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The Benefits of University Faculty as P-12 Substitute Teachers

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The current substitute teacher shortage was exacerbated by COVID-19 and is not expected to improve any time soon. A solution that may benefit both P-12 schools and higher education involves the occasional utilization of university faculty as substitute teachers. This alleviates some of the pressure on school districts in finding substitute teachers while also building relationships, providing university faculty with current classroom experience, and serving as a recruitment pipeline.

Schools across the entire P-20 range have their share of challenges. With COVID-19 having exacerbated ongoing issues, P-12 administrators have seen teachers and other employees leave the profession at an increasingly alarming rate and staffing shortages becoming too common and are not optimistic about long-range forecasts considering current and future pandemics (Pressley, 2021). In higher education, faculty are often entrenched in their research and classrooms (Stolz, 2021). Without sustained effort over time, faculty may become out of touch with the broader educational system, how their field has evolved, and even how generations of students have changed. While this is nothing new, recent trends in faculty disengagement compound these issues (McClure & Fryar, 2022). Instead of seeing P-12 schools and higher education as separate entities looking for answers to their problems, we should collaborate to focus on opportunities and find solutions.

Colleges of education tend to have more interaction with P-12 schools in close physical proximity due to placements in student teaching and field experiences. As a form of apprenticeship, knowledge and expertise pass from current practitioners to those still learning in a hands-on and real-life environment. Both college faculty and supervising teachers contribute to educating the next generation of educators. Schools benefit by having another educator in their classroom, a potential lead for a future hire, and a symbiotic relationship where the student-teacher learns from the supervising teacher, and the supervising teacher sees her class through the eyes of a student with a fresh perspective.

College of Education faculty benefit from observing student teachers and their interactions with

the schools. However, not all faculty have that opportunity. For the majority of college faculty, exposure to a P-12 classroom is a “faint memory” by the time a faculty member is tenured and is actively discouraged as research and publications are prioritized (Moskal & Skokan, 2011, p. 56).

The glaring question, then, is how can both P-12 schools and postsecondary institutions support one another in mutually beneficial ways? One opportunity involves using college faculty as substitute teachers in P-12 schools to fulfill staffing shortages while also engaging faculty in the classroom.

Background

Substitute Teachers

Substitute teachers are needed for coverage during professional development, in-school meetings, or most commonly to fill in for illnesses, health issues, and other absences (Gonzales, 2017). By the time students complete their P-12 education, the typical student will have spent an average of one school year, or about eight percent of their time, with substitute teachers, and sometimes up to 13.5% in low socio-economic schools (Gonzales, 2017).

Many substitute teachers take on substitute teaching in place of a full-time job, enjoying the flexibility of when to work. Some are retired teachers or educators and want to supplement their retirement incomes, while others are younger and have family responsibilities that keep them from full-time employment (Gonzales, 2017).

It takes time for teachers to gain experience and get to know their schools and students. Ideally, districts and buildings will have low turnover and

teachers will stay for many years (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). This is also true of substitutes. Research has indicated that three key aspects of success in substitute teaching are knowledge of pedagogy, experience in the classroom, and relationships with students (Robinson, 2016). Furthermore, the relationship with the principal and the support they provide can have a direct impact on substitute success (O'Connor, 2009). Having that regular interaction and guidance allows for growth in pedagogy, increased experience, and stronger relationships (Landis, 2019).

As with all teacher certifications, substitute teacher requirements vary by state. In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) requires either 30 earned college credits or completion of an approved 20-clock-hour substitute teacher training course in addition to a criminal background check ensuring that a substitute teacher is at an educational level above the students.

Substitute Teacher Shortages

Shortages of substitute teachers have been ongoing. In fact, schools typically only have 80% of what they need (Nelson, 2020). To solve day-to-day shortages, the gap is filled by teachers covering another classroom during their plan periods, doubling up on classes, or administrators filling in. During the 2021-2022 school year, some Missouri districts had to cancel school due to a lack of coverage. Across the United States school districts are begging retired teachers and parents to sign up to substitute and some are filling substitute jobs with police officers and in New Mexico and Maryland, even the National Guard (Iati, 2022; Ansari, 2022).

What is the cause of this crisis? Typically, it's basic economics: increased demand coupled with a decrease in supply (Smith, n.d.). Some school districts are using various tactics to cope with these problems such as state boards lowering requirements to be a substitute teacher, providing pay increases, and aggressively recruiting (Paterson, 2021). Research on substitute teachers shows a direct correlation between low pay and a lack of benefits to a higher likelihood that one will not stay long-term as a substitute teacher (Gonzales, 2017).

All of this has been a challenge for years. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the problems and Missouri schools are struggling with having enough teachers available to educate students (Nelson, 2020). To try and alleviate recent challenges, the Missouri Department of Elementary

and Secondary Education (DESE) launched an online training program to fast-track candidates to become substitute teachers.

While the substitute crisis is nationwide, it is particularly hard on rural districts. School district leaders have had an increasingly difficult time finding substitutes since COVID-19, but the current crisis is new enough to not have aggregated data as to the comparison between rural and nonrural districts and substitute shortages. Instead, news articles are commonplace reporting on the lack of substitutes in rural areas as well as the lengths districts are going to keep students learning and classes covered (e.g., Danahy, 2022; Haugen, 2023; Walker, 2019).

P-12 and Higher Education Collaboration

Collaboration between P-12 schools and higher education has taken many forms. At its most basic level, today's P-12 students become tomorrow's college students, and today's college students become tomorrow's teachers. This is known as a community of practice, with common interests and goals. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4).

Providing students and teachers with continuing education and degree completion are major goals and benefits of this community. Learning communities or knowledge-building communities are possible opportunities for collaborations between universities and schools (Sim, 2010). These concepts may be used in the context of a particular task or topic. Often the partnership is focused on professional development or even action research.

Much of the literature on collaboration has focused on conducting research projects as opposed to collaboration in teaching and building relationships. Contrary to this, there are ways to instill the value of community relationships within universities (Buisse et al., 2003). Defining the service mission in reciprocal terms and finding ways of rewarding outreach and dissemination activities not only translate research into practice but also encourage practitioners to inform and collaborate with re-searchers to carry out a research agenda. However, there is often a disconnect between research and practice (Fisher & Rogan, 2012). University faculty can benefit from involving P-12 teachers throughout the research process as opposed to at the conclusion which tends to result in

interpreting the research results after the fact. Partnerships might take the form of structured conversations, researcher-in-residence options for university faculty in public schools, or participatory action research frameworks to bridge the gap between research and practice (Quebec Fuentes & Spice, 2015).

While collaboration and involvement between P-12 and higher education faculty take place across the spectrum of disciplines and majors, it's natural that colleges of education play a larger role. It is education majors that become deeply entrenched in schools for observations, practicum, and student teaching. As teacher education has accepted an apprenticeship model, this close collaboration from a classroom standpoint have remained forefront. As an example, the University of Minnesota's coordinator of teacher education uses her paid time off to substitute teach (Erdahl, 2021). Her role is to connect the university with the local schools, and substitute teaching has been one way of doing so.

Still, there is a noted disconnect between P-12 schools and higher education (Smith et al., 2016). As university faculty become further removed via time and distance, they can lose insight into the changes that have occurred in schools and miss or forget the challenges of being a P-12 educator. An important ingredient in a successful community of practice is a shared goal (Quebec Fuentes & Spice, 2015). While there may be many such goals, one may be addressing the substitute teacher shortage as well as the disconnect university faculty may have from P-12 classrooms.

Discussion

There are benefits to both P-12 schools and institutions of higher education by working together to mitigate some of the challenges of the substitute teacher shortage. Since university faculty tend to have schedules that may allow them to serve as substitute teachers one or more days per week, this is a welcome opportunity to fill that need. Depending upon their teaching and meeting schedules, university faculty availability may vary from one person to the next, from semester to semester, and from week to week. Faculty that teach graduate courses, online, evenings, or on weekends, may have even greater flexibility. While faculty duties certainly make for a busy schedule, subbing a day here or there can benefit both the school district and faculty. Not only allowing but encouraging university faculty to fill in as substitute teachers can alleviate some of the

pressures P-12 schools are facing and give university faculty a fresh perspective of today's classroom.

Having university faculty in P-12 school buildings is just the first step. An advantage of them serving as substitutes is simply their being present, seen, and known by building teachers, personnel, and students. Developing connections and relationships between P-12 and higher education can then open doors for future endeavors, whether that be for professional development, research, or advisory boards. Most likely, university faculty will make connections with the age and content levels they teach or are familiar with. Unexpected opportunities may arise due to the experiences of working with a breadth of content areas sparking new ideas.

Small rural districts may not have as many opportunities to host preservice teachers during observations or clinical training opportunities throughout their educator preparation program, including student teaching. This may be due to proximity to the university, the structure of the clinical program, or current P-12 faculty not meeting experience requirements to host student teachers. University faculty serving as substitute teachers could learn about these rural districts and share their experience related to the school culture and climate with education students to assist them in exploring if a rural district is a good fit for them and their career. This becomes a strong recruiting tool for rural districts and school leaders as they search for permanent teachers each year.

Furthermore, serving as a substitute teacher supports university programs by providing university faculty with current P-12 classroom experience. For many faculty, it may have been a very long time since they sat in the P-12 classroom outside of observations or in passing. This is a wonderful opportunity to see firsthand the generational changes that have occurred. University faculty will be able to practice those strategies taught in teacher education programs related to classroom management, pivoting when students finish too quickly or need additional time, supports, and clarification. Time as a substitute teacher can provide university faculty with an insight into the types of technologies that are currently used in districts and how they are being implemented. University faculty will be able to bring back to their classrooms current examples of how the learning standards are being taught as these have evolved over time. All of this, as we know, is better appreciated and seen firsthand beyond reading about it.

Even for faculty that may feel a bit overwhelmed with workloads, a small amount of substitute

teaching may and should be viewed as a service to the profession. Universities wanting to instill professional service as an ongoing commitment should consider this type of teaching and collaboration to be counted towards service requirements regarding promotion, tenure, and annual duties. Many university faculty have found various ways to make connections with P-12 schools and this is one more opportunity. Additionally, it should not be overlooked that this is an opportunity to continue to impact future generations of community leaders and to have fun while doing so. While the role of a substitute is not always easy, typically there is little to no prep work or grading. Instead, the substitute could practice skills they learned years ago, utilize emerging techniques from promising practices and research, and assist students in their learning.

Finally, university faculty should view substitute teaching as a recruitment pipeline for both the teaching profession and their university. Considering the pressure to maintain if not increase enrollments, placing a university faculty member in the school and the classroom multiple times throughout a student's P-12 experience can lead to direct and indirect student recruitment, both for P-12 students as they look for future college programs and for teachers that may be interested in graduate programs. Wearing and

using items with university insignia is an unobtrusive way of promoting the university, while conversations and excitement about the degrees and courses in which one teaches can lead to discussions about careers, the profession, and application processes.

The authors have been partnering for the past four years in this manner. In speaking about their experiences, they found a handful of other university faculty who also serve as substitutes. The conversation of benefits, including class coverage, consistency with substitutes, and students getting college questions answered from faculty in the know have been evident to the school administrator. The university faculty have noted the positive experience with recruiting, service, and the enjoyment of spending time with P-12 students. They also noted a better understanding of current policy, procedure, and the many directions in which P-12 faculty and administrators are pulled daily. The authors continue to comment on how the partnership keeps both sides aware of the current atmosphere on each side of the high school diploma.

What do we need to do next? School principals and college deans must meet to discuss needs and opportunities. Having those conversations and then spreading the word about how faculty can participate is a great start.

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