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SUPPORTING STRUGGLING PRESERVICE TEACHERS

A GUIDE FOR
MENTOR TEACHERS

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CHALLENGES IN FIELD EXPERIENCES

It is common practice in Canada and many other countries for preservice teachers—students completing a teacher preparation program—to participate in practicum experiences as part of their education. Practicums, also known as field experiences, provide opportunities for preservice teachers to integrate theory and practice in real classrooms with real students. In field experiences, preservice teachers are paired with at least one mentor teacher, who is a certified teacher. A mentor teacher's role is to share knowledge, provide guidance, and evaluate the preservice teacher during the field experience.

During field experiences, preservice teachers may experience challenges. These challenges may be the result of additional demands from the field placement itself, or the field experience could amplify preexisting challenges. Even when postsecondary institutions are aware of preexisting challenges, they are often unable to divulge this information due to privacy legislation.

When preservice teachers encounter challenges or struggle in their field experience, their mentor teachers often face the dilemma of how to proceed. While research has been conducted on concerns in field experiences, there tends to be little practical advice with respect to how mentor teachers can support preservice teachers who are struggling.

THEMES

This document summarizes the major themes identified in a study of how Alberta mentor teachers support preservice teachers who are struggling in their field experience.

Each theme is presented with a quote from a mentor teacher describing a challenge, tips for handling a similar situation, information from additional research, and resources for you to access. The following themes were identified by the mentor teachers interviewed for this project:

1. Don't Do This Job in Isolation: Seek Support
2. Guide and Model What You Want to See
3. Provide Immediate and Frequent Feedback
4. Communicate: Early, Often, Directly, Honestly, and Clearly
5. Remember the Big Picture
6. Set Clear and High Expectations
7. Support Engagement in Self-Reflection
8. Reflect on the Preservice Teacher's Difficulties
9. Recognize Early Warning Signs and Don't Ignore Them
10. Identify the Preservice Teacher's Current Skill Level
11. Create Goals

THEME

01

DON'T DO THIS JOB IN ISOLATION: SEEK SUPPORT

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I had a feeling about this student within the first week. She was very pleasant and seemed eager to please, but this did not translate into action. In my first meeting with the field advisor, I casually mentioned this, expecting to be brushed off, but the field advisor worked with me to develop a plan to address this immediately. The field advisor thanked me for bringing up these concerns and continued to check in about the student's progress. I felt extremely supported and much more confident in addressing my concerns with the student. When the concerns escalated, the field advisor already knew what was going on, and it made the process much smoother.

”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

In your role as a mentor teacher, it is important to remember that you are not alone in this process. When problems arise, it can be helpful to obtain an outside perspective. There are many individuals you can rely on:

- field advisors
- your school's administration
- other teachers

Keeping in contact with field advisors was a source of support frequently mentioned by mentor teachers. Remember the importance of networking and connecting with others.

THEME

01

DON'T DO THIS JOB IN ISOLATION: SEEK SUPPORT

RESEARCH SAYS

When a preservice teacher has difficulties in their field experience, it is not uncommon for mentor teachers to blame themselves or feel guilty. At times, you may feel like pushing away other people, but it can help to lean on others (Hastings, 2009).

Many mentor teachers agree that one of the best ways to get support when a preservice teacher is having difficulties is to approach program staff (Glisic Petaroudas, 2014). Within the program, mentor teachers often have access to a field or university supervisor, practicum coordinators, or even program directors (Broad & Tessaro, 2010; Chudleigh & Gibson-Gates, 2010). Often programs will have a system in place to direct you to the best person to contact when you need support. If not, it might be helpful to ask program staff directly about who to contact. Beyond formal supports, it can also be helpful to lean on other mentor teachers. Creating a professional learning group with other mentor teachers can be a great way to create connections while mentoring (Carroll, 2005).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Broad, K., & Tessaro, M. L. (2010). Voices from the field: Associate teachers and teacher candidates in learning conversations. In T. Falkenberg & H. Smits (Eds.), *Field experiences in the context of reform of Canadian teacher education programs* (Vol. 1, pp. 79–90). Winnipeg, MB: Faculty of Education of the University of Manitoba.

Carroll, D. (2005). Learning through interactive talk: A school-based mentor teacher study group as a context for professional learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(5), 457–473. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.03.005>

Chudleigh, A. M., & Gibson-Gates, C. (2010). Supporting teacher candidates at-risk in field experiences: Organizational and program responsiveness. In T. Falkenberg & H. Smits (Eds.), *Field experiences in the context of reform of Canadian teacher education programs* (Vol. 1, pp. 101–116). Winnipeg, MB: Faculty of Education of the University of Manitoba.

Glisic Petaroudas, M. (2014). *How and why do teacher candidates struggle?* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (Accession No. 10158270)

Hastings, W. J. (2009). *A construction of site-based teacher educators' subjectivities in difficult practicum relationships: Conduct un-becoming* (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from <https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/a-construction-of-site-based-teacher-educators-subjectivities-in--3>

THEME

02

GUIDE AND MODEL WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE

“When I first started my field placement, I wasn’t really sure what my mentor teacher was expecting. I tried things out on my own, but it didn’t seem to meet the expectations. Everything started clicking when my mentor teacher started to show me examples of what she wanted to see. I have always been really reserved and unsure of how to approach students. My mentor teacher picked up on this and told me to watch how she interacted. I put my own spin on it, but that really helped me see what to do.”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Just like you do for your students, it is important to model for preservice teachers what you want them to do. This might include the following:

- providing templates of lesson plans
- modelling a lesson before having your preservice teacher jump in
- asking questions about why the preservice teacher chose to teach a certain way
- talking aloud when lesson planning to show the process
- providing examples from your experience teaching

Emphasize to your preservice teachers that they need to find their own style, but provide them a few examples to pull from.

THEME

02

GUIDE AND MODEL WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE

RESEARCH SAYS

Modelling is one of the key techniques that mentor teachers use in teaching preservice teachers (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Goodwin, Roegman, & Reagan, 2016) . While it is important to guide and model your teacher style, it is also important to remember that the expectation is not for preservice teachers to duplicate your style but to integrate many different styles and create their own. When preservice teachers feel as though the expectation is to duplicate a certain style, they may show resistance, which could impact their progress (Bronkhorst, Koster, Meijer, Woldman, & Vermunt, 2014) . Researchers have found that having multiple models from which preservice teachers can draw is useful, as is giving preservice teachers the liberty to experiment with their own teaching (Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009). The goal in modelling is to model for “guided rather than mimicked practice” (Graham, 2006, p. 1128) .

Mentor teachers often feel the pressure to be “exemplary” as they model for their preservice teachers (Lewis, 2017) . Rather than striving for perfection, it can be beneficial to model introspection when things go right, as well as when things do not go as planned (Lewis, 2017) .

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Bronkhorst, L. H., Koster, B., Meijer, P. C., Woldman, N., & Vermunt, J. D. (2014) . Exploring student teachers' resistance to teacher education pedagogies. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 40*, 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.02.001>

Calderhead, J., & Robson, M. (1991) . Images of teaching: Student teachers' early conceptions of classroom practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 7*(1), 1–8 .[https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(91\)90053-R](https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(91)90053-R)

Goodfellow, J. (2000) . Knowing from the inside: Reflective conversations with and through the narratives of one cooperating teacher. *Reflective Practice, 1*(1), 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713693136>

Graham, B. (2006). Conditions for successful field experiences: Perceptions of cooperating teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 22*(8), 1118–1129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.07.007>

Lewis, D. H. (2017). *Cooperating teachers' experiences mentoring preservice teachers* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/educ_spcd_etds/26

Sobel, D., & Gutierrez, C. (2009). Scaffolded support systems: Examining a multi-tiered support plan protocol for struggling teacher candidates. *Teaching Education, 20*(4), 409–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210902902930>

THEME
03

PROVIDE IMMEDIATE AND FREQUENT FEEDBACK

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Coulter, G. A., & Grossen, B. (1997). The effectiveness of in-class instructive feedback versus after-class instructive feedback for teachers earning direct instruction teaching behaviors. *Effective School Practices*, 16, 21–35.

Giebelhaus, C. R. (1994). The mechanical third ear device: A student teaching supervision alternative. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(5), 365–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487194045005009>

Greenwood, C. R., & Maheady, L. (1997). Measurable change in student performance: Forgotten standard in teacher preparation? *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 20(3), 265–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088840649702000307>

Hamel, F. L., & Jaasko-Fisher, H. A. (2011). Hidden labor in the mentoring of pre-service teachers: Notes from a mentor teacher advisory council. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 434–442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.09.013>

McNally, J., Cope, P., Inglis, B., & Stronach, I. (1997). The student teacher in school: Conditions for development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13(5), 485–498. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(96\)00057-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(96)00057-1)

“As a former preservice teacher myself, I remember hating that I would go all day thinking I was rocking it, only to be told about all of the things I could have done better after the day was over. So what I find useful with my preservice teachers is to provide feedback to them throughout the day. As much as possible I try to give them feedback that is useful and immediate. Obviously I do so discreetly, but I find this corrects any concerns right away. As hard as it is, we’re not doing these preservice teachers any favours by holding back.”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Similar to communicating, it is also important to provide ongoing feedback to preservice teachers.

Immediate feedback. We know from teaching students that immediate feedback is usually the most beneficial; applying the same strategy with preservice teachers will support them to grow. It may be helpful to ask preservice teachers questions regarding how to improve.

Frequent feedback. Just like communicating, it is important to provide feedback often. This includes feedback about what is going well and feedback about what can be improved.

THEME
03

PROVIDE IMMEDIATE AND FREQUENT FEEDBACK

RESEARCH SAYS

Some mentor teachers experience hesitation, as they are unsure of their role in providing feedback (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). Working with your preservice teacher and creating guidelines about when, how frequently, and how much detail will be provided in terms of feedback can be beneficial for both parties (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011).

While there may be challenges to providing feedback, research has demonstrated that it is very effective in adjusting teaching practice (Greenwood & Maheady, 1997). Immediate feedback results in faster acquisition of targeted skills and behaviours, increases the accurate use of these skills and behaviours, and maintains the change over time (Coulter & Grossen, 1997; O'Reilly et al., 1992; O'Reilly, Renzaglia, & Lee, 1994).

Delivering feedback immediately can be challenging due to time constraints and the multiple roles of the mentor teacher in the moment (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011), as well as fears of being disruptive to the learning process (O'Reilly et al., 1994). Often mentor teachers want to provide feedback to preservice teachers immediately but are restricted by their simultaneous role in teaching a class of students (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). To mitigate the need to find time later, it can be helpful to set aside dedicated time immediately after a preservice teacher conducts a lesson. Providing immediate and live feedback through the use of technology is another way to overcome this barrier. Use of a wireless FM listening system or "bug in the ear" has been found to be effective in a variety of career paths, including teaching (Giebelhaus, 1994; Scheeler & Lee, 2002). Preservice teachers also find discreet and subtle approaches preferable to receiving overt feedback in front of students (McNally, Cope, Inglis, & Stronach, 1997).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

O'Reilly, M. F., Renzaglia, A., Hutchins, M., Koterba-Bass, L., Clayton, M., Halle, J. W., & Izen, C. (1992). Teaching systematic instruction competencies to special education student teachers: An applied behavioral supervision model. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 17, 104–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/154079699201700205>

O'Reilly, M. F., Renzaglia, A., & Lee, S. (1994). An analysis of acquisition, generalization and maintenance of systematic instruction competencies by preservice teachers using behavioral supervision techniques. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 29, 22–33.

Scheerler, M. C. & Lee, D. L. (2002). Using technology to deliver immediate corrective feedback to preservice teachers. *Journal of Behavioural Education*, 11(4), 231–241. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021158805714>

THEME

04

COMMUNICATE: EARLY, OFTEN, DIRECTLY, HONESTLY, AND CLEARLY

As much as possible I try to keep an open dialogue with my preservice teachers. I let them know right away that I expect them to be as honest with me as I am with them. I also expect them to be actively involved in every task. Even if they're not teaching, I'm asking them questions: "What did you notice about the students when I did X?" "Do you understand why I did Y?" I also encourage the preservice teachers to ask questions and we set aside time to talk about everything. That way, when problems arise, the student knows I'm not going to dance around the issue. I'm going to be direct and we're going to figure out a solution. Sure, it can be uncomfortable to talk about mistakes, but by that point the preservice teacher knows that I'm only mentioning it to support them.

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Communication is key to preservice teacher success. It may be the case that a preservice teacher is unaware of difficulties you have observed or how to improve. The following are some tips to keep in mind when communicating with preservice teachers.

Communicate early. The best way to ensure open communication is to set a precedent. Let your preservice teacher know early about your expectations for communicating and your style of communication.

Communicate often. Taking time talk with your preservice teacher is supportive to their growth. It can be beneficial to schedule in dedicated regular time to touch base and answer questions.

Have the tough conversations. It can be difficult to have frank conversations with preservice teachers, but it is important to keep in mind that some preservice teachers will not on their own know how to improve or even if they need to improve. It is important to be clear, direct, and honest to ensure there are no misunderstandings.

THEME

04

COMMUNICATE: EARLY, OFTEN, DIRECTLY, HONESTLY, AND CLEARLY

RESEARCH SAYS

Open communication has been noted by preservice teachers as a key characteristic of a good mentor teacher (Hudson, 2013). In fact, many preservice teachers want more communication and feedback about their progress (Izadinia, 2016).

While communication is important, the delivery of information is even more so. Consider how the preservice teacher is to use the information you provide (Hobson, 2002; Maynard, 2000). Many tough conversations can be buffered through discussion of how the preservice teacher can improve in the future (Izadinia, 2016).

Open communication is not a one-sided process. Preservice teachers indicate a key component of open communication is feeling like they can not only discuss their concerns but also be listened to. Although the mentor teacher often takes the lead in conversations, it is important to ensure an adequate level of reciprocity in these conversations (Portelance & Gervais, 2009). This may mean stepping back from the conversation to facilitate the preservice teachers' thoughts around the "why" of practice (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; John, 2001).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Clarke, A., Triggs, V., & Nielsen, W. (2014). Cooperating teacher participation in teacher education: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 84*(2), 163–202. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654313499618>

Hobson, A. J. (2002). Student teachers' perceptions of school-based mentoring in initial teacher training (ITT). *Mentoring and Tutoring, 10*(1), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260220133117>

Hudson, P. (2013). Developing and sustaining successful mentoring relationships. *Journal of Relationships Research, 4*(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2013.1>

Izadinia, M. (2016). Student teachers' and mentor teachers' perceptions and expectations of a mentoring relationship: Do they match or clash? *Professional Development in Education, 42*(3), 387–402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.994136>

John, P. D. (2001). Winning and losing: A case study of university tutor-student teacher interaction during a school-based practicum. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 9*(2), 153–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260120069372>

Maynard, T. (2000). Learning to teach or learning to manage mentors? Experiences of school-based teacher training. *Mentoring and Tutoring, 8*(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713685510>

Portelance, L., & Gervais, C. (2009). Analysis of the dynamics of the sharing knowledge between cooperating teacher and teacher-in-training: The partners' respective roles. *US-China Education Review, 6*(6), 71–80. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46923377.pdf>

THEME

05

REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE

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When my preservice teacher struggled or had difficulties, I always thought back to what the purpose of their training was. I constantly reminded myself that this person wanted to become a teacher and would potentially be my colleague or teach my kids. This made it easier when it came to the preservice teacher not passing their practicum. I knew that I needed to give the tough love now so that others wouldn't suffer in the future.

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TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Many of the preservice teachers you work with will go on to be practicing teachers in your community. When their skills are not where they should be, everyone suffers, including students. Many teachers who have worked with struggling preservice teachers go back to two questions:

- Do I want this person as a colleague?
- Do I want this person teaching my kids?

If there is hesitation in answering these questions, likely there are significant enough concerns to discuss a support plan with the preservice teacher or their field supervisor. With support, struggling preservice teachers can go on to be very successful teachers.

RESEARCH SAYS

Mentor teachers have the added complexity of being a mentor and a teacher, two roles that coincide but have fundamental differences. As a teacher, your primary role is to support the learning of your students, which means your preservice teacher becomes a secondary responsibility (Jaspers, Meijer, Prins, & Wubbels, 2014; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). Some researchers have referred to this as a “conflict of dual loyalties” and a potential source of tension, especially when preservice teachers have difficulties (Edwards & Protheroe, 2004; Goodfellow, 2000; Rajuan, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2007). This is an important, albeit sometimes difficult, concept to acknowledge.

It is not uncommon for mentor teachers, like the ones in the current study, to examine challenges in relation to how these challenges may impact future students (Glisic Petaroudas, 2014). When challenges arise, remembering the confines of your role as a mentor teacher is beneficial (Jaspers et al., 2014). Ensuring your students, both current and future, are supported often supersedes your role as a mentor and has implications for a preservice teacher’s success in the practicum (Cross, 1999).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Cross, R. (1999). What time constraints face the junior school teacher taking on the role of student mentor? *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 7(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0968465990070101>

Edwards, A., & Protheroe, L. (2004). Teaching by proxy: Understanding how mentors are positioned in partnerships. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(2), 183–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000215511>

Glisic Petaroudas, M. (2014). *How and why do teacher candidates struggle?* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (Accession No. 10158270)

Goodfellow, J. (2000). Knowing from the inside: Reflective conversations with and through the narratives of one cooperating teacher. *Reflective Practice*, 1(1), 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713693136>

Jaspers, W. M., Meijer, P. C., Prins, F., & Wubbels, T. (2014). Mentor teachers: Their perceived possibilities and challenges as mentor and teacher. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 44, 106–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.08.005>

McIntyre, D., Byrd, D., & Foxx, S. (1996). Field and laboratory experiences. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (2nd ed., pp. 171–193). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Rajuan, M., Beijaard, D., & Verloop, N. (2007). The role of the cooperating teacher: Bridging the gap between the expectations of cooperating teachers and student teachers. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 15, 223–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260701201703>

THEME

06

SET CLEAR AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

“One preservice teacher I worked with didn’t grasp simple expectations. Things as simple as due dates and showing up before the students seemed to go over his head. I found sitting him down and explicitly outlining my expectations really helped and it was something I could easily refer back to if something went wrong. Further to that, I kept my expectations of him high. I can’t bend the rules to make it work for him. If he wasn’t ready, I made it clear that he would need to proceed anyways, just like any other teacher. Of course I provide support, but I keep my expectations firm and high.”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Instead of assuming a preservice teacher knows the general expectations in the classroom, try outlining these expectations explicitly. Here are some expectations to discuss:

- **Due dates.** Do you want your preservice teacher to have their lesson plans ready the day of the lesson or the week before? Be transparent about your expectations about due dates.
- **Level of preparedness.** It might be helpful to discuss your expectations regarding how prepared a preservice teacher should be. This may include preparedness with materials such as pencils, paper, photocopies, and so on; what time to be at the school in the morning; or what to do when something goes awry in a lesson.
- **Behaviour in the school.** Some preservice teachers may naturally pick up on appropriate behaviours in your school, but many may not. It’s helpful to give preservice teachers an overview about the school culture.

When a preservice teacher has difficulty, you may want to decrease their workload or loosen expectations to support them. However, many teachers in this study warned against such a strategy, noting it doesn’t help a preservice teacher in the long run. Teachers have emphasized having high expectations not only for the preservice teacher but also the profession.

THEME
06

SET CLEAR AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

RESEARCH SAYS

In field experiences, expectations are seldom formally articulated but rather discussed “on the fly” through talk about teaching philosophy and how to structure a classroom (Hudson, 2013). This can create ambiguities for the preservice teacher, or the preservice teacher may feel that expectations have been unexpectedly changed if they are put in place later in the field experience (Lasley & Applegate, 1985). Some studies have suggested that fundamental differences between mentor and preservice teacher expectations of one another result in strain in these relationships (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008).

Maintaining high expectations is crucial not only for the success of the preservice teacher but also for the profession. In fact, preservice teachers expect their mentor teachers to have high expectations (Jaspers et al., 2014). Often mentor teachers will use the expectations of the university; however, they may also use their governing body’s expectations to guide their own (Hudson, 2013). Mentor teachers may contextualize their expectations based on the skill level of the preservice teacher, which may lead the preservice teacher to feel the expectations are too demanding (Hastings, 2010). If this happens, it can be beneficial to consider whether your expectations are similar to what you would expect of any other preservice teacher and are aligned with program expectations (Hastings, 2010).

Overall, having direct, explicit, and clear conversations about expectations can not only prevent concerns but also rectify performance issues (Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Bradbury, L. U., & Koballa, T. R. (2008). Borders to cross: Identifying sources of tension in mentor–intern relationships. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(8), 2132–2145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.03.002>

Hastings, W. J. (2010). Expectations of a pre-service teacher: Implications of encountering the unexpected. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(3), 207–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2010.493299>

Hudson, P. (2013). Developing and sustaining successful mentoring relationships. *Journal of Relationships Research*, 4(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2013.1>

Jaspers, W. M., Meijer, P. C., Prins, F., & Wubbels, T. (2014). Mentor teachers: Their perceived possibilities and challenges as mentor and teacher. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 44, 106–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.08.005>

Lasley, T. J., & Applegate, J. H. (1985). Problems of early field experience students of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 1(3), 221–227. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(85\)90005-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(85)90005-8)

Sobel, D., & Gutierrez, C. (2009). Scaffolded support systems: Examining a multi-tiered support plan protocol for struggling teacher candidates. *Teaching Education*, 20(4), 409–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210902902930>

THEME
07

SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT IN SELF-REFLECTION

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Broad, K., & Tessaro, M. L. (2010). Voices from the field: Associate teachers and teacher candidates in earning conversations. In T. Falkenberg & H. Smits (Eds.), *Field experiences in the context of reform of Canadian teacher education programs* (Vol. 1, pp. 79–90). Winnipeg, MB: Faculty of Education of the University of Manitoba.

Clarke, A. (1995). Professional development in practicum settings: Reflective practice under scrutiny. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(3), 243–262. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(94\)00028-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(94)00028-5)

Crasborn, F., Hennissen, P., Brouwer, N., Korthagen, F., & Bergen, T. (2008). Promoting versatility in mentor teachers' use of supervisory skills. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(3), 499–514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.05.001>

Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). Helping novices learn to teach: Lessons from an exemplary support teacher. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487101052001003>

Gunn, C. L. (2010). Exploring MATESOL student 'resistance' to reflection. *Language Teaching Research*, 14(2), 208–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168810363940>

“When this preservice teacher started having consistent difficulties, I changed the way I approached the situation. Initially I would tell them what I wanted to see improved but didn’t see any difference in their behaviour, and it started to impact our relationship. So I began to ask the preservice teacher what they thought rather than tell them. I would ask what worked well, what could be improved, and what did they take away from the experience. The preservice teacher began to actually take these discussions seriously and we noticed growth.”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Self-reflection has a lot of utility in education. It is a process we often have to consciously engage in. To help facilitate this, you can ask preservice students questions about why they chose to do something the way they did. Some general questions may include the following:

- What do you feel is your greatest strength?
- What are three areas you want to work on during this placement?
- Why do you want to become a teacher?

Similarly, when a preservice teacher has difficulty in their placement, it can be helpful to support them in reflecting on their challenges. Some questions may include the following:

- What worked well?
- What could you have done differently?
- What will you do differently next time?
- What are you going to take from this experience?

THEME
07

SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT IN SELF-REFLECTION

RESEARCH SAYS

Reflection for preservice teachers has been emphasized in teacher education since the 1980s (Schön, 1983, 1987). Self-reflection has been found to facilitate higher-level thinking and aids in setting and achieving goals for preservice teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Tang & Chow, 2007).

While self-reflection is an important skill, it may require development. Self-reflection does not come naturally to everyone, and some preservice teachers may be resistant to reflective-based mentoring pedagogies (Gunn, 2010; Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001; Middleton, Abrams, & Seaman, 2011). Guiding and mentoring preservice teachers about the utility and method of self-reflection can support the use of this strategy throughout their teaching career (Middleton et al., 2011).

There are a variety of techniques than can support self-reflection for your preservice teacher. First and foremost, having dedicated time for self-reflection creates the expectation that such practice should occur (Clarke, 1995). It can be beneficial to ask open-ended, why-based questions to your preservice teacher (Clarke, 1995; Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthgen, & Bergen, 2008). For example, asking thought-provoking questions about intentions behind their practice requires preservice teachers to think beyond information that can be memorized (Lewis, 2017). Further, when reflecting on future skill development, it can be beneficial and effective to ask for concrete responses or explicit actions (Crasborn et al., 2008). Paraphrasing and using scaling questions can also be a useful tool to unpack a preservice teacher's thinking (Broad & Tessaro, 2010).

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Korthagen, F. A. J., Kessels, J. P. A. M., Koster, B., Lagerwerf, B., & Wubbels, T. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

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THEME

08

REFLECT ON THE PRESERVICE TEACHER'S DIFFICULTIES

“When this preservice teacher initially began having difficulty, I thought about the concerns I was seeing. I did as much as I could to ensure the preservice teacher was supported but even that wasn't helping. I made a list of my concerns and considered if these concerns would be the same if this preservice teacher was in a different classroom or with a different teacher. As I went through the list, I realized that if these problems were happening in my classroom, it was likely they would continue in other classrooms unless we put a plan in place.”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Just like we expect a preservice teacher to engage in self-reflection, it can also be helpful to reflect on the situation. When emotions are high, it can be difficult to parse out the concerns and what to do. Here are some questions to guide you in this process:

- What are my concerns?
- Would these concerns be the same in a different grade, a different subject, or with another teacher?
- Would any changes to the environment support this preservice teacher?
- Is this concern something that can change with support?

THEME
08

REFLECT ON THE PRESERVICE TEACHER'S DIFFICULTIES

RESEARCH SAYS

Schön (1983, 1987) emphasized that reflection can be beneficial when faced with a non-routine problem. Reflecting on the way you provide feedback can help determine how to address such a concern but can also be useful to determine the way you are interpreting the situation (Clarke, 2006). Mentor teachers most commonly cite internalized factors (e.g., mental health, psychological, and emotional challenges) as the source of preservice teacher difficulties, whereas preservice teachers cite external factors (e.g., course format; Glisic Petaroudas, 2014).

For example, in Clarke's (2006) study, a mentor teacher initially believed a preservice teacher was ignoring their advice, which would result from an internal personality trait. After reflecting on and reframing the behaviour, the mentor teacher determined the preservice teacher could not distinguish the key information to apply to practice, which is more reflective of a combination of external and internal factors. This changed the way the mentor teacher interacted with the preservice teacher. By examining difficulties through an objective lens, you can gain clarity in how to proceed with a preservice teacher.

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Clarke, A. (2006). The nature and substance of cooperating teacher reflection. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(7), 910–921. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.04.039>

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THEME

09

RECOGNIZE EARLY WARNING SIGNS AND DON'T IGNORE THEM

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Even at the outset, there were some red flags. I don't want to say I ignored them, but I didn't trust my gut and it came back to bite me. She seemed a little disconnected with the class and I just assumed she was an introvert. The red flags turned into flares and I had a real mess on my hands. I couldn't get this preservice teacher to engage at all with the students, other staff, parents, nothing! If I could advise any other teacher working with a preservice teacher, I would say trust your gut and address the issues as early as possible.

”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Warning signs can be glaring or they can be insidious. When these signs come up, even if they are minor, address them as soon as you can. Trust your instincts and have the tough conversations early.

Recognizing warning signs is important in all field experiences for preservice teachers. It is important to catch minor concerns when preservice teachers are in their first field experience to prevent them from escalating into larger concerns. New concerns may arise later, and some concerns may not manifest until the preservice teacher is in the last year of their program. In all cases, it is important to address concerns as soon as possible.

THEME
09

RECOGNIZE EARLY WARNING SIGNS AND DON'T IGNORE THEM

RESEARCH SAYS

Preservice teachers have noted that support from mentor teachers during times of difficulty helps them overcome challenges (Hudson, 2013; Maynard, 2000); however, out of all preservice teacher requests for support, mentor teachers receive only 15% of these (Hsu, 2005). This suggests that a mentor teacher needs to not only address but also recognize a preservice teacher's difficulties, as a preservice teacher will seldom approach their mentor teacher.

It can be challenging to discuss when a preservice teacher is having difficulties. Often mentor teachers use a softer approach when discussing concerns, which can be effective but more often than not does not explicitly address the issues (Hastings, 2009). Overall, preservice teachers want to be successful in their field experiences, and intervention by a mentor teacher when concerns arise limits the chances of problems escalating later (Lewis, 2017).

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Hastings, W. J. (2009). *A construction of site-based teacher educators' subjectivities in difficult practicum relationships: Conduct un-becoming* (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from <https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/9304832/14864>

Hsu, S. (2005). Help-seeking behaviour of student teachers. *Educational Research*, 47(3), 307–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131880500287716>

Hudson, P. (2013). Developing and sustaining successful mentoring relationships. *Journal of Relationships Research*, 4(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2013.1>

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THEME

10

IDENTIFY THE PRESERVICE TEACHER'S CURRENT SKILL LEVEL

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My preservice teacher identified that she had done a lot of lesson planning in her role as a camp counsellor. So I thought, “Great, let’s get you in there!” I tasked her with creating a pretty crucial element of a math lesson, and since she discussed her vast experience with this, I let her complete this pretty independently. Unfortunately, her lesson was very scattered and did not make sense, even to me. I had to do a lot of backtracking with the students and then also had to rebuild the preservice teacher’s confidence. I really should have gotten her to do a smaller portion of the lesson and walked her through it.

”

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

Just like in education and teaching, preservice teachers enter a classroom with their own diverse set of experiences and skills. It’s important to avoid making assumptions about a preservice teacher’s skill level. Instead, it is beneficial to identify their level of competence in a variety of teaching aspects. For example, you may ask a preservice teacher what they would identify as their strengths, then ask them to demonstrate those skills in a small, low-stakes situation.

In early field experiences, it is more common to have a preservice teacher demonstrate their skills due to their limited exposure in the classroom; however, it is also important to have the preservice teacher demonstrate their skills in later field experiences. In general, avoid making assumptions about a preservice teacher’s skills.

THEME
10

IDENTIFY THE PRESERVICE TEACHER'S CURRENT SKILL LEVEL

RESEARCH SAYS

Many of the reasons why preservice teachers struggle can be traced back to a skill deficit (Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009). Many preservice teachers struggle with classroom instruction as it is a multifaceted activity (Lasley & Applegate, 1985). Not only do preservice teachers have to plan a coherent lesson, but they also have to deliver that lesson to a large group of students. Therefore, it can be beneficial to break down this skill into subskills and discuss each subskill with the preservice teacher.

For example, some elements include ensuring engagement, providing clear and concise information, modifying lessons to suit student needs, and doing all of these things in a restricted time block (Lasley & Applegate, 1985). Other common areas of skill deficit include behaviour management, interpersonal relationships, organizational skills, understanding and supporting student needs, and workload management (Lasley & Applegate, 1985). Identifying skill level is important to determine how to help the preservice teacher grow (Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Lasley, T. J., & Applegate, J. H. (1985). Problems of early field experience students of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 1*(3), 221–227. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X\(85\)90005-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0742-051X(85)90005-8)

Sobel, D., & Gutierrez, C. (2009). Scaffolded support systems: Examining a multi-tiered support plan protocol for struggling teacher candidates. *Teaching Education, 20*(4), 409–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210902902930>

THEME

CREATE GOALS

11

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Bloomfield, D. (2010). Emotions and 'getting by': A pre-service teacher navigating professional experience. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(3), 221-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2010.494005>

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Sobel, D., & Gutierrez, C. (2009). Scaffolded support systems: Examining a multi-tiered support plan protocol for struggling teacher candidates. *Teaching Education*, 20(4), 409-426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210902902930>

“When things started to go sideways with this student, I found it really helpful to create a contract outlining specific goals I wanted him to achieve in the placement. That way, if he didn’t do something, I could literally show him what was expected that he agreed to. I think it was also helpful for him as he knew not only was I going to hold him accountable, but he could also really see what he needed to do



TIPS FOR HANDLING THE SITUATION

When a preservice teacher struggles, it is helpful to identify their areas of weakness and develop specific goals for them to achieve. Although this can be formal or informal, many teachers recommend a formal contract that both you and the preservice teacher agree to. In this contract, ensure each goal identifies exactly what the preservice teacher should do. For example, if the preservice teacher is weak in terms of lesson planning, the goal may be to plan one lesson independently within the placement. After you have an overall goal, it can also be helpful to identify the steps the preservice teacher should take to meet the goal. For example, have the preservice teacher show you their lesson plan at least one week prior to the scheduled lesson.

THEME

CREATE GOALS

11

RESEARCH SAYS

OUTCOMES WHEN REVIEWING GOALS

as described by Sobel and
Gutierrez (2009)

Outcome 1: The plan will remediate the concerns about the preservice teacher, in which case no further action is required.

Outcome 2: The preservice teacher will make progress; however, they will require additional supports. In this case, the plan is to be revised to account for these supports.

Outcome 3: The preservice teacher will make limited to no progress. In this case it will be beneficial to have a conversation with program staff about the preservice teacher's fit in the program. In many instances the director of the program will become involved.

Remediation plans or goals have been shown to be effective in supporting preservice teachers who are struggling, especially when the preservice teacher is involved in the process (Pellett & Pellett, 2005; Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009). Some university programs may have a template or process for creating a remediation plan, so it is important to connect with the university to ensure you are following any procedures.

In creating a plan, it is important to identify a preservice teacher's strengths and areas needing improvement using factual rather than opinion-based information (Pellett & Pellett, 2005). After you have clarified what exactly the preservice teacher is struggling with, it is time to determine how to support the preservice teacher moving forward. Focusing on creating goals with positive language can support the preservice teacher to move through their challenges and can also soften feedback (Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009). Create objectives for two to three areas of concern, using specific language to describe how the preservice teacher will be evaluated on each of the objectives (Pellett & Pellett, 2005). In many ways this plan contains elements similar to what you would find on a student's Individualized Program Plan.

Following the creation of the plan, it is important to continually review it with the preservice teacher (Sobel & Gutierrez, 2009). Sobel and Gutierrez (2009) have outlined three outcomes that may occur during these reviews (see box to the left).

Often preservice teachers feel pressure to achieve a good evaluation instead of meeting goals that will help them in the future (Bloomfield, 2010). It can be useful to outline how these elements will make them a better teacher in the future.

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