Supporting Teacher Candidates' Sense-Making of Field Instructors' Feedback Through Co-Constructed Goal Setting

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discern if teacher candidates and their university-based field instructors' engagement in co-constructed goal-setting activities would better support teacher candidates' understanding of feedback delivered during post-lesson observation conferences. Data from preliminary and retrospective surveys were compared within and across treatment and control groups. Findings showed that teacher candidates ($n = 9$) who participated in co-constructed goal-setting activities grew more comfortable discussing their teaching and took on a greater responsibility in guiding the post-observation conferencing discourse and higher rates than control-group participants ($n = 9$). However, the co-constructed goal-setting protocol did not support a greater understanding of feedback.

Introduction

Feedback is useless if it is misunderstood, devalued, or ignored. The worth of the student teaching practicum, a highly regarded experiential learning opportunity that serves as the capstone in a majority of teacher preparation programs across the globe, hinges mainly on preservice teachers' ability to receive, make sense of, and apply feedback from their university-based field instructors (Soslau, 2012, 2015). Feedback is "information communicated to the learner that is intended to

modify his or her thinking or behavior to improve learning” (Shute, 2008, p. 154) and teaching decisions. Shute (2008) further suggests that:

Formative feedback might be likened to a ‘good murder’ in that effective and useful feedback depends on three things: (a) *motive* (the student needs it), (b) *opportunity* (the student receives it in time to use it), and (c) *means* (the student is able and willing to use it). (p. 175)

The field knows very little about the feedback practices of university-based field instructors and even less about what sense teacher candidates make of such feedback (Soslau, 2015a, 2015b)

It has been shown that experiential learning can be improved by guidance provided by a knowledgeable other. In fact, many researchers have posited that university field instructors provide critical guidance, which increases the effectiveness of the student-teaching practicum (Boydell, 1991; Freidus, 2002; Glickman & Bey, 1990; Lyle, 1996; Scheeler, McAfee, Ruhl & Lee, 2006; Shantz, & Ward, 2000; Soslau, 2015a, 2015b; Stones, 1987; Veal & Rikard, 1998; Wubbels, Korthagen, & Brekelmans, 1997). Therefore, this study was aimed at deliberately scaffolding the post-observation debriefing conference to optimize opportunities for learning during the student teaching practicum by working to improve candidates’ understanding of, and receptiveness to, their field instructor’s feedback.

Pilot data for this study indicated that teacher candidates use field instructor’s feedback to track their growth, reflect on their teaching, and to set goals. Teacher candidates also reported that they ignore and devalue formative observation feedback that they predict will be negative or overly critical. Data also show that conference participants interpret discourse differently than their field instructors and that the extent of their mismatched interpretations of discourse was inversely related to field instructor’s observation rating scores indicating that opportunities for improving instruction were lost (Soslau, 2015b). Furthermore, observation-rating scores were higher when teacher candidates interpreted the meaning of discourse in the same way as their university-based field instructor. This finding supports the logical claim that candidates must be able to correctly interpret their field instructor’s feedback and be willing to apply the feedback, if they are to use the feedback to improve their instructional decision-making.

Additional findings from pilot data supported the claim that teacher candidates self-construct goals during the practicum and were willing to work on goals collaboratively with their field instructor. Thus, the researchers hypothesized that structuring the post-observation conference around goal setting would help candidates better understand, and ultimately apply their field instructor’s feedback. The goal setting protocol was designed to help candidates feel more comfortable discussing their teaching with others, encourage active participation in discourse exchanges with their field instructors, and make discourse more explicit. Since developing a shared understanding of discourse with others is problematized by varied levels of intersubjectivity (Matusov, 1998), the researchers were also interested to learn if participants who engaged in the co-construction of goals would have a higher frequency of matched interpretations of the

conference discourse due to their engagement in the goal setting activity, which was designed to encourage active negotiation of meaning.

Self-Determination Theory and Goal Setting

Similar to others (Hagger & Malmberg, 2011; Jank, Nitsche, & Dickhauser, 2015), this study blends learning motivation and goal-setting theories. Brophy's (1998) goal-setting criteria and Ryan and Deci's (1991) self-determination theory (SDT), a motivational theory, support the framework (see Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of the Present Study's Theoretical Framework

Brophy's (1998) Goal-Setting Criteria	Ryan & Deci's (1991) Self-Determination Theory
Goals focused on pupil learning and/or student teacher's development. (<i>appropriateness</i>)	Candidate selects goals that, if successful, will support pupil outcomes. Actions are important to others outside of self. (<i>relatedness</i>)
Goals aligned with indicators on teaching assessment forms. (<i>self-assessment</i>)	Goal is developmentally appropriate for the teacher candidate and the candidate feels comfortable enough to engage in help seeking if needed. (<i>competence</i>)
Teacher candidate initiates construction of the goal and engages in help seeking. (<i>ownership</i>)	Teacher candidate initiates the construction the goal and has control over goal achievement. (<i>autonomy</i>)

According to these theories, ownership and responsibility for creating the goals should be shared between learners and knowledgeable others. Therefore, learners feel autonomous in their learning, competent enough to meet the goal, believe that achieving the goal will help themselves and their students, and safe enough because the learner and knowledgeable other develop a secure learning space (Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004). Researchers have also found that goal setting has a positive relationship with self-efficacy and improved teacher candidates' confidence and strengthened professional identity (Cho & Shim, 2013; Erin & Eskicioglu-Soylemez, 2017; Wang, Ertmer, & Newbym 2014). Explicit feedback, in the form of collaborative goal setting also has positive effects on teacher candidates' improvement of practice and the learning of their pupils (Rakap, 2017). Additionally, others have found that when explicit goals were tied to specific teacher learning outcomes, teacher learning improved (Koellner & Jacobs, 2015). Most importantly, researchers have shown that goal setting can be used as a vehicle for novice teachers' help seeking behaviors (Butler, 2007; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010).

Removing the stigma associated with candidates engaging in help seeking is incredibly important if the feedback sessions between university field instructors and their teacher candidates are to function as educative spaces for novice teachers. Teacher candidates need to feel comfortable to seek advice and clarifications to accurately interpret and utilize their field instructor's feedback.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discern if a co-constructed goal-setting protocol, implemented by university-based field instructors, would provide a more salient opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn from feedback about their teaching. Based on the literature around goal-setting for novice teachers, three indicators of an improved opportunity were selected: (a) an increase in teacher candidates' comfort levels when discussing their teaching, (b) active participation in discourse exchanges, and (c) a closer alignment between teacher candidates' and field instructors' interpretations of discourse exchanged within the post-lesson observation conference. Based on these aims, a theory of action was developed (see Figure 1). This theory of action depicts the conference activity, the necessary conditions, and the intended outcomes.

Figure 1: Theory of action for co-constructed goal setting to support understanding of feedback.

To discern if the theory of action was credible, the following questions were addressed:

- 1.) What changes in comfort level during conferencing do teacher candidates report after engaging in co-constructed goal-setting compared to candidates who do not engage in this activity?
- 2.) What do candidates report about their understanding of field instructor's feedback in co-constructed goal-setting conferences compared to conferences without this activity?
- 3.) What are the differences in the ways that candidates describe their participation in co-constructed goal-setting conferences compared to conferences without this activity?

Context and Participants

All eighteen ($N=18$) teacher candidates participating in this study were enrolled in a four-year undergraduate elementary teacher education program at a large mid-Atlantic university. At the time of the study, students in this program completed two eight-week student teaching placements, one in an elementary school and the second in a special education setting or in a middle school content area setting. Placements were completed in the last semester of their fourth year, before graduation. All candidates were white, middle class, females.

Two university-appointed field instructors (2nd and 3rd authors) volunteered to collaborate on the study. Each field instructor held a masters degree in education and was an elementary teacher in the school district in which they currently make field experience placements. One field instructor had a caseload of 10 teacher candidates while the second field instructor had eight candidates.

Table 2

Matched Pairs Example Responses

Student Teacher ID Code	Comfort Level	Concerns	Gain
4f	5	I am worried about being able to <u>manage the class' behavior</u> and time management.	<u>Experience in front of the classroom</u> , classroom management, a <u>sense of comfort</u> . (matched 15f)
8f	4	Being able to connect with students and <u>maintain control in the classroom</u> .	Better classroom <u>management skills</u> .
15f	3	Staying on top of things and <u>getting everything done</u> while also doing a good job.	I am hoping to learn a lot from my coop and get the <u>in-class experience</u> I need in order to <u>feel ready</u> to be a great teacher.
17f	4	Balancing my time and <u>getting everything done</u> -while not losing my mind.	<u>Experience in front of the classroom</u> , classroom management, a <u>sense of comfort</u> . (matched 15f)

Control and Treatment Group Assignment

A quasi-experimental design was used to discern the impact of a co-constructed goal-setting protocol on teacher candidates' comfort levels, participant roles, and understandings related to the exchange of discourse within the conference. Before the practicum, candidates were surveyed to discern their comfort levels when discussing their teaching performance with others,

concerns about student teaching, and what they hoped to gain from the experience. Teacher candidates were then matched with another candidate that responded similarly on the survey. Each matched-pair was then split and assigned to either the treatment (goal-setting) or control setting. This procedure resulted in an even assignment to the two groups ($n=5$) in each group for one field instructor and ($n=4$) in each group for the other instructor (see Table 2).

The researchers (university-based field instructors) co-developed the goal-setting protocols, which included features such as withholding feedback until the end of the conference, having the teacher candidate initiate the goal, and working together to ensure that goals were developmentally appropriate for the candidate and would likely yield a positive impact on pupil learning and emotional well-being. To conduct fidelity checks of treatment implementation, field instructors' meeting schedules, reflective journal entries, and goal-setting notes were collected throughout the 16-week practicum. Also, treatment participants' self-reports confirmed that key components of the treatment were implemented such as withholding feedback until the end of the conference. The final analysis conducted by the first author was shared with the second and third authors and confirmed for trustworthiness.

Data Sources

Field instructors observed and held conferences with teacher candidates six times throughout the 16-week placement at two-week intervals (see Table 3).

Table 3

Field Instructor Conference Schedule During the Teaching Placement Period

Conference	Placement	Semester	Placement Type	Time of Conference
1	1	Fall	Elementary	Between weeks 4-8
2	1	Fall	Elementary	Between weeks 4-8
3	2	Fall	Middle or Spec. Ed.	Between weeks 1-4
4	2	Fall	Middle or Spec. Ed.	Between weeks 1-4
5	2	Fall	Middle or Spec. Ed.	Between weeks 4-8
6	2	Fall	Middle or Spec. Ed.	Between weeks 4-8

Data collected included pre- and post-surveys of the teacher candidates to discern changes in comfort level. Questionnaires were administered at the conclusion of the practicum to both the teacher candidates and field instructors to collect interpretations of feedback. To discern shared understanding of feedback or matched interpretations of post-lesson observation conference discourse, teacher candidates and field instructors were independently asked to review their conference notes and indicate which teaching domain areas were most frequently discussed (Danielson, 1996). Additionally, all participants were asked to report areas of teaching weaknesses and strengths.

Results

Overall, the use of the structured co-constructed goal setting protocol functioned according to the theory of action. When conditions were satisfied, candidates and their field instructors had higher rates of matched interpretations of feedback, which points to a better understanding of feedback likely resulting in candidates' appropriately applying their field instructors' suggestions. Though it is true that teacher candidates engaged in goal setting reported a greater growth in comfort levels, a greater understanding of feedback, and a greater control of topic selection and discourse flow, there were some conflicting findings. Below we explain each finding related to the conditions and intended outcomes and we problematize the co-constructed goal setting process based on the conflicting findings.

Changes in Comfort Level Discussing Teaching Practices and Improvements

Using pre-and post-surveys, candidates were asked to report their comfort level when discussing their teaching practices and dilemmas with their field instructor. Since Brophy's (1998) goal-setting criteria and Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory both hinge on the candidate initiating the construction of a self-selected goal, comfort levels in discussing their teaching with field instructors is important. We also determined that an increase in comfort would align with candidates being open and receptive to feedback and also support their willingness to engage in help seeking behaviors.

In the control group, five teacher candidates reported an increase in comfort level, three candidates reported the same comfort level, and one teacher candidate reported a decrease in comfort level. In contrast, seven treatment-group participants reported an increase in comfort level, two teacher candidates reported the same comfort level, and none of the candidates that engaged in co-constructed goal setting reported a decrease in comfort when discussing their teaching with their field instructors. Regardless of group assignment, the majority of participants from both the treatment and control groups reported a greater sense of comfort when discussing their teaching with their field instructors. This finding suggests that the field instructor is able to build rapport and trust with their candidates over time regardless of the use of the co-constructed goal-setting protocols. However, when comparing the two groups, more candidates in the treatment group reported becoming more comfortable discussing their teaching with their field instructors and engaged in help seeking behaviors as needed, compared to candidates not part of the co-constructed goal setting sessions (see Table 4 for a summary of findings).

Participation in Conferences

Active participation in conferences was deemed to be another critical condition to satisfy, if candidates were apt to make sense of, and appropriately utilize, their field instructors' feedback to improve their instructional decisions. The candidates initiating their own goal and feelings of autonomy and control over the conference discourse typified active participation. Six of the treatment-group participants who engaged in co-constructed goal setting described their role in conferences as active. The three candidates that did not explicitly describe their role in the

conferences as active were all from the same field instructor. This resulted in only one of the candidates in the treatment-group assigned to this field instructor reporting that they were active participants in the conferences. This within-group comparison is important because it may indicate that candidates assigned to this particular field instructor were less successful at co-constructing goals.

Six candidates who did not engage in the co-constructed process commented that their field instructor controlled the flow of discourse and provided evaluative comments or constructive feedback. Candidates reported that their own questions were aimed at seeking suggestions from their field instructor. This result contrasted with the reports from candidates that engaged in co-constructed goals with their field instructors. Those candidates reported that they were prompted to select topics, ask questions, set goals, and reflect on their instructional decision-making. However, three candidates in the control-group explicitly stated that they had an active role and they defined the conference as a shared conversation. Two out of three of these candidates were assigned to the field instructor who worked with the treatment-group, which reported a higher frequency of active participation. This finding again points to the role of the field instructor as an influential factor. Regardless of participation in the co-construction of goals, candidates from one field instructor reported higher rates of self-directed engagement in post lesson observation conferences compared to all candidates assigned to the second field instructor.

Understanding Feedback

Six non-treatment-group candidates reported understanding their field instructor's comments and feedback "extremely well" while the treatment-group had eight participants who reported understanding the content of their conferences "extremely well." Though this first finding supported the initial hypothesis, more students in the non-treatment-group (eight out of nine) had exact matches in interpretations of discourse compared to only six of nine students in the treatment-group. This finding is interesting since although the self-report data suggest that co-constructed goal setting supported better understandings of supervisory feedback, the data that were independently collected suggest that treatment participants less frequently had similar interpretations of field instructors' feedback compared to candidates in the control group. This finding indicates the importance of checking self-report data by collecting additional data that can be independently collected by the researchers to confirm or disconfirm the self-reports. In this instance, candidates were sure that they understood their field instructor's feedback, but when their interpretations of the feedback were compared to the field instructors' original intent of the feedback, mismatched interpretations were noted, pointing towards limited intersubjectivity. This finding is critical, because candidates cannot use and appropriately apply feedback if they do not understand the feedback. Additionally, candidates may believe that they are taking up their field instructor's suggestions, but in fact are not. This misapplication of feedback can result in several less than optimum outcomes. First, the candidate fails to improve a particular aspect of their practice, second, the field instructor assumes that their feedback is being ignored and devalued, and third, rapport breaks down between the candidate and their field instructor.

Table 4

Summary of Teacher Candidates' Growth After Co-Constructed Goal Setting

Group	n	Comfort Level			Active Participation		Understanding of Feedback	
		Increase	No Change	Decrease	Active	Non-active	"Extremely well"	Matched interpretations
Treatment	9	7	2	0	6	3	8	6
Control	9	5	3	1	3	6	6	8

Co-Constructed Goal-Setting Protocol: Failures and New Directions

Overall, the co-constructed goal setting protocol did not serve as a panacea to supporting the aforementioned theory of action (see Figure 1). That is, while there were instances where the treatment group reported a greater level of comfort, more active participation, and better understanding of feedback compared to the control group, the actual instances of matched interpretations of feedback were greater for the control group. While we do argue that it is critical that the field instructor create contexts for learning within the conferencing sessions that support candidate's comfort and sense of autonomy, we do not believe that a structured co-constructed goal-setting protocol will ensure shared understanding of feedback.

Elsewhere, we have described a study that measured the strength of intersubjectivity and the dangers of field instructors and teacher candidates making different meanings and conclusions based on shared conference discourse (Soslau, 2015b). This is incredibly important. If teacher candidates and field instructors are not on the same page during conferences, it is very difficult for the teacher candidate to learn something from their field instructor. We are particularly hopeful about the use of meta-conferencing to support intersubjectivity. That is, at the conclusion of the conference, the field instructor uses prompts to discuss what was learned during the actual conference. The candidate would then state what they learned, take away messages that they will think about, and plan for how to improve their instructional decision making in future lessons.

Significance

Borko and Mayfield (1995) insisted that significant evidence for the importance of student teaching is somewhat elusive. They called for research on "guided teaching relationships and their influence on prospective teachers" (Borko & Mayfield, 1995, p. 503). Teacher educators are apt to find these data useful when attempting to reform, improve, or substantiate the practicum experience. Important questions were raised via this investigation. For example, what is the purpose of co-constructed discourse within the conference, and how are teacher educators addressing needs such as: social participation in community (Matusov, 1998, 2001), negotiated meaning (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1993), negotiating discourse (Smith, 2005), developing disciplinary discourse (Greeno, Collins & Resnick, 1996), and understanding goals and principles

of community through experience and participation (Rogoff, 2003). While others have studied the use of goal setting with teacher candidates, we were unable to unearth any studies that used a comparison group to discern the impact of goal setting (e.g. Capizzi, Wheby, & Sandmel, 2010). We also think it is important to not only inform the field when interventions are successful, but also when they are problematic. While co-constructed goal setting shows promise particularly as it relates to building strong rapport and support candidates' efficacy and active engagement in conferences (Cho & Shim, 2013; Erin & Eskicioglu-Soylemez, 2017; Wang et al., 2014), field instructors must also engage in conferencing approaches that ensure their candidates are making sense of feedback in educative and useful ways. If candidates continue to attempt to reform their practice based on misunderstandings or partial understandings of their field instructor's feedback, the ability to improve one's teaching will be hampered, and the educational benefits of the student teaching practicum will go unrealized.

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