

The Importance of Role Perceptions in the Student Teaching Triad

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the roles and role perceptions held by members of physical education student teaching triads while engaged in a seven-week elementary student teaching experience.

It is believed that knowledge is created through group interactions (i.e., triad) in the environment, and therefore a social constructivist paradigm was used as the lens from which the data were examined. Data were collected by interviews, observations, video analysis, field notes, and a focus group meeting. Unique case narratives were compiled according to the emergent themes of each participant and triad. A cross-case analysis compared similarities and differences among the triads. The results indicated that role perceptions were varied among triad members and that these perceptions affected the student teaching triads both positively and negatively. Dysfunction within the triads was attributed to unclear role definitions and a lack of communication among triad members.

The Importance of Role Perceptions in the Student Teaching Triad

Student teaching is typically the culminating experience of the teacher education program and considered to be the most crucial and beneficial learning experience of the preservice teacher's program (Coulon, 2000; Griffin & Combs, 2000; Veal & Rikard, 1998). It is during this practical field experience that student teachers refine the critical teaching skills they will need as practicing teachers, while being supervised and mentored by more experienced professionals, a cooperating teacher, and a university supervisor. From the mentor in the supervisory role, the student teacher may receive

information related to (a) classroom management and planning for instruction (Banville, 2006; Coleman & Mitchell, 2000; Kahan, 1999; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1988), (b) content development (Coleman & Mitchell, 2000), and (c) teacher behaviors, such as enthusiasm, voice quality, checking for understanding (Coleman & Mitchell, 2000; Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1988), and the development of critical thinking skills (Ocansey, 1990; Ocansey, Chepyator-Thomson, & Kutane, 1992). A common goal of all supervisors is to make the student teaching experience a productive time for professional growth and orientation to the world of teaching.

Because the cooperating teacher observes and interacts with the student teacher on a daily basis during the student teaching practicum, there is little doubt as to the influence the cooperating teacher has on the student teacher. However, the mentoring relationship is complicated by the addition of the third individual, the university supervisor. The university supervisor may or may not function in the role of mentor to the student teacher. Regardless, the addition of a third person to form a student teaching triad disrupts the daily relational work of the student teacher-cooperating teacher dyad and creates a hierarchical shift in power and alliance when the university supervisor is present (Caplow, 1968).

Researchers have focused on the student teaching experience from different perspectives of triad members, such as the university supervisor's and student teacher's perspectives (Bain, 1991; Barrows, 1979); the cooperating teacher's perspective (Koerner, 1992; Veal & Rickard, 1998); and student teachers' perspectives of cooperating teachers (Rikard & Knight, 1997). Studies also exist on the relationships between members of the triad, such as the relationship between student teachers and cooperating teachers (Lemma, 1993) and

relationships between university supervisors and cooperating teachers (Tannehill & Zakrajsek, 1988). Additionally, studies focusing on role perceptions have added to the literature. Differing role perceptions are quite often apparent in student teaching triads and may have negative or positive effects on the triad (Bullough, Birrell, Young, Clarke, Erickson, & Earle, 1999; Burnstein, Kretschmer, Smith, & Gudoski, 1999). Role perceptions of the student teacher have been examined from the perspective of both the cooperating teacher and university supervisor (Bourdreau, 1999; Hynes-Dusel, 1999; Karmos & Jacko, 1977; Ramanathan & Wilkins-Canter, 2000). Perhaps the least studied member of the student teaching triad is the university supervisor. The literature (Tjeerdsma, 1998; Wilson & Saleh, 2000) suggests that cooperating teachers want the university supervisor to take a more active role in the supervision of student teachers. Oftentimes cooperating teachers expect the university supervisor to provide that critical link between theory and practice. Once a student reaches the student teaching experience, the university supervisor should play a secondary role and let the cooperating teacher take over (Griffin & Combs, 2000; Wilson & Saleh, 2000).

The formation of a collaborative group is essential for a successful and positive experience for the entire triad. Triad members acknowledge the formation of the triad and then learn how to function effectively within that triad. However, tension often exists among triad members because of a lack of clarity of the role of each member in the triad and the role expectations members have for their respective position, as well as the other triad positions. Triadic relationships have been reported to be competitive and hierarchical with no real chance of the members working collaboratively (Caplow, 1968; Simmel, 1950; Yee, 1968). Competition within a hierarchy happens because triad members do not have complete control over the choice of the other members. Veal and Rikard (1998) described problems within triads as coming from unclear or poorly defined roles. A triad may breakdown because of the confusion that results from different

definitions of the individual roles within the triad. As such, there is a need for clearly defined roles for all three triad members in order to foster a better understanding of the student teaching experience (Duquette, 1997; Tsui, Lopez-Real, & Law, 2001; Veal & Rikard, 1998).

The purpose of this research was to discover, describe, and examine the roles and role perceptions of each member of two physical education student teaching triads. The triad roles were examined through the lens of social constructivist theory, which allowed us to conceptualize the relationships among triad members and consider how each negotiated their role within the triad. Social constructivism is a well-established theory about knowledge and learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning was much more than the assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge but that it was the process by which learners were integrated into a learning community. The growth and development of learners occurs through social interactions among people. The premise of using social constructivism in educational settings is the belief that researchers must look at how students learn and how teachers teach (Grennon-Brooks & Brooks, 1993). According to Kim (2001) there are four specific assumptions that are essential to the social constructivist theory as used in educational settings. They include: reality, knowledge, learning and the inter-subjectivity of social meanings. Reality is constructed through human activity. Knowledge is created through group interactions within an environment. Learning is a social process and occurs when people are engaged in social activities. The inter-subjectivity of social meanings and knowledge are shaped and can only evolve through group negotiations.

Regarding group dynamics (i.e. the triad), it is believed that learners must develop teamwork skills and come to see that individual learning is related to the success of the group. The members of the student teaching triad come with their own unique interpretations of what student teaching is all about based on their past experiences and interactions in the world. They must learn to work together in order to gain those common experiences that allow them to

make appropriate meaning out of the specific student teaching experience and enable the student teacher to successfully transition into a beginning teacher. A constructivist paradigm allows student teaching triads to focus on large ideas from multiple perspectives and interpretations and permits all members to have the power to make decisions and reach conclusions. Such meaningful collaboration among triad members is essential to the growth of the student teacher.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Data were collected during a seven-week segment of an elementary physical education teaching practicum during the Fall semester.

In order to capture a deep understanding of the interactions among the participants as they constructed meaning about themselves and others within the triad, it was determined that a case study ($n=2$) approach was an appropriate methodology to utilize. Seven student teachers were engaged in the student teaching experience during the Fall semester. Of these seven, two agreed to participate in the study. These two cases were a convenience sample based on the acceptance of those students who were in their student teaching experience and showed a willingness to participate in the study. The remaining student teachers and cooperating teachers were asked to complete an open-ended survey at the end of the semester. Both cooperating teachers had been teaching for at least 4 years, were graduates of the same university and both had a previous relationship with Judy during their undergraduate teacher preparation years at the university. Case 1 included Maria (ST), Jennifer (CT) and Judy (US). Case 2 included Woody (ST), Bruce (CT) and Judy (US) (pseudonyms).

The nature of the study was explained to the student teachers and their accompanying cooperating teachers, and they voluntarily agreed to participate. Prior to any data collection permission to conduct the study was secured through the university Institutional Review Board, individual school districts, the principals, and the teachers at each site. Due to the

positional nature of the student teaching experience, the participants were assured that the requirements of the study were outside the expectations of their student teaching experience and would have no influence on their grades. To ensure confidentiality the researcher did not share any information provided by the participants with the university supervisor until after final grades were submitted.

Triad Members and Setting

Case 1. Southwest Elementary School (pseudonym) was considered to be an excellent school by the local community. This was a K-5 school with approximately 485 students. Class sizes were relatively small (18-23 students), met twice a week for 30 minutes, and the physical education program was well supported by the administration. As a result, the school was well equipped with a variety of facilities for students to use for both physical education classes and free time. The gymnasium was large and inviting, there was an outside blacktop area, an outside grass play area, and a large playground, which could be utilized throughout the day.

Maria had just completed the first part of her student teaching experience at a local middle school and was looking forward to working with younger children. She entered into the student teaching experience with the belief that she wanted to be an elementary physical education teacher. She was ready to put into practice all her content knowledge and activity ideas.

Jennifer was a first time cooperating teacher. At the time of the study, she had been an elementary physical education teacher for four years. In addition to her teaching duties, Jennifer was an active participant in state and local professional opportunities, she developed an after school jump rope club, coached at a local high school, served on school committees and was a co-writer for a successful Carol M. Wright Physical Education Program (PEP) grant for her school district.

Case 2. City Elementary School (pseudonym) located in the heart of the city was the smallest school in the district with only 235 students in grades

preK-5th. The average class size was approximately 18 and the students participated in physical education every day for 25 minutes. The gymnasium was very friendly and inviting. The walls were covered with posters, student work, and colorful flyers geared towards elementary students.

Woody was a few years older than his peer student teachers, and he was a father. He was very serious about becoming a good teacher and was already practicing his teaching skills on his young daughter. He looked forward to becoming an elementary physical education teacher and learning as much as possible from his student teaching experience.

Bruce had been teaching elementary physical education for six years. He was a graduate of the University and was familiar with the program and expectations of the university. He had completed a master's degree in administration and was thinking of pursuing an administrative position in the near future. Bruce had been a cooperating teacher numerous times in the past, and he was very excited to mentor Woody.

Judy had 26 years of experience as a professional educator. She had been in her current position at the University for seven years and had supervised over 65 student teachers. She had a personal and professional relationship with both cooperating teachers through her role as a teacher educator and her role as an active member in the state Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AHPERD). She had been the instructor for both student teachers in their elementary methods course and served as each student's program advisor.

Data Collection Procedures

A variety of sources were used to construct the case studies. These include observations, interviews, a video taped conference, field notes, and a focus group discussion.

Observations. The researcher conducted weekly observations throughout the entire student teaching experience. The intent of the observations was to make notes of the interactions and behaviors of each

triad member while engaged in triad meetings, post-observation conferences, and classroom teaching behaviors.

Interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted individually with each triad member three times during the semester. Two triad interviews were conducted; one was approximately midway through the experience and the second took place at the end of the student teaching experience. The interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and were conducted at the school site or at the university. A semi-structured approach was used in all interview sessions in order to elicit in-depth information from the participants (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Questions were developed based on the research questions, pilot study, and two previous dissertations (Davey, 2001; Riem, 1995). The interview questions centered around the following topics: (a) role of triad members; (b) effectiveness and function of triad; (c) expectations of members; (d) means of communication; (e) role of self; (f) student teaching experience; and (g) relationships among these triad members. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed and the participants were asked to review them for accuracy.

Post-teaching conference video. As each student teaching triad was engaged in a post-teaching conference the researcher videotaped the meeting. The sessions were conducted at the participants' schools near the end of the semester and were a normally occurring process throughout the student teaching experience. Within 48 hours of this meeting each participant individually reviewed the video and responded to prompting questions regarding their personal role and perceived relationship within the triad. The probes for this observation were generated from a previous dissertation that focused on cooperating teachers and university supervisors (Davey, 2001). The purpose of the videotaped conference was to allow the participants to observe how they interacted in a triad meeting and to gather additional information about the nature and relationship among triad members.

Field notes. Field notes were written during all observations, interviews, and the post-teaching

conference. Notes were recorded for verbal and nonverbal behaviors, the researcher's personal thoughts and interpretations, and specific comments made by the participants. These notes provided an additional method by which the data were analyzed and triangulated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Focus group meeting. After all the grades were posted, all the triad members were invited to a final focus group discussion. The meeting was held at the university and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The intent of the focus group was to allow participants an opportunity to ask questions, share their thoughts, and add new insight to the themes that emerged throughout the semester (Wellington, 2000). This session was audio and videotaped to allow the researcher to review the meeting for relevant details. Participants were asked to discuss the following: (a) individual roles within the triad; (b) the student teaching process; (c) relationships within the triad; and (d) benefits and challenges of being a triad member.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done simultaneously with data collection using analytic induction and constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This ongoing process allowed the focus and shape of the study to emerge as the study proceeded (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). In addition to various emergent themes it was hypothesized that certain themes would become apparent based on the initial research questions. Data were gathered, unitized, organized into themes, and then synthesized and interpreted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data from the interviews, videotaped conference and focus group were transcribed by the researcher, reviewed several times and color-coded according to emergent themes as expressed by the participants. Additional notes from the researcher's journal and observations were then reviewed and added to the coded themes. All data were reviewed and coded again by the researcher, while at the same time a peer debriefer was independently coding the data for emergent themes. Finally, the emergent themes along with other data sources were analyzed together so that a deeper understanding of

participants' thoughts and experiences might be obtained.

The primary researcher employed a variety of methods to establish dependability of the data. Detailed notes were recorded in a field journal regarding all interactions and observations of the participants. Throughout the fall and spring semesters, monthly consultations were conducted with a peer debriefer. Triangulation of data included crosschecking all data sources to insure the results of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher provided each participant with a typed transcription of each interview and continual checks of the transcribed data were conducted throughout the study. Individual data sets (interviews, observations, triad conferences, focus group, field notes, and questionnaire) were analyzed separately and brought together for a final analysis.

Results

Frustration and Confusion: Case 1: Maria (ST), Jennifer (CT) and Judy (US)

Judy felt very comfortable in her decision to place Maria with Jennifer for her student teaching experience. As a result she felt that both women would be able to develop and learn from each other. "I think they probably even have, although Jennifer's is much more developed because of her experiences, a philosophical agreement about elementary physical education" (Interview 3, Case 1).

As a result of a negative secondary student teaching experience, Maria entered this elementary experience filled with a combination of relief and apprehension. "I expect to be able to find out my strengths and weaknesses...to find out what teaching styles I like, what things work for me and what do not" (Interview 1, Case 1). She was afraid that she was going to be let down [again] by her cooperating teacher and at the same time she was happy to be at a new school with a fresh start. "I have heard so much about her [the cooperating teacher]. I wanted to see what her techniques were...I really want to learn a little more from her" (Interview 1, Case 1).

Early in her student teaching experience, Maria

defined her role in the triad and attempted to construct meaning and guidelines regarding the role of the cooperating teacher through her own set of expectations. She firmly believed these guidelines were essential for her to grow and develop into a better teacher. However, Maria kept these expectations to herself and assumed that the other members of the triad held the same beliefs.

As a first-time cooperating teacher, Jennifer was filled with excitement and apprehension. She felt confident in her role as a teacher and assumed that she would be able to act as a mentor to her student teacher. However, it became apparent early in the experience that Jennifer was struggling to define her role as a cooperating teacher. When asked what she believed her role to be, Jennifer replied, "I don't really know...I am trying to be a resource" (Interview 2, Case 1). Initially, the only expectations of her role were to give the student teacher space and let her take over the classes. As suggested by Kim (2001) learning is a social process and Jennifer was trying to "learn" how to be a cooperating teacher by focusing on how she was treated during her student teaching experience, which was to be left on her own. As a result, she left Maria alone in the classroom for hours at a time, assuming that being responsible for the classes would allow her to grow and develop. Ironically, this is the exact opposite of what Maria believed should happen during the student teaching experience. "It's important for them [the cooperating teacher] to be there and to give us feedback. When they are gone, it's hard" (Interview 2, Case 1).

As the semester progressed, Jennifer felt frustrated and helpless as a cooperating teacher. She knew that she was not giving Maria the feedback and mentoring she needed, yet she did not know how to remedy the situation. "I think the teaching stuff is going well but I am not sure...I don't really know [how Maria feels]" (Interview 2, Case 1). Unfortunately, neither Jennifer nor Maria chose to share this information with Judy and as a result Judy was not able to help either. Not until the end of the semester when Jennifer was out of town did Maria ask Judy to offer suggestions and feedback about her teaching. It was at this point that she finally felt she received the

guidance and feedback she had been craving all semester.

Maria and Jennifer chose not to communicate their expectations or to have these important conversations with each other, or with Judy, and as a result were unable to fully develop as a functioning dyad. They were each constructing their own individual realities but never got to the point where they shared information, interactions or a learning community. Even during the post-teaching observation video, Maria and Jennifer never fully engaged in conversation, and eye contact between the two was minimal (December 2).

Everything I Ever Wanted: Case 2: Woody (ST), Bruce (CT), and Judy (US)

Judy wanted Woody to be in a school where he would have a strong male role model as well as a mentor. She knew that Woody wanted to become an elementary physical education teacher and she knew how dedicated Bruce was as a teacher. "Woody had met Bruce previously in a seminar class...and he immediately said this is what I want to become and therefore I want to work with him. I thought this was a very appropriate placement" (Interview 2, Case 2).

It appeared that Woody entered into this experience with a well-developed sense of his role as well as that of his cooperating teacher. He never doubted for a second that this experience would be everything he expected. "This guy [the cooperating teacher] was my idol then [at a previous seminar] and I didn't even get to see him teach. Now, I got to see him in action and it is like, wow" (Interview 1, Case 2). Bruce was also pleased about this placement. He was eager to act as a mentor to another male whose goal was to become an elementary physical education teacher. "He is a male and he wants to teach elementary school. I think that is a huge giant factor...he really wants to be an elementary physical education teacher" (Interview 1, Case 2). This shared excitement certainly helped set the stage for easy communication and shared expectations.

From the very first day Woody was at the school, he and Bruce were engaged in continuous shared dialogue regarding teaching. Bruce was instrumental

in helping Woody become a part of the school community. "Bruce is here with me. We talk at recess. We eat lunch together..." (Interview 2, Case 2). His constant use of "we" indicated that there was frequent communication and that these interactions allowed Woody to feel as though he were an integral part of the school.

Woody was able to grow and develop quickly as a result of the shared dialogue between himself and his cooperating teacher. This well-functioning dyad laid the necessary groundwork for the university supervisor to come in and contribute to the learning environment and ultimately develop into a fully functioning triad. Because every member of the triad was working under the same assumptions and beliefs about the student teaching experience, they were able to come to a working and shared understanding of each other's role in the triad. Woody felt that he gained a tremendous amount from his interactions with both Bruce and Judy.

Exploring the Roles of Triad Members: A cross-case analysis

Student teacher. The student teachers in this study described their role as learner and observer. They needed to learn about the "real world" of a teacher, which included such topics as attending conferences, serving on school committees, working at after school programs, and providing grades and evaluations of students. Woody and Maria each constructed their own unique meaning regarding their role in the student teaching experience from the shared interactions with members of the triad.

The cooperating teachers and the university supervisor believed that the role of the student teacher should be learners and reflective practitioners whose time should be spent working out the kinks in their teaching before getting their first full-time teaching job.

Cooperating teacher. The university supervisor and the cooperating teachers agreed that cooperating teachers should act as day-to-day mentors and provide guidance and feedback to promote the growth of the student teacher. The student teachers concurred; however, they were extremely critical

about the role of the cooperating teacher. Maria expected her cooperating teacher to observe her daily and provide guidance and feedback. Although Woody agreed that feedback was essential, he did not specifically identify a need for the cooperating teachers' presence at all times. Perhaps this was not a concern for Woody because he had constant, daily interactions with his cooperating teacher, while Maria was often left on her own. Thus, she was unable to become a true member of a dyad or triad, where learning could be constructed through shared ideas and thoughts.

University supervisor. University supervisors are typically expected to wear multiple hats. They must meet the time demands for other responsibilities at the university, in addition to the responsibilities to student teachers and cooperating teachers. The university supervisor was expected to act as a resource, mentor, and evaluator. The student teachers in this study had a variety of specific expectations of the university supervisor. They expected her to be at the schools regularly to help them by giving feedback and suggestions. They wanted Judy to fix any problems that might arise, and they expected her to know everything that was going on in their student teaching experience.

The cooperating teachers believed the university supervisor should link theory with practice and oversee certain requirements like paperwork and lesson plans. Bruce and Jennifer agreed that the university supervisor was just one member of the triad whose job it was to help the student teacher during the student teaching experience. They believed that the university supervisor should also act as a resource for the cooperating teacher.

In the post-teaching videotaped conferences, Judy appeared to play a variety of roles. Initially, she acted as the supervisor, giving the student teachers feedback on their lessons. She gradually turned the conferences into conversations where each member could share their voice. At this point Judy became a resource and colleague for both the student teacher and cooperating teacher.

Triad/Dyad Interactions and Effectiveness

In both cases, there were a variety of interactions among the triads and dyads. The results of this study indicated that the role perceptions did have an impact on the quality of the student teaching experience. As suggested in the literature, the quality of the student teaching experience was dependent on the group effort of the student teaching triad (Darden, Darden, Scott, & Westfall, 2001).

Case 1. This triad was affected the most by the role perceptions. It was a combination of Maria's strong expectations and Jennifer's lack of expectations that caused problems for this dyad. Neither Jennifer nor Maria chose to discuss their concerns with each other or Judy. In addition to their communication problems, Jennifer and Maria failed to develop a strong relationship. Maria was affected the most by this non-functioning dyad as she became angry, frustrated, and realized that she and Jennifer were not going to solve the problem. Ultimately Maria searched for alternative sources for support. Maria reported learning a great deal and growing as a teacher, but it was due to the university supervisor rather than the support and guidance of her cooperating teacher. "...I was glad she came out as many times as she did. The last couple of times it was just her and I, and I got a ton of feedback and I loved it" (Interview 3, Case 1). The support offered by Judy allowed Maria to grow and develop her teaching skills. This is perhaps why Maria ultimately felt that the student teaching experience was a success despite a weak relationship with her cooperating teacher.

Maria did not believe that her triad functioned effectively. "I wish it would be more of a triad and I do not feel like it is. I do not feel like it is a triangle of people working together to achieve one purpose" (Interview 1, Case 1). Judy also indicated that the triad did not function effectively, because she was not able to be at the school as often as it was necessary to truly work as a triad. Jennifer, on the other hand, felt like there was a triad and that three people were working together in some capacity. There were interactions among all the members, but there was not the sense that the triad was a cohesive group of three people working together.

Jennifer was unsure of her own role and was unable to develop an understanding or expectation of the other roles in the triad. She did not really know what to expect from a student teacher other than that she would come out to the school and teach. She expressed the desire to get a better understanding of the process, but she did not take any steps to remedy the situation. In order to construct some meaning regarding her role, Jennifer used the only information she had, which was from her past student teaching experience. She then behaved in much the same manner, as she perceived her own cooperating teacher had acted with her. "Jennifer is very busy, she appears confident as a teacher but not as a cooperating teacher. I sense that she doesn't have the time right now to be reflective about her student teacher or about her own role as a cooperating teacher" (Researchers' Journal, 12/2). This ultimately led to a dysfunctional student teacher-cooperating teacher dyad. Because the university supervisor was not aware of the situation, she was not able to offer any strategies or mentoring to help Jennifer succeed as a cooperating teacher. Both Maria and Jennifer reported having learned a great deal from the experience. However it would have been more positive and functional with better communication and a deeper understanding and agreement of each role within the triad.

Case 2. The cooperating teacher/student teacher dyad was very effective. Woody and Bruce were fortunate to hold the same perceptions of each other's role in the triad, which allowed them to develop a strong bond. From the first day of the student teaching experience, Bruce and Woody spent several hours each day discussing the lessons. They met before school, during recess, and they ate lunch together so they could discuss teaching. Woody was extremely grateful for this type of relationship and interaction. Woody and Judy were also involved in a functioning dyad. They were able to communicate effectively, and Woody valued his interactions with Judy. Bruce indicated that he was comfortable with Judy and he would not hesitate to contact her if it became necessary. He reported that he enjoyed her visits to the school and would learn something new

with each visit. The cooperating teacher/university supervisor dyad in this case also functioned effectively.

The university supervisor was able to visit the school on several occasions and the group was able to meet as a triad two times. Everyone agreed that being able to have at least two triad conferences was beneficial. Bruce and Woody believed that their triad was functioning effectively. At the focus group meeting, Judy suggested that her time constraints limited the ability of the triad to function. Both Bruce and Woody disagreed and insisted that they were still able to function as a triad, even if she was not there all the time.

Discussion

Role Perceptions

Student teacher role perceptions. The research on student teacher role perceptions (Duquette, 1997; Griffin & Combs, 2000) indicates that student teachers have a variety of responsibilities in their role as student teacher. Student teachers typically plan lessons, practice a variety of teaching methods, and develop a realistic understanding of school life. Griffin and Combs (2000) found that student teacher's beliefs and feelings about the student teaching experience were "deeply ingrained" (p.45) even before they began student teaching. The findings in this study are consistent with that research. Each of the student teachers entered the student teaching experience with predetermined expectations about his/her role as a learner. However, Maria found that her expectations for professional growth were not facilitated. She became angry and frustrated when the role that she perceived of herself as learner was thwarted by a lack of communication with other triad members. She was unable to construct new learning from the group interactions and so relied on dyadic interactions with Judy towards the end of her student teaching experience.

Cooperating teacher role perceptions. Mentoring, knowledge sharing, supporting, encouraging, and providing feedback are the most cited roles of cooperating teachers (Boudreau, 1999;

Ramanathan & Wilkins-Canter, 2000; Tjeerdsma, 1998). The cooperating teachers in this study verbalized agreement with these previously published roles. However, Jennifer was unable to fulfill her roles based on her lack of confidence and experience as a mentor. Koerner (1992) stated that cooperating teachers look to the university to help them define their role. When this does not happen, cooperating teachers use other sources such as past experiences as a student teacher and their own teaching expertise to define their role. Jennifer chose to rely on her past experiences, which unfortunately were not functional for Maria's expectations. Consequently, the reality that she constructed was not conducive for her student teacher or herself, so neither was able to learn and enhance her knowledge and skills from interacting with the other. On the other hand, Bruce had previous opportunities to define and construct his role in the triad and was therefore more secure and comfortable as cooperating teacher and able to facilitate Woody's professional growth.

University supervisor role perceptions. University supervisors fill many roles: evaluator, liaison, colleague, resource, mentor, and instructor of record (Griffin & Combs, 2000; You & McCullick, 2001). Judy reported that she played a variety of roles during the student teaching experience, but questioned her effectiveness due to time limitations. Her university commitments and scheduled visitations with other student teachers conflicted with her opportunities to regularly interact within these two triads. While she was comfortable in her roles, she regarded her erratic engagement within the triads to have hindered the successful development of the triad and ultimately the learning opportunities afforded the remaining triad members.

Relationships within the Triad

During the triad conferences the student teachers were passive, letting the university supervisor or cooperating teacher lead the discussion. This is consistent with the early studies of Yee (1967, 1968) and Barrows (1979). However, neither student teacher reported feeling that this power differential made them uncomfortable or took away from their

experience. Their perceptions of Judy's role as mentor and their role as learner within the triad enabled them to continue a relationship that fostered their professional growth and development. This is inconsistent with Barrows (1979) finding that this power relationship negatively affected the student teaching experience.

Tsui et al. (2001) found that during supervisory conferences, the university supervisor assumed a dominant role over both the cooperating teacher and student teacher. Judy asserted herself as the leader during post-observation conferences. She believed this was appropriate since she was only able to visit each student teacher a few times. She directed the conference by asking reflective questions, guiding discovery of new strategies and methods, and giving feedback so that both the student teacher and cooperating teacher were aware of the student teacher's strengths and weaknesses according to the field experience outcomes. Her body language in all the videos suggested that she was in control of the situation, but she was not aggressive towards the cooperating teacher or student teacher. Judy sat back comfortably in her chair, making direct eye contact with both student teacher and cooperating teacher. Most of the discussion and interactions were with the student teacher, but the cooperating teacher was never excluded or ignored in the conversation. Woody explained, "I feel that the body language showed by each member of the triad showed that we each felt that we had a role, and we followed it... Even though my university supervisor has no official responsibility over my cooperating teacher, they seem to follow an unwritten chain of command" (Video Response, Woody, 11/18). Judy's dominance did not appear to hinder the relationship that developed between Bruce and herself. This triad appeared to work collaboratively, which encouraged Woody to draw meaningful conclusions from group interactions to enhance his professional development. However, Judy's leadership appeared to have rendered Jennifer powerless, as she engaged little in conversation and was not able to learn from the reflective dialogue that Judy modeled during the post observation conference. Because Judy was not aware of the strained

relationship between Maria and Jennifer, she did not take the time during these conferences to facilitate group interaction, which could have strengthened the relationship between Maria and Jennifer.

Effectiveness of Triads

Previous studies (Askins & Imwold, 1994; Bain, 1991; Duquette, 1997) indicated that perceptions held by each member had an impact on the effectiveness of the student teaching triad. The degree to which role inconsistencies affected the quality of the student teaching experience was varied. Grimmett and Ratzlaff (1986) argued that triad roles must be explored and understood by all members in order to provide a positive learning experience. In this study, Maria constantly reported that she wanted everyone to understand and to live up to her expectations of all three roles of the triad members. This failure was a significant source of frustration for Maria during the student teaching experience and hindered the development of a cohesive triad as perceived by Maria.

Researchers have argued that more communication among triad members would suppress the negative effect on the triad (Askins & Imwold, 1994; Grimmett & Ratzlaff, 1986; Page, 1980). This was supported by comments made by both Maria and Jennifer. "We need to have everybody [the triad] get together before the student teaching experience to communicate the roles and expectations... otherwise the relationships can be difficult" (Focus Group, Maria, 12/12). However during the experience, Maria and Jennifer were unable and unwilling to venture forth to negotiate their need for change within the triad in order to create a more positive learning environment for Maria. Judy was rendered ineffective in creating a cohesive team because she was unaware of the broken lines of communication between Maria and Jennifer. The result was a failed triad based on unmet perceptions and loosely constructed relationships.

Implications and Recommendations for Development of Triads

The confusion and misunderstandings that currently plague many student teaching triads may be alleviated through open discussions about role perceptions and expectations. These discussions could be as simple as a meeting with triad members prior to the student teaching experience to discuss expectations. Continued dialogue among triad members during the student teaching experience would then open the doors for a more positive learning experience and provide a better way to construct knowledge regarding role expectations. Cooperating teachers should receive specialized training from university supervisors in the techniques and methods of quality supervision if they are to function as effective supervisors. It is important for them to know and understand what expectations the university holds for the student teachers and the student teaching experience. At least one of the cooperating teachers in this study would have benefited from a more thorough understanding of what it means to be a cooperating teacher. Additional suggestions include providing potential cooperating teachers with scenarios of what functional triads look and act like, as well as setting up a panel discussion of veteran cooperating teachers and former student teachers who were engaged in successful and effective triads.

The use of collaborative communication skills such as dialogue, small group communication strategies, journaling, shared conversations, and a mutual leadership could be beneficial for the triads. Encouraging triads to create and use a variety of contact methods such as: email, voicemail, focus groups, and open-ended dialogue prior to and throughout the duration of the student teaching experience are all ideas which can foster positive and effective experiences for all members, especially if the university supervisor is not able to make frequent visits. Specifically, university supervisors should initiate dialogue among triad members, provide the essential training so that cooperating teachers can become successful mentors, and encourage student

teachers to become active members of the triad. It is then up to the other members of the triad to share in the responsibility of establishing and maintaining appropriate means of communication and developing functional relationships within the triad.

While generalizations of the results from this study can be made, they should be done with caution due to the small sample size. There were several assumptions that were made that may prove to be limitations for this study. The use of a semi-structured interview assumed that the participants were accurate and honest in their communications with the researcher. The participants were asked to avoid discussion of the study with other student teachers; however, no attempt was made to further control the participants. The university supervisor was also a member of the researcher's dissertation committee. To control for this, the researcher consulted with an outside faculty member regarding any information provided by the university supervisor.

Future Directions for Research

The continued exploration of the voices of physical education student teaching triads would benefit physical education teacher education programs. Further research will enable teacher educators and university supervisors to gain a more thorough understanding of the impact that the placement of student teachers has on the quality of the student teaching experience and the professional development of the student teacher. Of particular interest would be to study whether dyads can be completely functional and perhaps whether dyads (versus triads) are actually the standard in the student teaching experience. Furthermore, do the relationships of triad members or dyad members continue beyond the student teaching experience? Only through continued research will the satisfaction of all individuals involved in the student teaching experience and the role that satisfaction has on the development of the student teacher become more apparent.

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