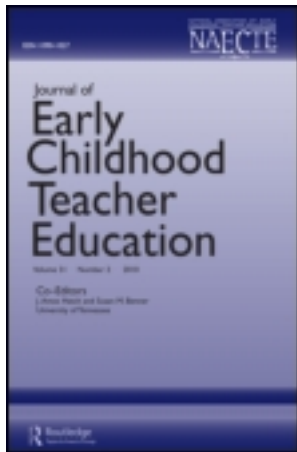


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Preparing Classroom Teachers to Be Cooperating Teachers: A Report of Current Efforts, Beliefs, Challenges, and Associated Recommendations

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A significant focus in the literature related to the preparation of early childhood teachers is the increasing emphasis on quality field-based experiences. Central to the effectiveness of these experiences is a cooperating teacher who is prepared with the necessary skills to provide prospective teachers with a powerful learning opportunity. Despite this recognition in the literature, research is limited on what early childhood teacher education programs are actually doing to prepare classroom teachers to function in this capacity. The nature and purpose of this preparation and support must be carefully examined in order to identify key features that will truly enhance the ability of these teachers to provide the type of mentoring that leads to quality field experiences. Thus, the purpose of this study is to report survey results from 62 early childhood teacher education faculty regarding their efforts in preparing cooperating teachers to work with preservice teachers. Recommendations based on these findings and the professional literature are offered.

In today's educational climate stressing accountability and outcomes, teacher education programs are under continual scrutiny. The success of these programs is measured by the achievement of the students in the classrooms of their graduates (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Levine, 2006). At the turn of the century, as many reports and recommendations criticized preparation of teachers for 21st-century classrooms, Feiman-Nemser (2001) stated, "If we want schools to produce more powerful learning on the part of [students], we have to offer more powerful learning opportunities to [preservice] teachers" (pp. 1013–1014). It is important that research regarding early childhood teacher education focus on defining and identifying the central features of these "more powerful opportunities," as well as the challenges inherent in implementing them.

A key feature that has received attention is the time prospective teachers are being required to spend in clinical or field-based experiences (Levine, 2006; National Research Council [NRC], 2010). Related to this is the role of classroom teachers to function as cooperating teachers or mentors (Bullough, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Korth, Erickson, & Hall, 2009; Korthagen, 2010; Young, Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Erickson, 2005).

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Recently a panel from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) called for a “shift away from a norm which emphasizes academic preparation and coursework loosely linked to school-based experiences. Rather, it must move to programs that are fully grounded in clinical practice and interwoven with academic content and professional courses” (2010, p. ii).

Thus, teacher preparation programs and cooperating teachers must work collaboratively to create a quality field experience, sharing a commitment to identify mutual goals and purposes, common definitions, and consistent expectations (Baum, Powers-Costello, VanScoy, Miller, & James, 2011; Korth, Erickson, & Hall, 2009). However, as teacher education programs effectively make this shift to an increased emphasis on integrated clinical experiences, it is important for them to evaluate the interface between their program and the cooperating teacher. Specifically, how are cooperating teachers prepared to provide powerful learning opportunities to preservice teachers? Despite the recognition in the literature of the importance of cooperating teachers and the need to prepare them for this role, research is limited on what early childhood teacher education programs are actually doing to prepare classroom teachers to function in this capacity. The nature and purpose of this preparation and support must be carefully examined in order to identify key features that will truly enhance the ability of these cooperating teachers to provide the type of mentoring that leads to quality field experiences.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to report the results of a survey exploring the efforts of early childhood teacher education faculty (representing over 50 programs) regarding their preparation of classroom teachers to function as cooperating teachers. Based on the survey findings, recommendations are outlined to guide early childhood teacher education programs in examining and enhancing their efforts to prepare and support cooperating teachers.

Literature Review

Importance of Field-Based Experiences

Over the last decade (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; NCATE, 2010), numerous national reports and studies have affirmed the need for rigorous teacher preparation programs emphasizing field-based experiences. For example, a recent report commissioned by NCATE (2010) called for a “transformation of the education of teachers to a clinically based, partnership supported approach” (p. v). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) further specified that, “supervised, reflective field experiences are critical to high-quality professional preparation” (2009, p. 6). A study by the NRC identified field experience as one of the three “aspects of teacher preparation that are likely to have the highest potential for effects on outcomes for students” (2010, p. 180), along with content knowledge and the quality of teacher candidates.

As noted in Levine’s (2006) analysis of teacher education, exemplary teacher education programs include a “field experience component that is sustained, begins early, and provides immediate application” (p. 6). Such field-based experiences provide preservice teachers an opportunity to “make sense of how the ideas and theories they encounter in their coursework fit in the process of developing practice” (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005, p. 398). Ultimately, these experiences allow preservice teachers to observe, practice, and develop teaching skills in the context of an authentic classroom setting as they prepare for the “increasing complexity, challenges, and diversity of current schools and classrooms” (Huling, 1998, p. 2).

Thus, many teacher education programs in the United States have started to restructure preservice education by extending their student teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 1990; Wang & Odell, 2002), integrating field experience components into their coursework (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996), and developing collaborative relationships between teacher education departments and other colleges and departments (Imig & Switzer, 1996). In addition, teacher education programs are engaging in collaborative partnerships with surrounding schools and districts in order to broaden the preparation of preservice teachers and provide quality field experiences (Bullough, 2005; Ridley, Hurwitz, Hackett, & Miller, 2005; Sands & Goodwin, 2005; Teitel, 2003). However, even though practicing teachers cite field experiences as the most “highly valued component of their preparation,” these clinical practices have also been characterized as the most “ad hoc part of teacher education” (NCATE, 2010, p. 4). In order to address this criticism, it is necessary to explore the role of the classroom teacher and how they are prepared to work with preservice teachers.

Importance of Classroom Teachers

The literature confirms that the ability of the classroom teacher to function in the role of mentor or cooperating teacher is inherent to the success of field experiences (Bullough 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Korth & Baum, 2011; Korthagen, 2010; Young et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2010). With the increasing emphasis on quality field experiences, the literature acknowledges the responsibility this places on classroom teachers (Cope & Stephen, 2001). However, simply increasing the number of hours spent out in the field or randomly placing preservice teachers in classrooms without considering the experience and mentoring ability of the classroom teacher will not automatically improve the quality of field experiences. Careful planning and coordination are required if potential teachers are to learn the expected lessons in the classroom setting (Baum et al., 2011; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Experts recommend that field-based learning should consist of “observation, apprenticeship, guided practice, knowledge application, and inquiry” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1024). As teacher candidates observe and practice the kind of teaching they are learning about from their program courses, having cooperating teachers that are *prepared* to provide feedback and scaffolding is critical as a prospective teacher transitions from simply observing practice to limited participation and ultimately to full responsibility for planning and instruction (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Preparation of Classroom Teachers to Be Cooperating Teachers

Rationale and recommendations. With the renewed emphasis on the central role of field-based experiences providing critical learning opportunities and the central role of the cooperating teacher, it becomes imperative that all candidates should be supervised by highly qualified cooperating teachers and mentors who have been adequately prepared to function in this role (NCATE, 2010). To be highly qualified, cooperating teachers must develop specialized mentoring skills (Wang & Odell, 2002; Zeichner, 2010) along with the foundational abilities of building trust, establishing rapport, effectively communicating, and providing critical feedback to prospective teachers (Korth & Baum, 2011; NCATE, 2010).

The professional literature is both explicit and implicit regarding the rationale and recommendations for cooperating teachers to be tooled with specified skills. For example, in their recent review of the early educational effectiveness, Epstein and Barnett (2012) identified a number of important features of early education programs including the need for prospective teachers to have “strong mentoring and supervision to guide their instruction

and interactions with students” (p. 6). Similarly, in a review of preservice education, quality programs were characterized as having field experiences in which prospective teachers were assigned to work with cooperating teachers who had completed special coursework related to their role and responsibilities (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). NCATE (2010) has recommended that cooperating teachers be carefully selected and prepared to be “accountable for their candidates’ performance and student outcomes” (p. 6). Furthermore, NCATE calls for institutions to identify skills and attributes required for working with candidate and develop programs specifically geared toward teacher educators who are charged to mentor and supervise prospective teachers.

With the increasing demands and expectations to not only implement quality field-based experiences, but also to promote specialized skills in cooperating teachers to effectively mentor preservice teachers, the preparation and support of cooperating teachers becomes vital to early childhood teacher education programs. However, adding the mentoring role and the university’s expectations for classroom teachers to participate as teacher educators adds complexity to their role as teachers of children (Bullough, 2005; Korth et al., 2009). Without the necessary support and preparation, classroom teachers may struggle in effectively functioning as a teacher of teachers.

Experts have cautioned that demonstrating good classroom teaching practices does not mean that a classroom teacher has the necessary skills and body of knowledge to mentor a prospective teacher (Korthagen, Loughran, & Lunenberg, 2005; Shagrir, 2010). Specifically, Zeichner (2010) notes that many people supervising candidates are not aware of how to “support teacher learning and its transfer to the early years of teaching in the context of a university-based teacher education program” (p. 90). This may be an unintentional outcome of a traditional view of field experience, dominant for many years, that classroom teachers mainly provide a place for student teachers to practice teaching, “simply declaring teachers to be teacher educators or mentors . . . and occasionally meeting with them on campus to discuss problems” (Bullough, 2005, p. 144). As a result, there hasn’t been a need to provide classroom teachers with the kind of preparation and support to implement a more interactive and educative concept of mentoring (Margolis, 2007; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009).

Exploring efforts to prepare cooperating teachers. Despite the rationale and professional recommendations evident in the literature, experts claim that many teacher preparation programs do not require any special training, preparation, or qualifications for cooperating teachers (Murray, 2008; Shagrir, 2010). According to the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel report (2010), roughly half of the states require mentor training but with no description of the mentors’ roles and requirements. The absence of required preparation and the lack of explicit roles and requirements is disconcerting given the central role of the cooperating teacher.

Additionally, research has found that there are varying perspectives of the mentoring role of cooperating teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Hall, Draper, Smith, & Bullough, 2008; Korth, Erickson, & Hall, 2009; Young et al., 2005). Some perspectives emphasize the important mentoring and interactive role of the cooperating teacher, whereas others simply point to the classroom teacher providing support and encouragement as needed while they allow the prospective teacher to practice teaching in their classroom.

Taken together, the apparent lack of preparation that cooperating teachers are receiving, the unclear nature of that preparation, and the varying perspectives of their role, there is a critical need to explore the efforts of teacher education programs in providing preparation and support for cooperating teachers. A better understanding of what programs are

doing and the circumstances that either promote or prevent them from implementing these worthwhile efforts can be beneficial to early childhood teacher education programs as they strive to enhance the quality of their field-based experiences.

Thus the purpose of this study is to explore the common and varying efforts, beliefs, and struggles early childhood teacher preparation programs face when providing preparation and/or professional development for classroom teachers in preparation for their work with preservice teachers. The following guiding questions were used in both collecting and evaluating the data from 62 early childhood teacher education faculty:

1. What are early childhood teacher preparation programs doing to prepare classroom teachers to be cooperating teachers?
2. Do faculty in early childhood teacher preparation programs believe that efforts to provide professional development for cooperating teachers are important? Why or why not?
3. What barriers or challenges do early childhood teacher preparation programs face in delivering professional development experiences for cooperating teachers?

Methods

Participants

A link to an online survey was sent via e-mail to the membership of an international professional organization dedicated to promoting the professional growth of early childhood teacher educators. Of the early childhood education faculty contacted, 62 responded to the survey, which had been designed to explore the training and/or professional development efforts their teacher preparation programs made to prepare cooperating teachers for their work with preservice teachers. Those agreeing to participate represented programs that required preservice teachers to complete at least one field-based experience working under the guidance of a cooperating teacher.

Participants represented a very broad range of program characteristics. Faculty from over 50 different national and international institutions of higher education completed the survey, representing early childhood teacher education programs granting 2- and 4-year degrees. The majority of programs offered bachelor's degrees with teaching licensure, while associate's and master's level programs were also adequately represented, including both licensure and nonlicensure offerings (see Table 1). Licenses or certifications offered were predominantly preschool (85%), kindergarten (85%), and grades 1–3 (92%). Forty-two percent of the programs offered infant/toddler licensure. A few programs (15%) indicated that they provided “other” types of licenses, including certification to work with children with special needs and dual certifications. Of the states represented by the programs, 75% required early childhood licensure to teach preschool, and 85% required early childhood licensure to teach kindergarten.

Program personnel who completed the survey included university faculty and field personnel (i.e., supervisors), with 83% reporting that university faculty both teach and supervise in the program. The number of full-time, part-time, and field personnel varied greatly by program, with some programs functioning with only one individual and others employing up to 10 full-time faculty, 20 part-time faculty, and 30 field personnel. The number of cooperating teachers working with a program varied greatly. Approximately one third of the programs worked with 1–25 cooperating teachers per term, and another

Table 1
Degree/Licensure Programs and Number of Students Graduating in Academic Year

Degree/license	1–25	26–50	51–75	76–100	101–125	Over 125	Total response
Associate degree	12	4	1	1	0	0	18
Nonlicensure BS degree	12	0	0	0	0	0	12
BS degree and licensure	21	16	7	5	1	5	55
MS/MA degree and licensure	19	3	2	2	0	2	28
Nonlicensure MS/MA degree	13	2	1	0	0	1	17

Note. Participants could indicate more than one program.

third of the programs worked with 26–50. The remaining programs worked with more than 50 cooperating teachers in a given term.

Survey

Using the three guiding questions noted above, the authors designed an Internet-based survey (Qualtrics Labs Inc., Provo, UT) consisting of 23 items to explore the efforts of early childhood teacher education programs to prepare cooperating teachers for their work with preservice teachers. (A copy of the survey is available upon request.) The following definitions were provided at the beginning of the survey:

- *Cooperating teacher:* A classroom teacher who works with preservice teachers in his or her classroom as part of a field-based training experience.
- *Preservice teacher:* An adult receiving professional training to be a teacher from a certified teacher preparation program, including the beginning, middle, and latter program stages.

Survey items included both forced-choice and open-ended response options. When respondents completed an item in which they chose from one or multiple predetermined responses, they were given an opportunity to elaborate on their response, including their efforts, beliefs, and challenges in providing preparation and/or professional development for cooperating teachers.

The survey consisted of four specific sections. The first section included questions about the characteristics of the teacher preparation program, including the kinds of degrees offered, the licenses/certifications available, and the number graduating from the program each year. Additionally, participants reported the number of faculty in the program, as well as the number of cooperating teachers participating each semester/term.

The second section included questions regarding the current efforts of the program to support and prepare cooperating teachers: descriptions of both formal and informal initiatives (e.g., planned workshops, e-mail conversations), including whether training was delivered face-to-face or electronically and whether efforts were offered at one meeting or were ongoing. Additional information related to whether and when cooperating teachers

were required to participate in training and/or professional development, who was responsible for planning and implementing these efforts, and what forms of incentives cooperating teachers might receive for participation.

The third section addressed items regarding the participants' beliefs related to preparing cooperating teachers to work with preservice teachers. Participants were asked to describe their beliefs concerning the importance of these preparatory activities as well as what they believed to be important qualifications and characteristics of an effective cooperating teacher. Finally, participants were asked to provide suggestions or recommendations regarding the training of cooperating teachers.

The fourth section included items concerning the challenges related to implementing professional development for cooperating teachers. Respondents described factors they perceived as impeding such professional development activities, including the challenges they encountered when implementing them. Additionally, faculty described their efforts to address these challenges.

Analysis of Survey Responses

This exploratory survey included questions with predetermined choices as well as open-ended questions, requiring use of both quantitative and qualitative analysis strategies. For the predetermined response items, the authors conducted a frequency count to identify the percentage of respondents making each specific choice. The numeric results of these items are delineated in Tables 4–7 throughout the Findings section of this report. Respondents were not required to answer every question and, in most cases, they could indicate multiple responses to one question. Because the total number of responses to each question varied, a comparative or correlational analysis could not be done. But as the goal of the study was exploratory and descriptive, responses were tallied and reported accordingly.

Survey items also included open-ended questions as well as opportunities for participants to expound on their responses to questions with predetermined choices. Qualitative processes were used to analyze responses to these items. First, a deductive coding process was utilized to sort or group participants' responses by the 23 survey questions. Next, grouped responses were further sorted by the three guiding questions outlined above. Many of the responses provided information that would inform more than one of the guiding questions. For example, descriptions of the challenges provided insight into faculty beliefs about the importance of supporting cooperating teachers. At this point in the data analysis, open coding was used to identify themes emerging from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), first by each author individually through multiple data readings, noting units of meaning and emerging themes. Next the authors compared their emerging themes, identifying similarities and differences. Results from the qualitative descriptions, included as themes, continued to emerge and develop as they aligned with the guiding questions. The following description of overall themes includes examples of responses that best represent participants' efforts, beliefs, and challenges.

Findings

The purpose of this survey was to explore the efforts of early childhood teacher education faculty regarding their preparation of classroom teachers to function as cooperating teachers and work with preservice teachers. Participant responses regarding program characteristics (see previous descriptions) demonstrated that findings were drawn from a broad range of early childhood preparation programs and that providing professional development

Table 2
Guiding Questions and Associated Themes

Guiding question	Themes
What are early childhood teacher preparation programs doing to prepare classroom teachers to be cooperating teachers?	Purpose of professional development Method of delivery Individuals delivering professional development Participants in professional development
Do faculty in early childhood preparation programs believe that efforts to provide professional development for cooperating teachers are important? Why or why not?	Support of program goals Benefits for cooperating teacher Benefits for preservice teacher
What barriers or challenges do early childhood teacher preparation programs face in delivering professional development experiences for cooperating teachers?	Time Resources/money Logistical issues Lack of control Selection of cooperating teachers

for cooperating teachers is commonly considered regardless of program characteristics. Consequently, findings are presented below using the three previously described guiding questions as an organizing framework to present frequency data and common themes that emerged from this exploratory process (see Table 2).

Guiding Question 1

Responses to items associated with this guiding question revealed the different purposes and goals for providing professional development to cooperating teachers. In addition, responses revealed significant variability in the content of current efforts and could be grouped into three distinct categories or themes: (a) how the professional development was delivered, (b) who delivered it, and (c) who participated.

Purpose of professional development. Through open-ended questions, respondents were asked to address their program's efforts to "provide support, training, and/or professional development" for cooperating teachers. Responses revealed three distinct purposes that influenced professional development content (see Table 3). The most common purpose described by respondents was to communicate *information*—primarily providing information related to the basic requirements of the program. One participant stated that a goal was "to ensure that cooperating teachers are informed of the policies and procedures involved in hosting a teacher candidate." Many programs focused primarily on the logistical issues of being a cooperating teacher: for example, how to complete evaluation forms and which assignments and other tasks candidates must complete. Materials were often distributed, such as handouts, syllabi, textbook information, and other items used in preservice coursework.

Table 3
Purposes and Content of Professional Development for Cooperating Teachers

Main category	Description
Information	Instructions for policies, procedures, logistical issues, and assessments of preservice teachers; overview of program and expectations; distribution of necessary paperwork
Encouragement and support	Guidance and assistance with challenges related to “problem” or “weak” preservice teachers; open communication between program and cooperating teacher; consultation and assistance
Mentoring skills	Assistance for cooperating teachers in developing mentoring skills to interact with and provide feedback for preservice teachers

A second purpose that emerged was to provide *encouragement and support* to cooperating teachers and to help them address “problem” or “weak” preservice teachers. Several respondents were concerned with keeping “lines of communication open,” responding to the needs of cooperating teachers by checking in regularly to “dialogue . . . about challenges in their settings,” share ideas about “how to support the candidates,” and “provide consultation and assistance.”

Respondents described a third purpose of professional development as helping cooperating teachers develop effective *mentoring skills*. Although not nearly as prominent as the others, these experiences were described as helping cooperating teachers “develop mentoring skills so that they learn to . . . interact with the student in ways that are positive and meaningful.” One respondent explained, “I believe there are educational considerations that are separate from training. Cooperating teachers can be ‘trained’ to perform certain functions, but only educative experiences will help them construct their reflective stances with preservice teachers.”

Responses highlighted that some professional development experiences emphasized only one of these three purposes, while others demonstrated intentional efforts to address all three.

Method of delivery. Quantitative data reflected variability in the delivery methods of these experiences to cooperating teachers (see Table 4). Participants’ qualitative responses demonstrated that professional development aimed at orienting cooperating teachers often

Table 4
Method and Frequency of Professional Development for Cooperating Teachers

Method of training	Never	Occasionally	Regularly	Total responses
Face-to-face training	13 (22%)	27 (45%)	20 (33%)	60
Via mail and e-mail	15 (25%)	25 (42%)	20 (34%)	59
Workshops	39 (66%)	16 (27%)	4 (7%)	59

Note. Participants could indicate more than one method. Due to rounding, total percentages may not equal 100%.

begins by disseminating materials via mail, e-mail, or other digital means such as a website or DVD. Many delivered additional explanations of these materials in writing or by posting information on a website.

Some respondents described conducting face-to-face “meetings” with cooperating teachers to review and clarify materials. Other programs held face-to-face orientations once or twice during the term, with all cooperating teachers meeting together. More commonly, however, program faculty relied primarily on the in-person interactions that supervisors and university faculty had with the cooperating teachers when in the classroom to conduct their observations and evaluations of preservice teachers. The least common method of delivery was providing formal workshops or seminars for cooperating teachers. Very few respondents described implementing a workshop, most reporting that they “never” used this method to deliver professional development experiences for cooperating teachers.

Provider of professional development. Regardless of the method of delivery, university supervisors and program faculty most commonly delivered the training or professional development experiences (see Table 5). When asked to explain further, many participants stated that they relied on supervisors to stay informally connected with cooperating teachers during their on-site observations of preservice teachers. During these observations, some respondents indicated that supervisors engaged in “training” cooperating teachers. For example, one program regularly scheduled “readiness conferences” between the preservice teacher, the cooperating teacher, and the university supervisor, in part to “ensure that everyone is ‘on the same page’ with regard to expectations, requirements, etc.” Another respondent described “goal setting” conversations as an important way to “keep the lines of communication” open and “check in” with the cooperating teacher.

University faculty were also occasionally engaged in designing and implementing formal or informal professional development experiences for cooperating teachers. One respondent described intentional pairing between a member of the faculty and a cooperating teacher, in which “each faculty person communicates with their respective cooperating teacher.”

Finally, several respondents referred to “others” as delivering training or professional development, including student teaching coordinators, professional non-tenure track staff, and a variety of other individuals outside of the early childhood program, such as staff

Table 5
Personnel Delivering Professional Development to Cooperating Teachers

Type of training	Program faculty	University supervisor	School administrator	Other	Total responses
Ongoing training	16 (53%)	7 (23%)	3 (10%)	4 (13%)	30
One-time training	12 (41%)	8 (28%)	3 (10%)	6 (21%)	29
Face-to-face training	33 (52%)	23 (37%)	1 (2%)	6 (10%)	63
Mail and e-mail	35 (47%)	30 (40%)	2 (3%)	8 (11%)	75
Workshops	14 (50%)	11 (39%)	1 (4%)	2 (7%)	28

Note. Participants could indicate more than one type of delivery personnel. Due to rounding, total percentages may not equal 100%.

Table 6
Cooperating Teachers That Participated in Professional Development

Cooperating teacher	Never	Occasionally	Regularly	Total responses
New cooperating teacher	15 (25%)	25 (42%)	20 (33%)	60
Experienced	23 (38%)	28 (47%)	9 (15%)	60

of “placement offices.” Such offices were housed in a variety of places at the department, college, or even university level.

Participants in professional development. Only about 28% ($n = 17$) of the respondents indicated that their programs required cooperating teachers to participate in some form of professional development before working with preservice teachers. Years of classroom teaching experience, prior experience as a cooperating teacher, and identification as a high-quality early childhood teacher were important factors in determining whether or not cooperating teachers were required to participate in professional development. New cooperating teachers were more likely to be offered regularly occurring professional development than were experienced cooperating teachers (see Table 6). Qualitative responses included a range of explanations regarding the requirement or availability of professional development. Some programs simply made professional development available for those who chose to participate. One respondent stated, “Teachers who have supervised for many years are encouraged, but not required, to participate in training.” Some programs offered professional development for some but not others, depending on the field experiences in which the preservice teachers were enrolled. For example, professional development was more likely to be provided for cooperating teachers with students enrolled in higher level field experiences, such as student teaching, rather than observational experiences required at earlier stages in the program. Several respondents also stated that cooperating teachers who were graduates of their teacher preparation program did not need to participate in training since they were already aware of the program’s expectations for students.

Guiding Question 2

Responses to questions related to the importance of professional development for cooperating teachers revealed faculty members’ belief that these efforts are important, with 95% ($n = 53$) of the respondents rating these efforts as *extremely important* or *very important*. The remaining 5% ($n = 3$) of respondents marked *neither important nor unimportant*; none considered this professional development *unimportant*. Survey items further ascertained participants’ beliefs regarding the nature of professional development and the capacity of classroom teachers to work with preservice teachers (see Table 7). These responses demonstrated the belief that cooperating teachers need professional development and should meet specific qualifications. Qualitative analysis of narrative responses related to the importance of preparing cooperating teachers revealed three primary themes explaining these beliefs: professional development (a) helps support teacher preparation program goals, (b) is beneficial for cooperating teachers, and (c) is beneficial for preservice teachers.

Support of program goals. Overall, respondents believed that their teacher preparation program should provide preservice teachers with high-quality field experiences—an

Table 7
Beliefs Regarding Cooperating Teachers and Their Preparation

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Even with training, not all classroom teachers are capable of being a cooperating teacher.	25 (44%)	28 (49%)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)
With proper training ALL classroom teachers are capable of being a cooperating teacher.	1 (2%)	3 (5%)	4 (7%)	35 (61%)	14 (25%)
The best preparation for cooperating teachers is to have preservice teachers placed in their classrooms and to learn from experience.	1 (2%)	4 (7%)	19 (33%)	23 (40%)	10 (18%)
Cooperating teachers should meet certain qualifications to work with student teachers.	30 (53%)	24 (42%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
If a person is an excellent teacher of young children, he or she will be an excellent cooperating teacher.	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	13 (23%)	37 (65%)	5 (9%)

Note. $N = 57$. Due to rounding, total percentages may not equal 100%.

“optimum situation for growth.” Preparing cooperating teachers for their work lends critical support for this and other goals of the teacher preparation program. As one participant stated, “There is no doubt that to meet the goals of the student teaching experience, a well informed cooperating teacher is a must.” Several participants specified goals such as providing cooperating teachers with basic information regarding the logistics of program delivery, which include evaluation procedures, assignment details, and practicum expectations (e.g., differing expectations based on place in the program—observational experience of program beginners vs. greater classroom responsibility of more advanced students). One respondent affirmed, “University faculty need to make our expectations and curriculum clear and explicit so that cooperating teachers can have a positive experience and can effectively scaffold our interns’ practicum experience.”

At a deeper level, engaging cooperating teachers in professional development experiences can ensure that both the school- and university-based programs are in sync—providing a consistent experience for preservice teachers. As an example, one respondent expressed that the professional development enabled the program and cooperating teacher to effectively work toward their shared goal of “assisting preservice teachers to be effective

teachers to all children . . . as they become professional[s].” Another participant added that “without the input from the university, our student teachers are at the mercy of whatever situation” happens to exist. Multiple responses echoed this notion that by working together and aligning their efforts, program faculty and cooperating teachers can “develop a shared understanding of philosophies and expectations for [field] experiences.”

Furthermore, responses indicated that providing an opportunity for school- and university-based faculty to understand each other’s program goals and philosophies is an important first step in bridging the perceived disconnect between teacher preparation programs and school-based partners. This message was clear as respondents described the importance of familiarizing cooperating teachers with critical program content, such as developmentally appropriate practice, action research, and NAEYC’s Professional Preparation Standards (NAEYC, 2009).

Benefits for cooperating teachers. Respondents also believed that professional development experiences offer many benefits for cooperating teachers. Responses indicated that these experiences “keep the lines of communication open” between cooperating teachers and program faculty, and enable cooperating teachers to feel connected to program faculty and have their questions answered by those most familiar with program details.

Aligned with this, responses also reflected a belief that professional development helps cooperating teachers to see themselves as mentors and to develop critical mentoring skills. One participant explained that cooperating teachers may need support to recognize the powerful role their mentoring can play in preservice teacher development, as “their teaching methods will be reflected in the methodology preservice teachers will adopt in their own classrooms.”

Further, respondents described the value in helping cooperating teachers develop effective strategies and skills for working with preservice teachers. Respondents recognized that skills required to provide high-quality mentoring to preservice teachers are different than those required to effectively teach young children, and thus proficiency in one does not always translate to effectiveness in the other. As stated by one respondent, “While they may be wonderful classroom teacher[s], they may not have experience or expertise in mentoring preservice teachers.” Responses indicated that cooperating teachers may benefit from support in developing critical mentoring skills such as fostering reflection and providing supportive and critical feedback.

Benefits for preservice teachers. Analysis of responses revealed the belief that because cooperating teachers may powerfully influence preservice teachers’ development, time must be invested into cooperating teachers’ preparation. One participant noted that preservice teachers’ success depends on cooperating teachers “who understand the aims, goals, and philosophical bases of our programs.” Another stated that with an unprepared cooperating teacher, the preservice teacher “will not gain any useful information by being in the classroom.” Taken together, responses reflected the belief that cooperating teachers must feel connected and aligned with teacher preparation programs and must get the information and mentoring support they need so that preservice teachers get the high-quality field experience critical to their development as teachers of young children.

Guiding Question 3

When asked to respond to open-ended questions related to any barriers or challenges encountered in implementing professional development for cooperating teachers, the most commonly emerging themes were a lack of money and/or time. Other barriers included

logistics such as lack of control over program delivery, as well as difficulties finding the right individuals to serve as cooperating teachers.

Time. Many respondents described time as a barrier to their work with cooperating teachers. The following statement specifies the challenge:

The amount of time that cooperating teachers have to attend training; the amount of time required to provide quality professional development; selection of the best day of the week and the best time of the week; ability to align schedules of cooperating teacher, supervisors, faculty and students are but a few of the challenges.

Respondents recognized the full commitment of cooperating teachers' time to their responsibility as a teacher of young children and the lack of time for additional meetings or courses; little or no release time is provided for them. In addition, program faculty had difficulty finding time to develop and deliver experiences of this kind, especially when teacher education programs are new.

Financial resources. Inadequate financial resources constitute another significant barrier, with many respondents stating they had little or no money available to support their efforts in this area. Respondents believed that if cooperating teachers are to be asked to give their time, they should be offered some incentive—preferably a stipend. Finally, respondents noted that there was a lack of financial resources available to support faculty's time to develop and deliver high-quality professional development.

Logistical issues. Respondents also described logistical challenges. For example, programs with field placements spread over a large geographical region had difficulty requiring individuals to travel a long distance, particularly if finances were inadequate to compensate travel expenses. Respondents also described program size as a potential barrier. For example, large programs work with a large number of cooperating teachers and assembling them all for professional development can be difficult.

Lack of control. Several respondents noted the program faculty's lack of control over the content and delivery of professional development as a barrier. One respondent expressed concern that early childhood students "are generally spread throughout the system . . . where most teachers and administrators do not understand early childhood education." Professional development was implemented outside of the program with "little or no input" from the early childhood faculty, who had very little "opportunity to talk to classroom teachers who . . . [work with our] student teachers." These respondents were frustrated by lack of "quality control," with little or no opportunity to influence content or tailor the experience specifically to the needs and expectations of the early childhood program.

Selection of cooperating teachers. Finally, analysis of responses showed that participants struggled with the process of selecting appropriate individuals to serve as cooperating teachers—individuals who "understand early childhood standards and best practices" and are "knowledgeable and skilled at embodying the NAEYC standards." Respondents indicated that cooperating teachers were selected by district or school administration, not program faculty, and that their pedagogical or philosophical beliefs might not align with those of the early childhood teacher preparation program. Others stated that rather than seeing themselves as mentors, some viewed hosting a preservice teacher as much-needed assistance for their classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the qualitative and quantitative findings from this survey, a review of the literature, and reflections of the authors, the following section will describe four recommendations for teacher preparation programs to consider in preparing cooperating teachers for their role as teacher educators.

Recommendation 1: Form True Partnerships

The first recommendation, which will provide the foundation for those that follow, is to envision the relationship of university or college teacher preparation programs with their school-based partners. Although the commitment to university-school partnerships has increased (Bullough, 2005), these two entities must avoid actually viewing themselves as “two largely separate worlds [that] exist side by side” (Beck & Kosnik, 2002, as quoted by Bullough, 2005, p. 144). One respondent expressed the problem as “a ‘who is in charge’ thing.”

The relationship between schools and teacher preparation programs must be viewed as *mutually* beneficial—as a true partnership rather than program faculty as “experts” and cooperating teachers as “learners.” All members of the partnership must feel respected as equals; the input of some should not be valued more than that of others (Baum et al., 2011). While many survey respondents used words such as *partner* and *working together*, an overarching tone to some responses reflected the belief that significant program improvement depended on “training” cooperating teachers. This subtle, but critical characteristic of an unequal partnership was evident in the following participant response:

Until we have cooperating teachers who are on the same page as we are, we will not create change in the system. We will, instead, continue to produce teachers who think we are the “ivory tower” and their field placement provides the “real” experience where they learn everything they need to know about teaching.

This statement reflects an attitude that instead of developing shared understandings, cooperating teachers must set aside their expertise and adopt the understandings of program faculty. Such perceived inequality can lead only to fragmented programs. True partnerships function cooperatively (Furlong et al., 1996), with both the school and the university/college valuing the critical characteristics that each brings to teacher preparation. To effectively merge these characteristics, all participants need to be engaged in establishing shared goals and purposes, common definitions, and consistent expectations and role identification. Sharing input must be done in fact as well as rhetoric, with teacher preparation programs fully open to their partners’ ideas. Policies, practices, and requirements of higher education programs must be the product of input from all partnership members.

Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) demonstrated that efforts to close the “gap” between schools and teacher preparation programs are largely unsuccessful, resulting in continuation of traditional roles: institutions of higher education representing knowledge construction and dissemination with schools providing places for preservice teachers to practice knowledge obtained elsewhere. Gorodetsky and Barak suggest a more successful framework by forming “edge communities”:

The collaborating partners, e.g., the school and the college or university, should establish a new, participative community. This community should be peripheral to both; however, it should maintain permeable borders with the core institutions to enable multi-directional flows of knowledge. This should be a real (concrete) community that will provide conditions encouraging the growth of new, culturally distinguished features. (pp. 1908–1909)

Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) further described this space as a “means for new growth and not a space for enculturation to existing core communities” (p. 1909). This concept of community removes the perception of the preservice program “training” or “teaching” cooperating teachers about the best practices of teacher education, instead situating the groups as mutually benefiting partners who work together to create high-quality experiences for preservice teachers. Such an orientation provides space for collaborative dialogue, leading to meaningful program revision.

Recommendation 2: Develop Shared Goals and Expectations for Professional Development

To ensure that professional development experiences are meaningful and effective, shared goals and expectations should be initially defined (Baum et al., 2011), as they will directly influence the content, mode of delivery, recipients, and frequency. While a small number of participants perceived their work with cooperating teachers as providing support and encouragement or promoting effective mentoring skills, the findings from this exploratory study suggest that the “default” purpose of professional development experiences is limited to information or logistics. Professional development guided by this purpose is confined to policies, procedures, and paperwork.

Additionally, a one-sided default approach considers only functionary needs. Aligned with Recommendation 1, the needs of all partners must be part of the professional development experience. Cooperating teachers must be invited to suggest specific content that will enhance their work with preservice teachers, and teacher preparation faculty may need information about daily classroom function to enhance their university/college work. Failure to first collaboratively delineate goals and expectations can lead to indiscriminate default implementation, preventing field-based experiences from having their intended impact. Engaging in a collaborative and ongoing discussion of the purpose and goals of professional development provides essential direction.

Recommendation 3: Develop Shared Understandings of High Quality Mentorship

As previously mentioned, a few respondents referred to the purpose of enhancing cooperating teachers’ mentoring skills. The importance of high-quality mentoring is supported in the literature, with counsel that preservice teachers must reflect on their practice and learning under the guidance of skilled mentors (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Huling, 1998). Thus, teacher preparation programs are encouraged to envision professional development experiences that will support classroom teachers’ mentoring skills and their identity as *teachers of teachers* as well as teachers of children (Bullough, 2005; Korth et al., 2009).

This recommendation concerns broadening program efforts in working with cooperating teachers to address (a) skills for critical mentoring, (b) the ability to encourage deep

reflection on teaching practices, and (c) the sensitivity to work with prospective teachers with varying levels of skills and dispositions. Simply presenting the logistics involved in hosting a preservice teacher will not adequately prepare the cooperating teacher to be an “agent of change” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1032) who can engage in positive and supportive relationships, provide meaningful feedback, and model continuous and collaborative learning (Korth & Baum, 2011). Mentoring preservice teachers at this level is unlikely unless cooperating teachers’ professional development helps them fully embrace their critical role.

As with the previous recommendations, collaborative work is critical for both the program faculty and cooperating teachers. Programs must recognize classroom teachers’ mentor-like skills such as scaffolding and build on these abilities rather than presuming classroom teachers know nothing about mentoring. With this understanding, program faculty can guide cooperating teachers in applying their skills when working with preservice teachers. One program referred to its cooperating teachers as “*coaching*” teachers, a designation with two important underlying meanings. First, the term embodies the classroom teachers’ expected mentoring role with preservice teachers, and second, it acknowledges them as experts. When this concept of mentoring is shared, professional development can empower both the program and the “coaching” teachers to provide powerful learning opportunities that better prepare the preservice teacher through quality mentoring and reflective feedback.

Recommendation 4: Prioritize Collaboration Efforts

Analysis of survey responses revealed participants’ beliefs that efforts to collaborate with schools and cooperating teachers were not given sufficient priority. These beliefs were particularly evident when considering barriers and challenges including time and financial resources. These problems can only be remedied through collaborative efforts of all those involved in teacher preparation, including colleges of education, institutions of higher education, and state departments of education. Because the current educational culture and organization of universities and schools can “work against effective teacher preparation” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1021), teacher education programs must make it a priority to engage all stakeholders in collaborative efforts to effect changes necessary for more effective preparation experiences.

To begin, all stakeholders need to agree on the importance of meaningful school–university/college partnerships. Significant financial commitments and support for those engaged in these collaborations must be priorities. For example, in many schools and/or districts the mentoring assignments that take classroom teachers “away from their main responsibility [are] considered a problem rather than an opportunity for professional development or professional practice” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1021). On the contrary, either cooperating teachers should be compensated for work done outside of their typical teaching responsibilities, or resources should be dedicated to allow them to engage in this work during a regular school day. In addition, schools and districts can acknowledge the skill enhancement that is necessary to effectively function as cooperating teachers by rewarding these teachers through increases in salary and status.

Currently, the “university culture favors research over teaching and accords low status to clinical work” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1021). Faculty who engage in clinical work such as creating and facilitating professional development for cooperating teachers may be acknowledged for their service to the school and community, but their significant time commitment does not help in issues of tenure and promotion (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

This likely explains the study findings that, although programs acknowledge the importance of working with cooperating teachers, such responsibilities are often relegated to offices/personnel outside of the program itself. This issue can be even more difficult with early childhood programs, which involve fewer faculty and more limited resources but coordinate their own programs in addition to typical university teaching and scholarship loads. Some survey respondents expressed regret that these inadequacies required them to rely on personnel outside their program for professional development in which they wanted to participate. Hence universities and colleges should demonstrate their support of this work by releasing faculty from other teaching responsibilities to engage in and/or facilitate these experiences. In addition, time commitment to clinical activities such as professional development should be considered when making tenure and promotion decisions. As the effectiveness of a teacher education program is likely to be measured by the performance of the students their graduates teach (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Levine, 2006), such changes need to be made to encourage faculty engagement in this work.

In their review of ways to strengthen the early education workforce, Ryan and Whitebook (2012) note that “mentoring should not be sector specific, but should be built into workforce initiatives at the state and federal levels as one aspect of the work environment for new and even seasoned practitioners” (p. 105). Hence, state departments of education must also recognize the value of collaboration between schools and universities/colleges and should become collaborative partners themselves. Their participation might involve engaging in conversations with schools and institutions of higher education about the necessary qualifications of cooperating teachers. Such collaborative conversations could lead to representing these requisite qualifications within the state system of teacher licensure. Thus the collaborations discussed in this article focused on universities/colleges and schools must eventually be broadened to include those responsible for the development and implementation of mandates and policy. Teacher education faculty will likely need to be the ones to initiate and encourage this level of collaboration.

Conclusion

To provide the highest quality field-based experiences for prospective teachers, teacher preparation programs and cooperating teachers must become collaborative partners and identify shared goals and expectations for the roles and responsibilities of all involved. The following comment from an experienced cooperating teacher summarizes the dynamic nature of her role, which further highlights the power that can come from effective partnerships between early childhood teacher education faculty and cooperating teachers:

An effective [cooperating] teacher is a learner who realizes that teaching is about living, theorizing, trying, reflecting, failing, succeeding, conversing, reading, planning, and trying things out all over again as new groups of students and new knowledge in the field challenge her to move to uncharted territory time and time again. There are no perfect cooperating teachers, only perfect conditions that feed the intellect and spirit of teachers willing to accept the challenge of [working with] a student teacher. (as quoted in Korth & Baum, 2011)

As this teacher so eloquently reminds us, cooperating teachers can play a powerful role in the development of future teachers. By nature of the significant influence they have on preservice teachers' development, classroom teachers are making important contributions

not only to future teachers but also to the young children in their classrooms. These contributions are too critical to be left to chance.

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