

Review research paper

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH COLLABORATING TEACHERS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract. *Within a teacher education programs, student teachers must participate in a teaching practicum, when teachers-in-training (i.e., pre-service teachers) work with experienced teachers (i.e., in-service teachers) in their classrooms, learning the best practices related to pedagogy. This context, the student teaching practicum, has been studied extensively in a wide range of publications. However, comparative studies across countries that examine the experiences and perspectives of the practicum participants have not been deeply explored in the literature. The following study seeks to understand how student teachers in the Czech Republic and the United States perceive their practicum and the role of their collaborating teacher. Building on previous research that focuses on the effective traits of collaborating teachers and the effective types of feedback collaborating teachers give, this study compares student teachers' experiences with their collaborating teachers and seeks to understand the differences between the two. The findings lead to topics in comparative education which could be explored in greater depth.*

Key words: *practicum, student teachers, cooperating teachers, comparative, feedback, effective traits*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the final year of undergraduate study, many students training to be teachers (i.e., pre-service teachers) participate in a student teaching practicum, which is when pre-service teachers work with experienced teachers (i.e., in-service teachers) in their classrooms, learning the best practices related to pedagogy. This context, the student teaching practicum, is a cornerstone experience and has been studied extensively in a wide range of publications (Calderhead, 1988; Crookes 2003; Farrel 2007; Gebhard 2009; Richards & Crookes 1988; Stoyhoff 1999; Ulyik & Smith 2011; Wilson 2006). This experience, along with seminars, workshops, and other types of learning experiences, is designed to help students move from the role of student to that of an autonomous teacher in his or her own classroom. The student teaching practicum enables pre-service teachers to apply their practical teaching skills they learned through their teacher education program.

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Because learning is a social process, student teaching practicums involve many important significant participants, such as university educators who observe the pre-service teachers in the classrooms; in-service teachers who mentor the pre-service teachers during the practicum; peers who support one another during their practicums; and, of course, the pre-service teachers themselves. During the student teaching practicum, pre-service teachers are placed with an in-service teacher who are referred to through a variety of names in the literature, such as supervisor, mentor, subject mentor, professional mentor, co-tutor, co-trainer (Bullough et al, 2003; Malderez 2009). In this study, we will call these in-service teachers, who act as teacher-mentors, cooperating/collaborating teachers (Akcan & Tatar 2010; Arnold 2002; Koster, Korthagen, & Wubbels, 1998) and define the term as “classroom teachers who participate in a teacher education program by agreeing to work with preservice teachers in their classroom community” (Koerner, McConnell Rust, & Baumgartner 2002: 36).

Teaching in the context of a real classroom places student teachers in close partnerships with cooperating teachers who are usually expected to provide “closer supervision and immediate feedback” of the student teachers (Crookes 2013: 219). For many student teachers, their practicum is the first hands-on experience within the teaching profession, which is why guidance and support (or lack thereof) may be crucial for their emerging teacher identity. As discovered by Farrell (2001), the main support, in terms of teaching competence and support, can come from school authorities in general and cooperating teachers in particular. Indeed, cooperating teachers were identified by student teachers as the most significant contact point during student teaching (Funk et al., 1982).

2. TRAITS OF COOPERATING TEACHERS

Decades of research on effective traits of cooperating teachers has created a litany of attributes that can be organized in a multitude of ways. Research has considered personal attributes, such as kindness, hardworking, openness, honesty, ability to give personal support, self-confidence, and ability to accept differences (Chien 2015; Hobson 2002; Johnson 2008; Kajs 2002; Koerner, O’Connell Rust & Baumgartner, 2002; Sayeski & Paulsen, 2012), as well as professional attributes, such as professional, organized, and knowledgeable (Kajs 2002; Koerner, O’Connell Rust & Baumgartner 2002). While the lists of traits could continue indefinitely, the focus of professional and personal attributes are a helpful beginning place when considering what attributes make a good collaborating teacher.

Since learning is social, the shared space of student teachers and cooperating teachers becomes a space where shared goals are critical (Goodnough et al. 2009). Not all good teachers are good collaborating teachers. It takes more than good teaching to fill the needs of training a novice teacher to become a teacher who can walk into their own classroom and be successful. The literature often differentiates between a mentor and a maestro to help clarify the critical difference needed to support student teachers: “one could say that maestros encourage knowing how, whereas mentors also encourage reasoning” (Ulvik & Smith 2011, p. 522). Indeed, learning to be a mentor is a complex process and is more than helping student teachers master the tradition of being a teacher. A mentor helps student teachers interpret, reflect, and co-construct knowledge (Sayeski & Paulsen 2012). And this type of mentorship affects growth that occurs through consistent and purposeful feedback.

3. FEEDBACK

Fletcher (2000) argues that the most skillful job of the cooperating teacher is giving appropriate feedback. Indeed, in a variety of studies “feedback” is often ranked as a top desirable trait in collaborating teachers (Birrell & Bullough 2005; Killian & Wilkins 2009). Despite all this, some collaborating teachers struggle to give effective feedback (Bullough 2005), and student teachers may be unsure how to take up collaborating teachers’ feedback in meaningful ways (Shute 2008). Furthermore, student teachers may construe feedback as unhelpful (Hobson 2002).

Indeed, research has shown that both giving and receiving feedback is a complicated process during student teaching. Sparse feedback can equate missed learning opportunities (Valencia et al. 2009). If a student teacher perceives feedback as negative, he or she may decide to not take up the feedback and integrate it into their practice (Le & Vasquez, 2011). Effective feedback encourages a connection between theoretical and practical aspects (Koerner 1992), and should encourage reflection and critical thinking skills on the part of the student teacher (Fletcher, 2000). Moreover, student teachers who received constructive feedback within student teacher education would tend to use it in their own teaching (Komorowska: 2018).

4. THE PRESENT STUDY

In this article, we present analysis of data from student teachers’ evaluations of cooperating teachers’ traits and feedback in both the United States and the Czech Republic. In the United States, every research study must receive approval from an Internal Review Board. Please see the footnote that clarifies the approval for this study.¹ From the study’s data set, we identified both the types of feedback student teachers received and the personal and professional traits the student teachers identified from their collaborating teachers. The focus of this article is to examine and compare both the types and the frequency of feedback, as well as the personal and professional traits seen and desired from collaborating teachers in the United States and the Czech Republic.

The questionnaire that drives this study was created by an education professor from the United States and an education professor from the Czech Republic during the US professor’s tenure as a Fulbright scholar in the Czech Republic. The questionnaire was created towards the end of the U.S. professor’s tenure and was based on her experience teaching pre-service teachers in the Czech Republic for two semesters. Further, the education professor in the Czech Republic had also completed a Fulbright in the United States and was, therefore, familiar with the education system in the United States. Both researchers worked to ensure the language of the questionnaire would be easily understood by students in both countries.

4.1. The U.S. Context

The U.S. participants attend a large university (35,000) in the southeastern United States. The university is located in a suburb of a large urban area and the student teachers’ practicums can take place in a wide variety of contexts, from rural to suburban

¹ IRB Approval

to urban. This study focused on student teachers in the secondary English Education program in their final year, during which time they participate in a year-long internship in a secondary school setting; the participants are expected to stay at the school all-day throughout the entire academic year and are required to teach throughout the academic year.

Student teacher placements are either assigned by the college of education or student teachers are placed at a partner school. Cooperating teachers are typically chosen by the principals at schools and must have at least three years of teaching experience. Each student teacher is also assigned a university supervisor, who is either a retired teacher or a university professor who provides focused feedback on lesson plans and teaching five times throughout the academic year. The cooperating teacher is also expected to provide a minimum of five rounds of official feedback throughout the year-long internship. This feedback focuses on professional dispositions (such as communication and timeliness), as well as lesson plans and teaching. Beyond this official feedback, the student teacher and collaborating teacher decide the frequency and type of feedback given during the student teaching placement.

4.2. The Czech Context

The Czech Republic still (due to some historical reasons) feels the paucity of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with master's degrees. The Czech participants attend a large university (10,000) in northwest Czech Republic, in an area known as Bohemia. The university consists of eight faculties and the research was conducted with student teachers of English, graduates of the Faculty of Education. Currently, within the ELT education program there are two periods of teaching practicum, which take place during the third and the fourth semesters of the two-year MA program. Both practicums are comprised of three weeks. During the practicums, student teachers are placed at schools where they work directly with a cooperating teacher and give EFL lessons in the cooperating teacher's classes.

The practicum includes activities traditionally adopted for student teaching, such as observations of the collaborating teacher's classes (from 5 to 7 classes), peer-observation (this component may be optional if student teachers are placed at a school alone), teaching a particular number of English classes (16 for English-only majors, 8 for double majors), and keeping a reflective journal (specifically, they must use "can-do" descriptors from the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Language to offer a focus to their journals). Additionally, the cooperating teacher is requested to share feedback on the student teacher's lessons; however, often times, the cooperating teacher may not have time to provide feedback because they have to immediately go to another class.

In the Czech context, student teachers select a school for their practice. Though the university has a number of faculty schools, it is not compulsory for student teachers to have their practicum only in such schools. Cooperating teachers are not appointed by schools, rather it is a matter of the student teacher's negotiation and the good will of a teacher. This voluntary basis of host teacher selection may, unfortunately, create a situation when student teachers' "somewhat progressive approach to teaching as a result of their university courses... is swiftly washed out during their student teaching" (Crookes 2003: 229).

4.3. Method

At the end of both the U.S. students' and Czech Republic students' teaching experience, they were given the option to complete the questionnaire (see Appendix). The objective of the questionnaire was to compare and contrast Czech Republic student

teachers' and U.S. student teachers' experiences with collaborating teachers during their practicum. Learning student teachers' perceptions and feedback may dramatically help in developing the courses or improving teaching practices (Bury & Hair, 2022)

The authors sought to answer this question by giving student teachers a ten-item questionnaire that focused on both types and frequency of the feedback they received, as well as the traits they found beneficial in their respective collaborating teachers. Because of the data received, only seven of ten items on the questionnaire are considered in this current study. Nineteen U.S. student teachers and 25 Czech Republic student teachers completed the questionnaire.

To construct the questionnaire, the authors first reviewed the literature and conducted a series of meetings to discuss similarities and differences in the student teachers and collaborating teachers experiences in the United States and the Czech Republic. This review and the subsequent conversations led the researchers to focus on who initiated the feedback during the student teaching practicum, how often the collaborating teacher provided feedback, the focus of the feedback, the nature of the feedback, and the ideal traits of a collaborating teacher.

Since the questionnaire included both multiple choice and open-ended questions, summative content analysis was used to analyze the questionnaire. Hsieh & Shannon (2005) define summative content analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the context of text data through the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). Summative content analysis moves beyond counting words to include latent content analysis, the process of interpreting the words in context and discovering meaning from the words and context (Hsieh & Shannon). In other words, summative content analysis moves beyond counting words to contextualizing those words in a larger context.

4.4. Results

A total of 39 students completed the questionnaire, 25 from the Czech Republic and 19 from the United States. Data from the study reveal similarities and differences in the experiences of student teachers from the United States and student teachers from the Czech Republic. The first five questions of the questionnaire focused on five aspects of feedback: frequency of feedback student teachers received, who initiated the feedback, focus of the feedback, type of feedback student teachers received, and the nature of that feedback.

Table 1 Frequency of Feedback

How often did you collaborating teacher provide feedback (on any and all aspects of your teaching experience)? Please mark the one that best applies.	Czech Republic N = 25	United States N = 19
After each class	88%	16%
Every day	12%	26%
A few times a week	0%	26%
Once a week	0%	11%
Less than once a week	0%	16%
Never	0%	5%
Other	0%	0%

As Table 1 demonstrates, student teachers in the Czech Republic received feedback far more regularly than those student teachers in the United States. The discrepancy in the data can easily be attributed to the length of each country's student teaching experience and the composition of the practicum. Since the Czech Republic has a three-week practicum, it follows that those student teachers receive feedback more often; whereas the student teachers in the United States have a year-long practicum, meaning they do not need to receive feedback as often.

Table 2 Initiation of Feedback

Who initiated the feedback?	Czech Republic N = 25	United States N = 19
The collaborating teacher	12%	5%
You	4%	16%
Both	84%	74%
Neither	0%	0%

Table 2 presents the results of question 2, "Who initiated the feedback?" As can be seen from the table, the numbers are similar in both countries. Both the student teacher and the collaborating teacher initiated feedback.

Table 3 Focus of Feedback

What was the focus of the feedback you received from your collaborating teacher? (Please check all that apply)	Czech Republic N = 25 (75 responses)	United States N = 19 (65 responses)
Lesson plan design (e.g., topic, objectives, language focus)	19%	9%
Activities (e.g., sequencing, giving instructions, group designs)	24%	23%
Time management	19%	15%
Critical moments (e.g., unexpected moments, starting and finishing the lesson)	15%	20%
Eliciting/facilitating discussion	8%	14%
Interaction with learners (e.g., classroom community, voice modulation, speaking clearly, teacher wait time)	16%	18%
Other	0%	1% (cutting off the student teacher)

As can be seen in Table 3, student teachers in the Czech Republic and in the United States received similar feedback from their collaborating teacher. The data shows that the largest differences in feedback demonstrate that student teachers in the Czech Republic received more feedback on lesson plan design than the student teachers in the United States, and students in the United States received more feedback on eliciting/facilitating discussion than student teachers in the Czech Republic.

Table 4 Type of Feedback

Which of the following best describes the type of feedback you received from your collaborating teacher? Please mark the one that best applies.	Czech Republic N = 25	United States N = 19
Informal and quick	24%	37%
Informal but detailed	48%	58%
Detailed with formalized suggestions for future improvement	28%	5%
Other	0%	0%

As can be seen in Table 4, most student teachers in both the Czech Republic and the United States received feedback informally but in detail. The student teachers in the Czech Republic received more detailed and formalized suggestions for improvement than their United States counterparts.

Table 5 Nature of Feedback

What was the nature of the feedback? Please check all that apply.	Czech Republic N = 25 (40 responses)	United States N = 19 (28 responses)
Praise-driven	35%	29%
Improvement-driven	50%	54%
Critique-driven	15%	18%

Table 5 demonstrates that the biggest difference between types of feedback received focus on praise-driven feedback: Czech Republic student teachers perceived that their feedback was more praise-driven than student teachers from the United States. The amount of improvement-driven feedback was perceived almost equally between the student teachers from the Czech Republic and student teachers from the United States (50% and 54% respectively).

In addition to the type, frequency, and nature of the feedback, the researchers were also interested in the student teachers' perceptions of the collaborating teacher, including what they believe they learned from the collaborating teacher, as well as what they believed were the ideal traits of a collaborating teacher. In order to assure rich data, the following questions were open-ended.

What are the three most important things you learned while working with your collaborating teacher?

Both student teachers from the Czech Republic and from the United States discussed the importance of lesson planning and activities. Although their comments differed according to their subjects (teaching first language learners as opposed to teaching second language learners), student teachers from both countries highlighted the importance of the "how" behind teaching. For example, a Czech Republic student teacher specifically mentioned the appreciation of "presenting lexis, focus on pronunciation; presenting grammar inductively, using L1 for explanation," and student teachers from the United States named "discussion extension" and "standards" and "grading" in their discussion of lesson planning and activities.

Furthermore, both groups of student teachers noted the importance of learning about students in their classrooms and acknowledged the importance of learning about different types of learners. Additionally, both groups mentioned the importance of positivity towards students. A student teacher from the Czech Republic highlighted the importance of “influenc[ing] the students in a positive way” and a student teacher from the United States used almost identical language when it was said that student teachers should show “positivity towards the students every day.”

Beyond these similarities, there were differences in the data as well. The first difference focused on teacher persona, which is defined here as the “daily personae based on [teachers] and the audience’s expectations... [such as] speech, language, clothing, and gestures...part of [this] role comes from personal models of teaching” (Davis 2012: 2). Most student teachers from the United States (12 out of 19, 63%) specifically referred to teacher persona through references to “teacher voice,” “patience,” “positivity,” and “bringing a personal touch to class.” Only 7 out of 20 student teachers (35%) from the Czech Republic referred to aspects of a teaching persona, but those who did also focused on “patience” and self-improvement.

The data from the student teachers from the United States also demonstrated a focus on time management that was not found in the data from the student teachers from the Czech Republic. Furthermore, student teachers from the United States used the word “collaboration” more than student teachers from the Czech Republic, but student teachers from the Czech Republic used the word “feedback” more than those from the United States.

What are the traits of an ideal collaborating teachers?

Please list three that are most important to you.

Both groups of student teachers focused on the importance of being trusted as an emerging professional. Student teachers from the United States used phrases such as “open to last-minute changes” and “allows freedom in planning and teaching,” and student teachers from the Czech Republic used phrases such as “being open to anything I’d like to try in the classroom” and “give us a change to do what we like to do and learn from our own mistakes.”

As other studies have found (Chien 2015; Hobson 2002; Johnson 2008; Kajs 2002; Koerner, O’Connell Rust & Baumgartner, 2002; Sayeski & Paulsen, 2012) both groups of student teachers labeled “ideal traits” within two categories: personal and professional. Student teachers from the U.S. listed “knowledgeable” and “ethical” as important professional traits most often, while student teachers from the Czech Republic listed “motivated” and “experienced” as their most valued professional qualities. When listing personal qualities, student teachers from the United States listed “positive,” “patient,” and “passionate” as the most important traits of a collaborating teacher, and student teachers from the Czech Republic listed “supportive,” “patient,” and “objective” as the most important traits. Beyond this, as seen previously, this question demonstrated a difference between the U.S. focus on collaboration and the Czech focus on feedback.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study fall into two broad categories: feedback and ideal traits of a collaborating teacher. In this discussion, we will first consider the similarities and differences between student teachers in the Czech Republic and the United States in relation to feedback, and then discuss the similarities and differences in relation to ideal traits.

Feedback

The data indicated three factors influencing the differences and similarities between perceptions of feedback: time, content, and place.

In this study, the time spent in the practicum differed significantly. The student teachers in the Czech Republic experience a three-week practicum, while the student teachers in the United States participate in a full academic year practicum. This time difference might affect how student teachers perceive their roles during their practicum. The data showed that student teachers in the Czech Republic focused on "feedback," whereas their U.S. counterparts focused on "collaboration" across multiple questions. With such a short amount of time in the classroom, student teachers' in the Czech Republic might be more focused on receiving and implementing feedback through multiple rounds. At the same time, with an extended practicum, student teachers in the United States might focus on learning alongside of their collaborating teacher, focusing on the desire in the U.S. data for collaboration above feedback.

In relation to content, both groups of student teachers received most of their feedback from their collaborating teacher on "activities." However, the biggest discrepancies between the focuses of feedback were lesson plan design for student teachers from the Czech Republic (19%; US student teachers, 9%), and the focus on eliciting/facilitating discussion for the student teachers from the US (14%; Czech Republic student teachers, 8%).

However, when looking at this data, we must also consider the larger context in which these studies took place. The student teachers in the Czech Republic were preparing to teach a second language in an elementary and low-secondary setting, and the student teachers in the U.S. were preparing to teach first-language speakers in a secondary setting. Therefore, the students in the student teachers' classrooms in the Czech Republic might not be ready for "discussion," since they are learning English, while first-language speakers in the United States would focus more on discussion.

Place is another factor that may have affected the results of the data in this study. The findings demonstrate small differences between student teachers' perceptions of the types of feedback they received from their collaborating teacher (see Table 5). However, one striking difference is that the largest gap between the student teachers' perceptions of feedback is "praise-driven feedback" (Czech Republic, 35%; United States, 29%). It has been noted in the literature that the United States can be perceived as more praise-driven than countries that used to be part of the Soviet bloc, of which the Czech Republic is included (Nesteruk & Marks, 2011). Therefore, the finding that student teachers in the Czech Republic felt as though they received more praise than their US counterparts is striking. Considering this, it could be concluded that since student teachers from the United States are more accustomed to receiving praise-driven feedback, their perception of praise is more extreme than that of their Czech counterparts. Since the student teaching experience can be a tumultuous time, student teachers from the U.S. could want more praise and feel as though they do not receive it; whereas their Czech counterparts can see praise more clearly since it may not be given as often.

Traits of a Cooperating Teacher

Like many studies before the present study (Chien, 2015; Hobson, 2002; Johnson, 2008; Kajs, 2002; Koerner, O'Connell Rust & Baumgartner, 2002; Sayeski & Paulsen, 2012), the research showed that student teachers from both countries labeled desirable traits in two categories: professional and personal. However, the specific labels under those categories differed. In the category of "professional," student teachers from the

Czech Republic regarded the traits of “motivated” and “experienced” to be the most important; these results are in tune with the research that state respect for students and motivation among expert teachers’ traits (Antić, 2017); whereas their US counterparts considered “knowledgeable” and “ethical” as the most important traits. “Knowledgeable” and “experienced” could be conceived to mirror a desire for professional experience writ large; the U.S. focus on “ethical” requires a discussion.

The student teachers in the United States in this study must complete four ethics modules before they begin student teaching. These modules include tutorials on how to report students who may be in danger outside of the classroom, how to manage school money, and how to ethically report grades. It is important to note here that these ethics modules are not a requirement in U.S. universities, but only a requirement at the university that the U.S. student teachers attended. Since the U.S. student teachers are specifically trained on ethics, they may look to their collaborating teachers with an ethical lens, specifically assessing how the collaborating teacher aligns with what they learned in the ethics modules.

The data showed one important trait of a cooperating teacher shared amongst all of the participants: being treated like an emerging professional. Student teachers from both countries noted the desire to “let the candidate make the most of instructional decisions” and “take into consideration that I’m still a student.” Data indicate that other desirable traits in collaborating teachers are those that would support an emerging professional. Again, all participants noted the importance of “patience,” which would seem to correlate with supporting emerging professionals. Other personal traits (supportive and objective - in Czech Republic; positive and passionate – in the United States) demonstrate student teachers’ desire to be supported in their emerging growth in their chosen field.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to better understand the similarities and differences between student teachers’ experiences with collaborating teachers in the Czech Republic and the United States. Participants held differing views on a number of aspects of their practicum experience, particularly related to feedback. These differing views could be related to the difference between time, content, and place. Despite these differences, all participants noted the importance of receiving the treatment of an emerging professional.

Though too small to warrant generalizations, the findings of this study could lead to explore other issues in greater depth:

1. How do the teaching styles between the Czech Republic and the United States affect student teachers’ experiences with the collaborating teacher?

2. How does the curriculum and required modules (such as the ethics module) at a university in the Czech Republic and a university in the United States affect student teachers’ experiences during a practicum?

And although identity was not a focus of this study, the data lead to an interesting question on identity:

3. How does feedback and perceived qualities of a collaborating teacher affect a student teacher’s perception of their teaching identity?

Ultimately, more studies should be conducted that compare and contrast experiences of student teachers across the globe. Such studies can help position each country’s strengths and help identify areas for improvement.

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