time including the semester while they are student teaching. Over the course of three semesters, 15 self-identified female and one self-identified male elementary education PSTs who were enrolled in their student teaching semester participated by requesting to be paired with a Critical Confidant. In addition, each participant agreed to complete the survey following their student teaching experience. The number of participants represents approximately one third of the total PSTs who were invited to participate.

Study Design

Data were collected from a survey completed at the conclusion of each semester. Two survey questions were posed as Likert-type scale questions. The questions participants how often they had been in contact with their Critical Confidant and to rate the usefulness of their conversations on a 4-point scale ranging from “definitely not helpful” to “definitely helpful” (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Likert-scale to capture PST's opinion of usefulness of Critical Confidant.

Two additional open-ended questions allowed participants to identify which topics they discussed with their Critical Confidant and explain what was helpful or not helpful about those discussions.

Data Analysis

Each PST engaged in student teaching for one full semester. There were no differences in programmatic requirements in each semester, allowing for all 16 participants' data to be grouped together for analysis.

Researchers analyzed the Likert-type scale questions using basic statistics to determine the mean average. The researchers calculated the range and percentages of each response. To draw themes from the open-ended questions, researchers drew on the traditions of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to develop a list of potential codes and develop the codes from our data rather than from existing literature. Each researcher independently

used open coding to develop a potential code list; afterwards, the codes were combined. The researchers collaborated to re-code the data using combined codes.

Findings and Discussion

Participants indicated that they had been in contact with their Critical Confidants a range of times with 10 PSTs (approximately 61%) reporting they had been in touch seven or fewer times during the semester and six PSTs (approximately 38%) contacting their Critical Confidant more than eight times. The number of times a PST contacted his or her Critical Confidant in a 15-week semester indicates that there are different levels of support needed by PSTs. Some may only need occasional or every other week contact, while others find that they need more support.

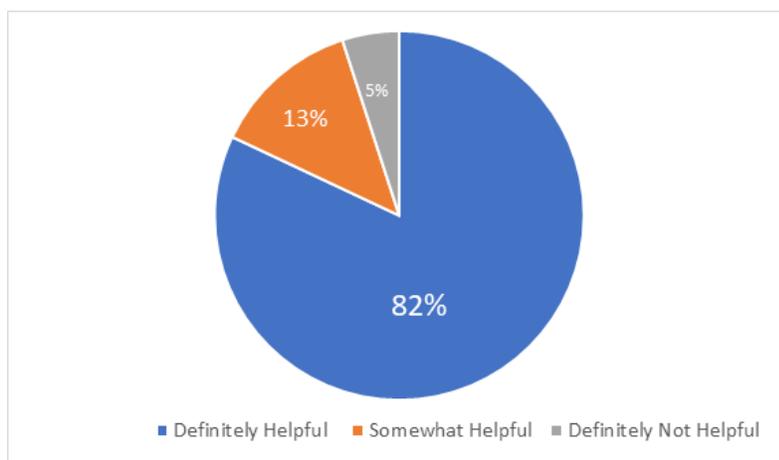


Figure 2: Results of Participants using Likert-scale to capture PST's opinion of usefulness of Critical Confidant.

As shown in Figure 2, on a four point Likert-type scale, nearly 82 percent (13 individuals) of the participants assigned the experience the highest rating indicating that having a Critical Confidant was “definitely helpful.” Thirteen percent (2 individuals) assigned the experience the next level down reporting it was “somewhat helpful” and one rated the experience at the lowest choice indicating it was “definitely not helpful.” The one PST who indicated the experience was “definitely not helpful” indicated that the Critical Confidant did not respond to requests for help quickly enough or with enough detail. However, our findings indicate that a vast majority of participants found working with a Critical Confidant to be helpful, likely indicating that they felt they benefited from the experience. This makes sense in that the literature is replete with calls for support for student teachers during what can be a difficult time (e.g., Berridge

& Goebel, 2013; Butler & Cuenca, 2012; Cooper & He, 2012; Houck & Chiodo; Jasper & Foster, 2009; Wyss, Siebert, & Dowling, 2012). Our findings both confirm and extend those of these researchers.

Through our analysis of the open-ended survey data, two themes emerged. In particular, our data indicated that it was helpful for the PST to: (a) have an outside person to talk with who was not evaluating the PST and could offer safe emotional support and (b) have a person who was slightly more experienced to offer advice and share experiences. We will describe both and summarize the data that lead to the selection of that theme.

Safe Emotional Support

The opportunity to work with a Critical Confidant appears to be important to PSTs because their conversations were in a safe environment with someone who was not directly responsible for evaluating the PST. As recent graduates, Critical Confidants were knowledgeable about teaching and about program requirements; because the Critical Confidant had no role in providing formal feedback, PSTs appeared to appreciate the opportunity to seek advice without concern that issues or weaknesses would be shared with evaluators. Having an outside point of view was clearly helpful. Participants reported that Critical Confidants provided non-judgmental support that was different than a PST's friends or relatives who were not in the teaching field and had less knowledge about the daily life of a student teacher. One PST commented on the benefit of being able to talk with her Critical Confidant during times when she was not sure if she was asking a question to which she should know the answer. PSTs reported that it was helpful to have a person to speak with who was knowledgeable about teaching, but not associated formally with the student teaching experience. This distance removed concerns related to evaluations, including the potential of an evaluation reflecting that the PST was lacking in knowledge.

PSTs indicated a need for emotional support where they could share thoughts in a safe environment. For example, one PST described how she had planned a science lesson for her third graders involving looking through "dirt" that was actually brownie mix. Following the teaching, she indicated she had spoken with her Critical Confidant to share her "real" thoughts. Although the lesson was generally successful, she had concerns that her classroom management skills might not be well developed because the children were attempting to eat the brownie mix once they realized what it was. Her true feelings of concern about her abilities were something the PST did not feel comfortable sharing with her supervisor who had rated the lesson positively.

Other PSTs felt able to be more open with their Critical Confidants and share honest concerns. One noted that her Critical Confidant had been helpful because she was able to tell her that, "...feeling like I don't know what I'm doing

is completely normal...” Another PST wrote that her conversations with her Critical Confidant were positive because, “...you don’t have to watch your every word because it’s a chance to relax and open up.” A PST who spoke directly regarding the power inherent in her relationship with her supervisor and cooperating teacher summed this up:

Because my Critical Confidant is not in a position of authority over me and is not connected to [either] of my teaching placements, she provides me with the opportunity to speak frankly with someone in the field of teaching without repercussions.

Our findings are in agreement with Houck and Chiodo (2009) in that PSTs may need more support than they are provided in the form of supervisors and cooperating teachers and we connect this with the findings of Jasper and Foster (2010) that PSTs need emotional support. In fact, Cherian (2007) found that PSTs describe having a *caring associate* as one of the most important parts of their student teaching experiences. Cherian defined this individual as someone who is open-hearted and open-minded. Caires, Almeida, and Martins (2009) call for providing student teachers a way to deal with the social and emotional aspects of learning to become a teacher. It is clear that PSTs need emotional support.

The results of the current study suggest this need for emotional support goes beyond that typically provided by the supervisor and cooperating teacher because those relationships are ones where there is inherently a power differential (Cherian, 2007). PSTs may understand the role of the cooperating teacher and supervisor as a person in charge rather than a person there to help them. As Slick (1998) notes the word ‘supervisor,’ comes from the word *supervidue*, which means to look over or oversee. Our work extends these ideas to bring in the Critical Confidant who functioned as, in Cherian’s words, a *caring associate*, but, importantly, was not responsible for assessing the PST, making the conversations more comfortable.

Slightly More Experienced Peer

PSTs valued the opportunity to talk with someone who was slightly more experienced. Comments coded in this category included one such as, “It was helpful to have the advice of [someone] who had only recently been searching the job market.” Another PST commented that she valued the advice of her Critical Confidant because that person had “only recently graduated” and appeared to be more relatable than an older supervisor and cooperating teacher. The Critical Confidants were close in age to the PSTs and they may have been able to relate to PSTs in a different way than the supervisor or cooperating teacher could.

One PST spoke with her Critical Confidant about her choice to apply to graduate school immediately or look for a teaching job. When referencing her

choice to speak with her Critical Confidant rather than her supervisor or cooperating teacher, the PST commented, “I want to know what people were feeling who just did this” implying that she wanted to understand the point of view of someone who had made this choice recently. PSTs may often find that the student teaching experience is more time consuming and stressful than they anticipated (Berridge & Goebel, 2013); the PSTs in this study appeared to benefit from being able to seek the advice of someone who had recently experienced student teaching.

Another PST noted of her Critical Confidant, “She was blatantly honest. She could be honest in a different way than my supervisors or cooperating teachers because she could relate to my experience.” In this way, the PST appeared to relate differently to her Critical Confidant than to her supervisor or cooperating teachers and the Critical Confidant was able to provide support in different ways because of their similarity in ages and recent experiences. Another PST commented that it was “helpful to receive advice from someone who was recently in my shoes and who is a peer” indicating the PST felt her relationship with her Critical Confidant was different than the relationship she had with her cooperating teacher or supervisor.

Helping a PST understand new information in the context of existing information and understandings about teaching may be best accomplished by someone such as a Critical Confidant who is just ahead of the student teacher in development rather than a supervisor or cooperating teacher who are often removed from their own learning-to-teach experiences. These discussions are within the PST’s Zone of Proximal Development and are developmentally appropriate because they are “...at the juncture of what the student teachers understood about teaching and what more they wanted to learn” (Street, 2004, p. 21). Ryan (1986) recommends that mentors be much more experienced than those they are mentoring, but he also comments that those who are younger and closer in experience level may be better able to identify with the current struggles of their mentee. This experience-level proximity may make discussions with a Critical Confidant more meaningful to a PST. We believe that closeness in age is part of what makes having a Critical Confidant so valuable. Student teaching in 2018 has different responsibilities than it did in the past and when many of the cooperating teachers and supervisors experienced student teaching. For example, the state tests teacher candidates are required to pass to become a teacher are much more demanding than they were even a few years ago. Additionally, many of our PSTs work part time jobs out of economic necessity, which was not a reality when many of the supervisors and cooperating teachers completed their own student teaching experiences. Finally, in the time of high-stakes accountability for schools, children take examinations and their scores are often seen as a measure of the quality of instruction they receive from their teachers.

These realities are quite different from the past and Critical Confidants who are closer in age to the PSTs could have a deeper understanding of the current educational context.

Limitations

Certainly, any research study has limitations. In this current study, we relied on a small group of PSTs to self-report data. It is possible that this sample does not represent PSTs at large or that PSTs in this study provided the answers they thought were appropriate rather than what they really thought. In addition, PSTs in our program are all younger in age. It would be interesting to learn the experiences of older PSTs and whether a Critical Confidant who is also an older-beginner could play a supportive role. Some preparation programs also employ younger faculty and younger supervisors; those situations are outside of this research study.

Conclusions and Implications

While research into the idea of having a Critical Confidant is needed beyond this study, we believe it is necessary to find new ways of supporting PSTs so they will persevere and enter the teaching profession prepared to take on the challenges of teaching in the 21st century. Although there are many ways that student teaching could be improved, having a Critical Confidant who is not involved in the evaluation of the student teacher, is close to his or her age and level of experience, and can talk through ideas that are not yet ready for more formal feedback, is a way to improve the student teaching experience. We believe that the assignment of the Critical Confidant has the potential to be a very effective way to increase the performance and the comfort level of the student teacher and provide some power to the individual to manage the demands of student teaching.

Naturally, there are challenges of wide scale implementation of this type of support. Finding willing Critical Confidants and matching them with student teachers could be difficult. An intermediate step to providing this level of support to all might be to continue the process we used in this research: To provide a Critical Confidant to student teachers who express an interest in the support or those who begin to struggle. Alternatively, providing the option to begin working with a Critical Confidant at any time during their student teaching rather than deciding at the beginning of the experience could be a way forward.

Teacher educators in general and those who work directly with student teachers, such as supervisors and cooperating teachers, need to be aware of the challenges involved in student teaching and possible models to assist student teachers. A Critical Confidant can be a powerful addition for PSTs so that they

can receive all of the support possible to have a positive student teaching experience and enter the teaching field prepared.

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