Student Teaching Reform

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Abstract: *The author explores problems inherent in popular models of student teaching along with potential solutions that better address the needs of candidates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors.*

Keywords: *Student Teaching, Teacher Education, Teacher Preparation*

1 Introduction

Student teaching is a practical experience intended to successfully prepare candidates for life as a full-time teacher. Student teaching has changed little since its beginnings in the early 1900s (Schneider, 2019). Candidates typically have a support team that includes a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor who work together over one or two semesters in the candidate's senior year. Unfortunately, this model often fails to prepare candidates for the challenges of today's classrooms. In the following op-ed, I discuss problems with and remedies for current student teaching programs, and explore new models that address the needs of all candidates.

2 Problems with Student Teaching

History provides us with opportunities to learn from our mistakes. The same holds true for the student teaching experience. Too often, insufficient support is given to supervisors, cooperating teachers, and student teachers (Clarke, 2002). These roles make up the framework for most student teaching programs.

Supervisors are often temporary workers paid at or below the level of adjunct faculty. Training and support programs for supervisors are typically limited, with "the roles of cooperating teachers and university supervisors . . . not always clearly defined" (Richardson-Koehler, 1988, as cited in Kauffman, 1992). Too often, this leads to unmotivated and confused supervisors who may not be able to effectively do their job with the resources provided. Beyond that, supervisors are often assigned a caseload that prevents adequate time to establish meaningful relations with and fully support student teachers. The main responsibilities of a supervisor are too often watered down to a limited number of observations of the student teacher, followed by short discussions. This gives student teachers limited input from what should be a valued resource.

In addition, cooperating teachers are often given no incentive to take student teachers, despite the complex and demanding nature of the mentoring process. For instance, the state of Ohio "prohibits a college or university from providing directly to any school district employee, and prohibits a school district employee from accepting from a college or university, compensation for mentoring student teachers, hosting students engaged in field experiences, or administering the district's student teacher program" (Ohio Ethics Commission, 2011). This discourages volunteers from taking on student teachers, as many do not want to add to the already intense work of being a teacher.

Moreover, being an effective cooperating teacher is not synonymous with being a good teacher, and those who volunteer to mentor are not typically provided with resources to foster student teacher growth (Zeichner, 2002). This makes mentoring a "learn as you go" process, often taking many years to master (if the teacher decides to continue mentoring).

Student teachers are typically thrown into a new, demanding environment—with the same expectations as veteran instructors. The initial stress and pressure of full-time teaching too often leads to disappointment and burnout, as many find classroom teaching less fulfilling than expected. Disillusioned candidates, often alone in this process with no connection to peers, would benefit from a cooperative learning approach (Hamman, Fives, & Olivarez, 2007). For instance, a number of successful programs organize groups of student teachers who meet in weekly support sessions, leading to higher rates of student teacher success (Clarke, 2002).

3 How to Improve Student Teaching

Why is this lack of support so prominent in many student teaching programs? For some, there is a perception of student teaching as "domestic labor." Universities undervalue teacher preparation programs as they funnel resources into faculty research projects or the teaching of doctoral students— work that is deemed "more important" (Zeichner, 2002). Beyond that, insufficient resources are dedicated to the development of new curricula to prepare teacher candidates in practical matters such as lesson planning, classroom management, and strategies for interacting in more positive ways with communities and families of students (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

With more funding and resources, teacher preparation programs could be improved. Departments could dedicate more personnel to developing relevant courses, better preparing candidates for student teaching while providing a more realistic view of the profession. Full-time supervisors could be hired to support student teachers and collaborate with faculty. Cooperating teachers could be given a financial incentive—one that better reflects the important contributions they make. Lastly, funding can play an important role in the preparation of cooperating teachers as mentors by providing additional support and training.

4 Ideas for a New Model

In addition to improvements that could be made with increased funding, I propose several new ideas which would allow student teachers more opportunities to collaborate with their peers and gain a wider variety of experiences from their preparation programs.

- **Student placement in pairs.** This would provide candidates with additional support, opportunities for co-teaching, and would provide the cooperating teacher with an extra set of hands in the classroom.

- **Lesson planning day.** Once a week during the beginning of the student teaching experience, candidates are relieved of classroom teaching responsibilities and dedicate this time to lesson planning. The planning day could be phased out as the student teacher becomes accustomed to the workload associated with full-time teaching.

- **Collaborative lesson studies.** Candidates, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors meet to create, evaluate, and revise lessons. Though potentially difficult to coordinate, lesson studies have been shown to be a positive experiences for all parties involved (McMahon and Hines, 2008).

5 Conclusion

Too often, student teaching is a grueling experience—but it doesn't have to be that way. With additional attention and funding, teacher preparation programs can be designed to better support teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and school-aged students. Rethinking established systems and considering alternative ideas is a necessary process which will contribute to the success of future teachers.

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