Breadth and Depth of Teaching: A University-Based Combination Model of Teacher Preparation with District Participation and Commitment

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In 2015, “Poor collaboration/disconnect between K-12 schools and Teacher Education Programs/Faculty” was the most warranted criticism of teacher education by Division K - Teacher Education group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). How do university-based teacher preparation programs increase relevancy and efficacy of practice on behalf of the school districts and teacher candidates served? This article describes action research of a combination model of teacher preparation that draws on experience and research on professional development school models and co-teaching models that support connections and collaboration between districts and university education programs. The model asserts a teacher preparation program that provides the breadth (early field experiences) and depth (co-teaching field experiences) of understanding and experience in teaching that districts demand and new teachers require for career success. The combination model is flexible enough for replication by any university-based educator preparation program facing challenges related to competition from private industry, political pressure at state and national levels, or meeting ever increasing needs of today’s schools.

In April 2015, at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association (AERA) held in Chicago, members of Division K - Teacher Education met and responded electronically to open-ended questions regarding criticisms of university-based teacher education programs. Of the 564 participants, nearly 40% of participants agreed “poor collaboration/disconnect between K-12 schools and Teacher Education Programs/Faculty” was the most warranted criticism of teacher education (Miller, 2015). Indeed, facing the harsh criticism of university-based education programs is difficult but necessary. Without clear understanding of criticisms, teacher preparation programs cannot face competition from private industry, political pressure at state and national levels, nor begin to meet the ever increasing needs of today’s schools. So, how do programs increase relevancy and efficacy of practice on behalf of the school districts and teacher candidates served? This article describes action research of a combination model of teacher preparation that draws on experience and research on professional development school models and co-teaching models that support connections and collaboration between districts and university education programs.

Research Questions and Review of Practice
Questions about relevancy and efficacy of practice are not new questions for university education programs. At Texas A&M University-Texarkana, Teacher Preparation Program (TPP) faculty and staff heavily debated questions of relevancy and efficacy over several years. Relevancy was defined as the perception of TPP as a significant contributor of teachers by schools and teacher candidates. Efficacy of practice was defined as the quality of the teachers prepared by the TPP for schools. To gain understanding, faculty visited successful programs, reviewed current literature and tapped the collective wisdom of colleagues and organizations (see Appendix A for Acknowledgements). At the same time, A&M-Texarkana’s nationally-recognized professional development school ended due to district funding and restructuring issues related to state funding cuts. So, questions included how the TPP could apply strengths and lessons learned from the successful professional development school to a model that would require the same commitment but less funding from districts. In addition to funding, resources of time and personnel needed for another lab setting for a professional development school in a district was no longer possible also due to state funding cuts and pressures related to impending accountability changes (e.g. STAAR testing).

Simultaneously, research in favor of earlier field experiences for teacher candidates was building (e.g. Capraro, Capraro, & Helfeldt, 2010; Gomez, Strage, Knusen-Miller, & Garcia-Nevaraz, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). So rather than push for another lab school partnership, education faculty worked with districts in the region to find out if there was an interest in participating, short-term, in a lab school model. With this model, foundational classes would meet on campuses up to several weeks in “lab classes” for structured observation and relevant application of education concepts. The positive response was immediate. Schools wanted to participate to
have an early look and recruit candidates, have teachers benefit from outside observers, have the opportunity to provide new and relevant information to potential candidates (e.g. STAAR, data management systems).

While the lab classes were first implemented as early field experiences, faculty continued to investigate ways to restructure later field experiences. At a conference, faculty discovered St. Cloud State University's model of student teaching using co-teaching practices (see Heck & Bacharach, 2015/2016). The model's research was impressive and the depth of collaboration between student teacher and cooperating teacher was the component A&M-Texarkana was missing from their previous professional development school utilized during student teaching.

Change of Practice: Combination Model
As stated earlier, questions about relevancy and efficacy of practice are not new questions for university education programs. But unfortunately, finding and implementing new answers is sometimes difficult in the slow moving world of higher education. At times, smaller universities have an advantage over larger universities in changing paradigms and honing program directions. Implementing the lab class sections for early field experiences in foundation classes was a relatively easy program shift. As lab classes continued, education faculty more easily ascertained district initiatives and concerns. It was clear that districts were demanding more inquiry-, problem- and project-based instruction from their teachers. As a result, A&M-Texarkana education faculty intentionally integrated these and other high impact strategies into methods courses, with specific emphasis on project-based learning.

Focusing on co-teaching strategies in field-experiences and student teaching was more logistically challenging. First, university faculty and district teachers needed to be trained in co-teaching principles and strategies; afterward, they were involved in planning how the co-teaching model could be integrated into A&M-Texarkana’s TPP with teacher and district support. As a second priority, university faculty and local administrators wanted the co-teaching experience to match the year-long field experience of the professional development school providing candidates the experience of starting and ending a school year. Local administrators maintained that the year-long experience benefited first year teachers stating the professional development school experience made “first-year teachers look like third-year teachers.” The year-long experience was resolved by having candidates participate in an introductory semester of co-teaching (Block 1) assigned to a cooperative teacher in the first semester of their senior year during which the candidate and cooperative teacher participate in co-teacher training. Then, during the student teaching semester, the candidate remains in the same class the entire day participating in co-teaching (Block 2) allowing the candidate to internalize and process nuances of teaching without having the burden of establishing a trust relationship with another cooperating teacher.

Implementation of Combination Model
The Junior Year – The Breadth of Teaching
During the first semester of the student’s junior year, students apply for admission into the Teacher Preparation Program (TPP) while beginning foundational course work. Course work and field experiences are designed to allow students to internalize knowledge and experiences regarding the landscape of education, the breadth of teaching.

Lab Class Semester. Foundation courses taken the first semester of junior year include Foundations of Education and Growth and Development for Early Childhood to Grade 12. Day sections of these courses are taught as “lab sections” in which university students are taught primarily in regional schools in a very structured manner. Lab classes expose students to the variety of settings available to EC-12 students today including “typical” elementary, middle and high schools, magnet schools, charter schools, alternative schools, virtual schools and private schools.

University faculty works closely with school leadership at each school participating in lab class to align course concepts/competencies with each lab class. The classes meet at each school for one or two weeks spending a minimum of six hours a week at a school. During this time, four steps are completed: the instructor addresses course content with students; students observe classrooms focusing on content topics; school leadership arrange for presentation and discussion by district personnel on application of topic in the field (e.g. proper use of technology, Response to Intervention, Dyslexia Therapy, project-based learning, classroom management, data management, etc.); and instructor debriefs experience with university students. Student complete assignments, lesson plans (with video segments for critique and reflection), academic analyses, reflections and exams based on their observations, readings, district...
presentations and class discussions.

**Project-Based Semester.** During the project-based semester, candidates extend their understanding of content and content pedagogy through methods classes. Courses extend knowledge developed in lab classes allowing candidates to further their skills in planning, delivery and assessment of standards and proficiencies through high impact practices, specifically through project-based assessments that include problem-based and inquiry-based foci.

**The Senior Year — The Depth of Teaching**
The students’ junior year is about range and scope of the educational landscape - the breadth of teaching. However, the students’ senior year is about focus, nuance and detail in teaching and learning over the course of the school year — the depth of teaching.

**Co-Teaching/Block 1.** During the first semester of senior year, students participate in clinical work in the public school setting as part of field requirements for the TPP. University students, formally admitted into TPP, are identified as “teacher candidates” and are required to spend six hours per week for 12 weeks in an assigned classroom under the supervision of an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), which includes a university field supervisor and cooperating teacher. Teacher candidate and cooperative teacher participate in co-teaching training that includes principles and strategies of co-teaching. Block 1 is the first semester of the co-teaching assignment in which candidate and cooperating teacher are introduced as co-teachers to the class. During this semester, candidates complete co-teaching assignments, activities, lessons (videoed for critique and reflection), and projects as assigned by ILT.

**Co-Teaching/Block 2.** During the final co-teaching semester, the teacher candidate spends 72 full public school days with the same cooperating teacher and increasingly assumes leadership roles in planning and assessing co-taught lessons under the supervision of the ILT. Candidates complete co-teaching assignments, activities, lessons (videoed for critique and reflection), and projects as assigned by ILT. Candidates observe other classes as assigned by ILT.

**Data Analyses**
May 2015 represented the end of the first cohort to have access to the entire combination model. At the end of their program, teacher candidates and cooperating teachers completed an online survey regarding their 1) experience with the TPP and 2) experience with the new co-teaching model. All teacher candidates (N=28) responded to the survey for a 100% response rate. Less than half of the cooper-

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**Figure 1.** Teacher candidate comments regarding experience with Teacher Preparation Program (TPP).

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Teacher Candidate Excerpts from Survey</th>
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| **Faculty & Staff Expertise and Support** | • Amazing staff who go above and beyond to help students  
• Knowledgeable professors  
• Support from staff  
• Staff/educators are very friendly and encouraging  
• Expertise from professors and instructors  
• Field supervisor is very helpful  
• Advisors are well informed about program  
• Wonderful, knowledgeable field supervisor  
• [Instructors] always push you to do your best  
• [Instructors] were a strength  
• Faculty and staff care and want to help us succeed. |
| **Teaching Experiences** | • Positive, realistic experiences  
• A lot of hands-on experiences  
• Program allows you to gain plenty of experience in classroom  
• Good to feel like a part of classroom  
• Amount of time actually teaching |
| **TPP Organization** | • The layout of the program  
• Organization  
• The way it is organized!  
• Flexible hours for working Moms with partial and full courses online. |
| **Preparation for Class** | • The program prepares students for teaching job  
• Prepares students to become teachers  
• Prepares students to have their own classroom |
ating teachers (N=11) responded to the survey for a 39% response rate. Candidate comments over program experience organized into five themes represented in Figure 3.

Open ended responses to year-long co-teaching experience were overwhelmingly positive. 26 of 28 candidates felt the experience was beneficial. Two negative comments related to negative perceptions of cooperating teacher. Figure 4 includes examples of positive comments.

Like teacher candidate responses, cooperating teacher responses regarding co-teaching were overwhelmingly positive. Cooperating teachers were asked to check a list of 13 potential benefits experienced from the year-long co-teaching. The top five responses were: 1) More creative lessons (73%), 2) More in-depth knowledge of pedagogy for the candidate (73%), 3) Worked well as a team to meet needs of students (53%), 4) Students questions were answered more quickly (53%), and 5) Fewer classroom disruptions (53%).

Conclusions
The goal of A&M-Texarkana Teacher Preparation Program has been to have a greater connection with the schools in a manner that is relevant and provides more effective preparation for teacher candidates. Early results indicate teacher candidates and cooperating teachers support A&M-Texarkana's integrating of a combination model of preparation that includes lab school components of professional development schools and co-teaching models. Local teachers and administrators have become more active partners and invested in preparing the next generation of teachers as evidenced by their participation in planning and implementing current field experiences and contributing more in TPP activities. For example, last spring, a local principal met with TPP faculty to inform faculty on T-TESS rubrics and directions.

Additionally, having greater connections with schools has allowed TPP faculty and staff to be aware of district initiatives and concerns; this knowledge has supported TPP faculty and staff perception as relevant and knowledgeable of current practices. Knowledge of district initiatives and concerns also allowed education faculty to make programmatic changes that directly align with district needs allowing greater efficacy of practice on behalf of candidates and schools served. Glitches have occurred and tweaks have been made, but the combination model has allowed relationships to develop between university faculty and district personnel to create a collegial atmosphere in which obstacles are minor and benefits are great.

Overall, A&M-Texarkana education faculty implemented a model that requires district commitment and participation and allows school administrators and teacher candidates to feel confident that program preparation provides the

Figure 2. Teacher candidate responses regarding year-long co-teaching experience.

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<th>This year, [through the co-teaching semesters] you had one cooperating teacher. Do you feel there was a depth to your experience that was beneficial to you?</th>
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<td>• I think only have one teacher allowed us to bond more with our teacher and our students. I think [year-long co-teaching] was a great change for the program!</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I think by having one cooperating teacher I was able to build a relationship with her and the class that helped me become ready to enter my own future classroom.</td>
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<td>• I was able to build relationships with the teacher, students, as well as being able to see their growth from day one to the last weeks of school.</td>
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<td>• I was able to spend more time learning specific teaching tools, ideas and classroom management by being able to be in one assignment the entire year. I also took advantage of seeing other classrooms, but always loved returning to my class.</td>
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<td>• I got to see the kids grow so much throughout the year.</td>
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<td>• I was able to see how to run a classroom by a great teacher and to think of how I want to do things differently.</td>
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<td>• Being with one teacher allows you to get into the rhythm of the classroom.</td>
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<td>• There was a depth to the experience that you do not normally get in standard student teaching.</td>
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<td>• By being with my co-teacher I was integrated into the classroom sooner. I feel this gave me ample experience and provided me the education needed to be a great first year teacher.</td>
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<td>• I got to see the entire year from start to finish and that was beneficial.</td>
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<td>• I had the experience to stay in one room and build relationships with the children instead of having three separate teachers and not being able to actually experience anything.</td>
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breadth (early lab class field experiences) and depth (co-teaching field experiences) of understanding and experience in teaching that districts demand and new teachers require for career success. Further, the combination model is flexible enough to be replicated by large and small university-based educator preparation programs facing challenges related to competition from private industry, political pressure at state and national levels, or meeting ever increasing needs of today’s schools.

References


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