Cooperating Teachers: Willing Partners or Reluctant Participants?

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To grow and sustain field placement experiences, a group of elementary education university faculty members from a small private liberal arts university, examined strategies for teacher recruitment, retention, and recognition. Faculty members compiled and categorized data from cooperating teacher exit surveys, intern exit surveys, field observations, and consultations with cooperating teachers and our advisory board. Extrapolating scenarios and evidence from these categories, faculty brainstormed ways in which the partnership with existing schools, and the experiences for both the interns and their cooperating teacher could be strengthened. This work shares some of the challenges faced during this process as well as suggestions for making field experiences enjoyable, productive, and worthwhile for all involved.

Teaching can be a labor of love. Undergraduate students majoring in education are excited to impact the lives of their future students. Current practitioners are passionate about interacting with their students. Faculty members in teacher preparation institutes cherish their time in the classroom and eagerly mentor preservice teachers in both the content and pedagogical knowledge needed to be effective beginning teachers. Given the common denominators of a passion for teaching and excitement about talking, doing, and reflecting on practice with colleagues, it seems, finding high-quality field placements for preservice teachers would be a simple task. However, this is not always the case. This article describes how a teacher preparation program at a private liberal arts institution partnered with the local school district to recruit, retain, and recognize high-quality cooperating teachers. The authors share some of the challenges faced during this process as well as suggestions for making field experiences enjoyable, productive, and worthwhile for all involved.

Field experience is a key factor in the development of novice teachers' instructional approaches (Grossman, Ronfeldt, & Cohen, 2011). Darling-Hammond (2010) writes that "the most powerful programs require students to spend extensive time in the field throughout the entire program, examining and applying the concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their courses" (p. 40). Pairing a preservice teacher with the right cooperating teacher is essential. A well-matched partnership can give a new teacher the equivalent of a six-month head start in his/her first year of teaching (Rickenbrode, 2018). However, according to the National Center for Teacher Quality, only about 7 percent of teacher preparation programs collect any information on each cooperating teachers' years of experience and certification. Even fewer programs poll administrations about cooperating teachers' mentorship abilities, communication styles, instructional capabilities and behavior management skills (National Center for Teacher Quality, 2016).

A lack of understanding of the cooperating teachers' teacher-identity can be a hurdle for placing preservice teachers. During the field placement, preservice teachers are beginning to develop their teaching persona (Mockler, 2011). During this development, they rely on the support and guidance from their cooperating teachers. Preservice teachers thrive when they have cooperating teachers supporting their emotional development (feel like a teacher), modeling effective practices (act like a teacher), and promoting the cognitive processes involved in instructional decision making (think like a teacher) (Roberts, Benedict, & Thomas, 2014).

Challenges for Teacher Preparation Programs

As the point of contact between local school districts, school administrators, cooperating teachers and preservice teachers, university faculty must navigate and develop multiple relationships and address multiple challenges to make the field experience as successful as possible. Some of those challenges faced by teacher preparation programs when finding high-quality field placements include a lack of diversity among cooperating teachers, cooperating teachers with an unclear understanding of commitment and a vague understanding of the field placement expectations, and underdeveloped mentoring abilities. There may also be a fundamental disconnect of expectations among preservice teachers, cooperating teachers and university faculty as well as time constraints of university faculty working with schools and districts.

Hands-on experiences in real classrooms provide a tremendous opportunity for preservice teachers to apply skills and theories learned in the college classroom. It is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to ensure that students have a variety of experiences teaching and working with diverse populations (Bryan & Atwater, 2002). While the classrooms are filled with students from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2018), the teaching population is not as diverse. The 2015-2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey reported approximately 80 percent of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic White females (U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Taie & Goldring, 2018). Preservice teachers, mainly from predominately White institutions, are placed in classrooms that are similar to their childhood schools or communities, which often lack diversity (Sleeter, 2001). During the field experience many of the cooperating teachers are of the same demographics: White middle-class females who may also lack training and experience working with culturally diverse students. In many cases, the preservice teacher unknowingly embraces the behavior of the cooperating teacher who may have their own biases towards culturally diverse students (Barnes, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In an effort to better prepare preservice teachers to teach in dynamic and diverse classrooms, teacher preparation programs must be strategic about their field placements and actively seek placements in schools that offer positive work environments, collaboration among faculty, a history of student achievement and minimal faculty 'churn' (Ronfeldt, 2015, p. 318).

Another challenge faced by teacher education programs is finding cooperating teachers who are fully committed to the work of mentoring preservice teachers. Asking practicing classroom teachers to open their classroom doors, and allow preservice teachers to instruct students, provide quality actionable feedback about

those experiences, and act, simultaneously as teacher, role model, and confidant, can be daunting. Despite being required to work an average of 39 hours a week to earn a base salary, teachers report spending 53 hours per week on school-related activities (Taie & Goldring, 2018). Not included in those numbers are hours spent coaching preservice teachers. This lack of time, a necessary component to developing a successful field experience relationship between preservice and cooperating teacher, is essential. Some cooperating teachers, despite being a willing participant in the field experience process, feel a lack of time to develop the needed relationship with their intern. Finding time to sit and review teaching, provide feedback, set goals, and plan future instruction is almost nonexistent, which can be a source of frustration to both parties (Young & MacPhail, 2016). To compound the time issue, cooperating teachers hosting preservice teachers are asked to do so with little recognition, no financial compensation, and added responsibilities and obligations.

Despite the oppressive sounding obligations, teachers regularly volunteer to support preservice teachers with their time and talent. However, that willingness to welcome a preservice teacher into their classroom is tenuous and fragile. The relationship between cooperating and preservice teachers and university superiors must be maintained and supported by a willingness to have open, and sometimes difficult, conversations. For the field experience to be successful, all must be committed to doing their fair share. Hindrances to the field experience relationship may include, unmotivated or disinterested preservice teachers, the inability of cooperating and preservice teachers to develop a relationship, and a lack of clearly defined roles of all involved (Young & MacPhail, 2016).

Teaching is an outward expression of individual people's persona, identities and experiences. Teachers self-identify in many ways and see their teaching as a reflection of themselves (Sim, 2011). Teachers' identity, both practicing and preservice, is fluid and informed by a complex and constantly changing factors of personal, professional and political experiences (Mockler, 2011; Day & Gu, 2007). Opening their classroom to a preservice teacher who may help or hinder their classroom dynamic can be overwhelming and frightening to a practicing teacher. Moreover, having another person in the room that may or may not be interested in feedback can be an emotional roller-coaster (Sim, 2011). Feelings and relationships with colleagues, based on the dynamics and interpersonal relationship with the preservice teachers, including successful teaching moments and moments of being seen as less-than-capable may influence a teacher's willingness to host a preservice teacher. Adverse effects of personal, workplace or policy experiences may impair the teacher's capacities for sustaining effective practices (Day & Gu, 2007). Teaching demands attention is paid to emotions and how those emotions impact effectiveness. Working with preservice teachers in a supervisory role may be a new experience for some classroom teachers and that new experience brings a change in their teacher identity as they try to meet the preservice teachers' needs and university expectations while maintaining focus on their students' needs.

Some preservice teachers may seem disinterested in the learning to teach process and display apathy towards feedback provided by cooperating teachers, which can be a great source of frustration for cooperating teachers (Young & MacPhail, 2016). Research has shown that the type and amount of feedback given by a supervisor plays an important role in the development

of preservice teachers (Shantz & Ward, 2000). Additionally, feedback has been cited as a significant factor in defining the value of a field experience for preservice teachers (Shantz & Ward, 2000). Therefore, providing high quality feedback during field experiences is essential for shaping new teacher behaviors (Gibson & Musti-Rao, 2016).

Further, teacher education programs can also be challenged by preservice and cooperating teachers' different understandings of the expectations for field experiences. Preservice teachers may enter their field experience with preconceived expectations. When those expectations are not met, the disconnect between the reality and the expectation can be disconcerting for some. Zeichner (2009) states, "Although most university-based teacher education programs now include multiple field experiences over the length of the program and often situate field experiences in some type of school-university partnership, the disconnect between what students are taught in campus courses and their opportunities for learning to enact these practices in their school placements is often very great" (p. 91). Further, some teachers who are nominated to be mentors and acknowledged to be effective teachers, with years of experience in the classroom, spend great amounts of time planning and developing lessons and expect preservice teachers to show initiative and bring resources and ideas to the classroom (Sim, 2011). When no resources or activities are produced, cooperating teachers can feel frustrated, like they are doing more than their fair share of work.

Naturally, practitioners are not the only educators struggling with issues, including time commitments, when working with field experiences. University faculty, in addition to their teaching load, scholarship, and service, must be willing participants. University faculty must see the value in finding quality field placements in which their students can see the teaching strategies espoused in the classroom in action. However, there is little incentive, particular for tenure-track faculty, to undertake the responsibility (Zeichner, 2009).

Our Story

Partnering with the local school district, faculty members placed approximately 150 students in 20 sites over the past five years. During that time, faculty members witnessed phenomenal teaching and mentoring. They also witnessed some areas in need of improvement. The following shares one faculty group's experience with recruiting cooperating teachers for field experiences, describes our difficult situations, and reports actions taken to support, incentivize and acknowledge cooperating teachers. To overcome challenges mentioned above, faculty members examined current practices, conferenced with local school administrators, and spoke with students currently in field placements. Current practices and action steps are outlined below.

Recruiting Cooperating Teachers

To recruit cooperating teachers, university faculty use three methods. Methods are outlined here in a linear manner, but are not sequential in nature. We plan to meet with the principal as a first step, but as situations organically present themselves, we may speak with teachers in an informal setting first. First, a faculty liaison formally meets with local principals. During the meeting the faculty member outlines the experiences the university requires and asks the principal if he/she has teachers who would be willing and able to host a preservice teacher. The second

strategy, approved by the school administrators, includes faculty members attending a school wide faculty meeting to explain the field experience process. In addition to the explanation of the process, the faculty members also pitch opportunities for teachers to volunteer their classrooms. The third, less formal, recruitment includes asking current cooperating teachers if they would be willing to host another intern, and if they have any colleagues who might be willing to do the same. The third recruitment step is typically undertaken by the university faculty member teaching the course for which the interns are completing the required field experience. All methods of teacher recruitment have had successes and shortcomings. We have had strong teachers recommended by their administrators, and dynamic teachers who volunteered to host students. We have also missed the opportunity to work with teachers because they did not self-identify as capable of hosting an intern. The most challenging hurdle we have faced is being invited either by the teacher or his/her administrator to place an intern and finding the match did not create a suitable partnership.

The teachers described below represent a completion of teachers in the field. Personas are based on interactions university faculty members have observed in the field. Although our goal is to recruit cooperating teachers like Teacher A, sometimes we work with cooperating teachers who resemble Teachers B and C.

Teacher A: *A ray of sunshine. This teacher loves her job. Her excitement for teaching, knowledge of subject matter, and jubilance for working with her kids is contagious. Not only can she entertain and instruct her students, she can mentor and offer quality feedback to the intern placed in her classroom. She inspires the intern to be his/her best self. She is the teacher that can do it all.*

Teacher B: *This is a solid teacher. The teacher knows her grade level content and pedagogy. She effectively manages her classroom. She communicates with the intern, but barriers impede the mentoring process. The teacher may not be comfortable redirecting the intern or offering constructive feedback. The teacher may see the intern as a peer, and treat him/her as friend and try and engage in personal conversation that may make the intern feel uncomfortable. This teacher may have wanted the experience of hosting an intern, but once the process began, realized the amount of commitment required, and was unable to fulfill the responsibilities to the level desired by the faculty or intern.*

Teacher C: *This in another solid teacher. This teacher's administration recommended her to the University. However, the teacher was not particularly interested in hosting an intern. For any number of reasons, including, a desire to keep administration happy, a lack of understanding of what hosting an intern includes, or the perception the intern will do the work and lessen the load, the teacher agrees to host an intern.*

Retaining (and Training) Cooperating Teachers

"While many programs indicate that they 'work cooperatively' with school districts to match student teachers with cooperating teachers, this usually refers only to having a cordial relationship in which the programs formally or informally communicate their need for cooperating teachers and in response receive names of those selected by district personnel" (NCTQ 2016, p. 3). Our goal is to go beyond the superficial partnership and create meaningful, effective, and long lasting

partnerships. We aim to coach teachers (B & C) who have may have been reluctant participants and help them become willing partners. We actively seek ways in which we can support and encourage our teachers who are eager to house preservice teachers without causing extra stress or contributing to burnout. We want to retain cooperating teachers who will positively impact preservice teachers.

Open communication surrounded by a layer of trust is the foundational layer of recruitment and retention of quality cooperating teachers. To create this, the faculty members have utilized several strategies. First, we begin each field experience semester with an introductory email. The email introduces the faculty and course load the preservice teacher will be completing in conjunction with the field experience. The introductory letter includes an invitation to attend two formal 90-minute introductory training sessions on the university campus. To ensure all cooperating teachers can attend, we work with administrators each semester when scheduling the training dates.

The formal trainings are led by faculty members of students in the field. The sessions provide information on the scope and sequence of cooperating teacher responsibilities and explain the observation and write-up procedures. The trainings are intended to be dual-purposed; first, to inform new cooperating teachers and outline expectations and obligations of the placements; second, to offer support to returning cooperating teachers to empower them to know they are completing tasks as the university requires, and acknowledge their teacher persona as effective and their mentoring styles as commendable.

At the conclusion of the semester, all cooperating teachers are emailed a thank you note and a request to complete an anonymous survey ranking the effectiveness of the trainings. That feedback is folded into the development of the following semesters' training sessions.

Recognizing Cooperating Teachers

We believe it is important to recognize the hard work of cooperating teachers in a way that celebrates them as professionals, which we also see as a way to retain cooperating teachers. Currently, we offer our offering cooperating teachers a thank you, a certificate of acknowledgment, and several in-service/professional development points granted by the district. We worked with district personnel in developing the plan for awarding points to each cooperating teacher who has fulfilled the requirements outlined by the university. The certificate may be used to document their performance. Practicing in a district that uses the Charlotte Danielson Framework for teaching evaluations, the certificate can be used to document teachers' professional responsibly (Danielson, 2019). We also offer cooperating teachers who work with senior interns a voucher for a graduate level course. However, the vouchers are not always used since many of our cooperating teachers already have a graduate degree. Finally, we recently partnered with a local foundation to provide gift certificates to senior intern cooperating teachers.

Moving Forward

To grow and sustain our field placement experiences, we examined our strategies for teacher recruitment, retention, and recognition. Using data from cooperating teacher exit surveys, intern exit surveys, field observations, and consultations with cooperating teachers and our advisory board, faculty compiled data into themes. Themes initially were very broad and were labeled as successful experience or unsuccessful experiences. Extrapolating scenarios and

evidence from these categories, we brainstormed ways in which the partnership with existing schools, and the experiences for both the interns and their cooperating teacher could be strengthened.

Several outcomes are under development for recruitment of teachers. Initially, an informational leaflet designed to share program requirements. This leaflet will be shared with local school principals by faculty members during the official recruiting meeting. To make all obligations transparent, the leaflet will then be passed on to cooperating teachers. By clarifying and streamlining the process of hosting preservice teachers, cooperating teachers may feel more confident in their supervisory role and that confidence could facilitate focused conversations about teaching and learning (Young & MacPhail, 2016).

In an effort to work more efficiently, the current work of the cooperating teachers could be more explicitly aligned with their professional growth via Deliberate Practice Plans (DPP). In the DPP process, educators self-assess their own practice by analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data sources in relation to the priorities of their school and district. According to the local school district's handbook, "a meaningful DPP is one that engages teachers in significant learning or improving a skill related to one's professional practice" (VSET Handbook, 2013, p. 23). Mentoring and providing student interns with actionable feedback to improve their own practice contributes to the professional growth of the cooperating teacher and should be counted as a positive contribution to their summative evaluations. This would be especially beneficial for teachers B and C described above who might be good teachers, but need to cultivate their skills as mentors.

Advisory board members suggested a creative recruitment offer: after a successful experience as a mentor, teachers might be interested in becoming adjunct faculty for the university. The skills of these exemplary classroom teachers could translate well to university classes and preservice teachers would gain much from the real-life experiences shared. Furthermore, if these cooperating teachers could teach/facilitate field experiences (e.g., practicums or professional educator courses), then this might minimize Zeichner's (2009) disconnect mentioned earlier. As a university adjunct, the cooperating teacher could make sure that course learning matched experiences in the field.

Retaining quality cooperating teachers means supporting their work with preservice teachers. At the beginning of each semester, faculty members host two trainings that focus on teaching evaluation ratings and feedback. While the majority of cooperating teachers have communicated that the trainings were helpful, others have expressed a desire to make the trainings more accessible throughout the semester. For example, one teacher recently explained that she felt confident giving actionable feedback during the training, but when her intern taught a lesson to be evaluated a few weeks later, she was less sure of her abilities. Checking the faculty provided PowerPoint seemed to help, but she wished she could refer back to comments and suggestions from faculty and other teachers at the training. Another teacher commented on the process of documenting her evaluation; although this had been explained in the training, she wished she had taken better notes. Video recording the trainings and sharing them with cooperating teachers (via a private YouTube channel or the University's platform) could be a refresher or support later in the semester.

Incentives can be powerful. Desiring to work with the best of the best warrants acknowledging the time and efforts teachers

donate to help the interns navigate field experiences. We are currently exploring ways to honor the cooperating teacher's commitment to the field. We are partnering with the district to discuss the possibility of offering a larger amount of in-service/professional development points to cooperating teachers. We are involved in interdepartmental talks about creating several teacher recognition pieces. We are discussing offering a certification to be presented to cooperating teachers. For example, teachers who complete the field experience, attend the required trainings, document the appropriate observations and complete the university required paperwork, would receive a Certificate of Honor to be displayed in their classroom. Along with that, we are reviewing the possibility of giving teachers who complete the above requirements a themed t-shirt to simultaneously advertise the field placements and acknowledging their time and efforts in helping future teachers. The t-shirts, proudly worn on a causal Friday, would foster conversation between and among teachers about the field experience and perhaps, inspire others to speak with a faculty member about the possibility of their participation. A final incentive we are examining is the possibility of giving cooperating teachers an 'All Access Sports Pass.' The pass would allow the cooperating teacher and immediate family members' admission to all university home sporting events. This last option is particularly interesting. While we cannot offer financial recognition, allowing cooperating teachers, and their families, access to sporting events saves the out of pocket expense of purchasing tickets and creates an opportunity for the teacher to have a little fun with the family. This can also build a stronger connection between cooperating teachers and the university community.

Conclusion

The importance of having high-quality, willing participants who are effective mentors is key to successful field experiences. As we go forward and practice the art of being reflective practitioners, we continually keep several questions in mind:

- How can the field experience be strengthened?
- Is the experience sustainable?
- How can university faculty support teachers willing to take on the responsibility of mentoring the next generation of teachers?
- How can university faculty coach teachers who are pressured to host preservice teachers by their administration?
- How can university faculty foster relationships so cooperating teachers invite preservice teachers back into their classrooms?
- Is it possible to gracefully split from a cooperating teacher and preservice teacher pairing and still maintain the relationship?

Teaching is a profession dealing with huge challenges and trying times. We believe there are high-quality teachers working hard to meet the needs of their students. Those teachers act as educators, mentors, caregivers and confidants. They do it because they are committed to their students. We want to do our part to illuminate the great teachers willing to work with preservice teachers so preserve teachers can develop into outstanding educators.

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