GREAT EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT TEACHERS: 
EXPLICIT AND IMPLIED

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In this study of the expectations for the student teacher during the practicum experience, cooperating teachers identified a multitude of expectations of student teachers beyond simple classroom practices. Participants for this study were 28 (5 male and 23 female) public school teachers, who had served the previous semester as cooperating teachers for two Midwestern regional universities. Expectations of student teachers come from the cooperating teacher, the host school, and the university and take formal and informal designations. For this reason upon receiving only subtle indicators of what is expected the student may fall short of meeting these outcomes. It is essential that all stakeholders in the process be forthcoming with explicit descriptors of what is expected with guidance regarding how such performances can be achieved. Whereas the novice may take her or his lead from those who model desirable professional behavior, mapping out the intricacies of such expectations can be mutually rewarding.

In preservice teacher education universities strive to devote a considerable portion of the curricula to clinical experiences in K-12 schools. From the beginning of coursework in education are interwoven classroom experiences intended to expose potential teachers to what lies in store. However, the culminating student teaching experience plays a primary role in shaping preservice teachers' values, beliefs, and teaching skills (Darden, Scott, Darden, & Westfall, 2001; Koskela & Ganser, 1998). Student teaching has been the capstone of teacher preparation for nearly a century (Ganser, 1996). All fifty states require a student teaching practicum, testifying to the significance of the experience. Henry (1989) attributes this to the novice teachers' need for (1) experience in an actual teaching setting, (2) emotional involvement, (3) personal and professional growth, and (4) one-on-one teaching encounters (pp. 74-75). Therefore, maximizing the degree of guided immersion in the field is reported to be predominant in the quest toward becoming an educator.

Student teachers spend far more time with their cooperating teachers than with university supervisors. Therefore, the mentor teacher has much greater influence on the outcome of the mentorship. Student teachers verify that the influence of their host teachers was paramount (Borko & Mayfield, 1995), and veteran teachers also testify to the impact of their own cooperating teachers during their preservice experience (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). Clearly the exchange between mentor and mentee has the potential to provide a rich opportunity for guided growth.
However, the influence of a cooperating teacher extends beyond classroom instruction (Pellet, Straye, and Pellet, 1999). The host teacher models professional behavior in his or her interactions with parents, administrators, other faculty, and support staff. Clothing selection, grooming, conduct, language, and reliability also demonstrate expectations for the student teacher. Thus, it is the responsibility of the host teacher to ensure that the student teacher be acculturated into the field, learning not only formal classroom techniques, but also the myriad of other more subtle awarenesses reflective of a professional.

In our study of the expectations for the student teacher in the practicum experience cooperating teachers identified a multitude of expectations of student teachers beyond simple classroom practices. Participants for this study were 28 (5 male and 23 female) public school teachers, who had served the previous semester as cooperating teachers for two Midwestern regional universities. Represented were 10 elementary, 7 middle school, and 11 high school teachers from a range of disciplines, including speech, physical education, English, science, music, special education, math, high school business, family and consumer science, and elementary education.

Two primary sources provided data for this study. A demographic survey was completed, followed by interviews with each of the cooperating teachers at the completion of the student teaching experience. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide for consistency. The 20-30 minute interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Teacher education programs from the two sponsoring Midwestern regional universities reflected in this study both provide cooperating teachers with packets of information outlining their expectations for the student teaching experience. Twenty-two of the 28 cooperating teachers attested that the university’s expectations were clearly outlined. A high school English teacher suggested that if there is any confusion, the fault does not rest with the university. She said, "Many times it’s our fault because we don’t contact the university and find out more about their student or what they want us to do." Communication between the host teacher and the university supervisor is integral to providing a quality experience. A middle school mathematics instructor concurred, "If I had initiated it, they’d be more than willing to answer any questions that I had. But because we’re in an educational community, there’s a lot that’s presumed to be understood that isn’t necessarily stated or discussed." Since most institutions rely heavily on the teachers in their local schools, university supervisors need to avoid this implicit assumption.

Because of the supervisor’s ongoing experiences with supervision in a variety of settings, she or he can be a viable source of information on university expectations, advice on mentoring, and desirable contemporary practices. A high school family and consumer science teacher testified, "The university supervisor was working with me quite a bit. He was really helpful and together we were able to get through some things that were difficult." Often the rapport established between the host teacher and the university supervisor makes
the difference. If the representative of the university continues in that role over time, a comfortable understanding may evolve. One middle school English teacher described such a relationship, "We are kind of like two old dogs. We've known each other for a long time. We talked about golf games and such." Clearly the experience is enhanced if communication between supervisors is ongoing.

One primary factor is the time demands on both university and site-based mentors. Certainly K-12 teachers feel tugs on a variety of fronts due to demands of students, student teachers, colleagues, administration, and family. If the university supervisor is overloaded by the number of student teachers, there is little time to devote to providing the individual attention each candidate deserves. An elementary educator noted, "The university supervisors are usually so overrun with work, they don't have time to do anything. They are overworked and under loved." A middle school science teacher concurred, "I know she had a very full load and was very busy going from one room to another and one building to another. We talked about the student teacher, but she didn't have much time to talk to me really." Such testimonies are in keeping with Rikard and Veal's study (1996) revealing that cooperating teachers reported little assistance from and few interactions with the university, and that they relied on their own student teaching and teaching experiences to guide their mentoring.

Perhaps the limited funding and increased load assigned to university supervisors has resulted in less contact between mentors. A study of 20 cooperating teach-

ers by Kahn (2001) disclosed that cooperating teachers felt a need for greater support and collaboration from the university community. An elementary educator who participated in our study stated, "I never really felt that I was given any guidelines as to what I should be doing." Likewise, a high school English teacher who sought guidance regarding specific content areas she should be covering voiced a concern, "I would have thought in my particular area that they would have some kind of list for me to go by." Typically the university does not attempt to dictate which specific content knowledge needs to be demonstrated by the candidate. However, in her desire to meet university expectations the mentor was perplexed by the lack of direction specific to her discipline provided by the university. A simple statement to reassure her that the experience is not intended to target any materials that she does not already cover would set her at ease. Perhaps by relying too heavily on the host teacher's expertise the university may fail to provide key supports necessary to assure the mentor that she or he is meeting the novice's needs and the university's expectations.

Another participant, a middle school mathematics instructor articulated concerns regarding the lack of clarity. She suggested,

There needs to be clearer communication on the degree and the extent to which they want to see us get the student involved. If I run into trouble, it's been when I've asked too much. If I have an extracurricular obligation that's part of my teach-
ing assignment here, having somebody help me with that seems to be appropriate. It’s not been clear whether the students should be expected to do that or not.

Such dilemmas may put the cooperating teacher and the student teacher in a quandary regarding expectations. Certainly the student teacher’s primary responsibility is to gain experience teaching; however, there are multifarious expectations of teachers beyond the classroom. Darden, Scott, Darden, and Westfall (2001) plonk that in order for the novice to have a “complete student-teaching experience,” she or he should be engaged in all facets expected of the mentor. “This includes attending important meetings and discussions with other teachers, coaches, and administrators. Each of the team members should understand that shortcuts during the student-teaching experience detract from the mission and the value of the experience” (p. 52). Preservice teachers need enough exposure to the demands on teachers to be aware of what lies ahead, but being overloaded at a crucial learning time can thwart their professional growth.

Besides the demands the cooperating teacher and the university place on the student teacher, the expectations of the host school also tax the student teacher’s focus. All of the participants in our study declared that their administration and colleagues expected student teachers to perform the same professional tasks as their host teachers. A middle school English teacher commented, “At the beginning of the year our principal meets with the student teachers and encourages them to attend sporting events so the students can see them there.” Such specific reference to expectations aids a preservice candidate in recognizing additional professional demands.

However, the presence of the student teacher at faculty gatherings is as important as at student functions. An elementary speech clinician noted,

Our staff is very good about including them as staff members, so if I go to a meeting here in the building, it’s understood that my student teacher will be there with me, and they make him or her feel just as much a part of what we are doing as I am.

This collegial exposure during the practicum enhances the neophyte’s awareness of professional expectations. A middle school special educator elucidated,

If it was a parent-teacher conference, she was there. When I had an IEP conference, she was there. When we had an evening activity, she came. When we had open house for sixth graders coming in, she came back in the evening and did that. And I think it was expected that she do so, and I think she knew that.

These expectations demonstrate a desire to immerse the mentee in the broader context of the professional life of a teacher. The stamina required to face all these fronts with poise and readiness distinguishes those candidates most likely to thrive in their eventual roles as educators. Such specific commitments are com-
mon to the student teaching experience. However, there are occasionally less formal opportunities that arise. An elementary physical educator explained, "An example would be that we take the fifth grade camping. I don't make this mandatory, but my student teachers have always gone on the trip, too." The difficulty lies in there being no definitive policies to draw from. A middle school mathematics instructor declared,

I've had one or two who resisted, who didn't see that in their job description, and they hadn't signed up to, in their minds, participate in this extracurricular thing. My understanding in walking away from my one particularly bad experience is that it would be appropriate for that person to want to participate and you would hope that she would, but it probably isn't a requirement.

Certainly there is more to a teacher's day than conducting her or his classes; however, the school's requirements for a student teacher need to be clearly outlined so that all participants in the mentoring experience are savvy to the school's expectations.

The cooperating teachers in our study identified a plethora of outcomes they hoped their student teachers would gain beyond elemental expectations. The most common that emerged from the data are as follows:

- Serving as a role model
- Understanding and caring about students
- Developing a love of teaching
- Establishing a positive rapport with parents
- Demonstrating professionalism
- Becoming adaptable

These additional goals beyond merely executing instructional procedures cut to the heart of teaching. Because they emerged repeatedly in the interviews, it is evident that teachers recognize these traits as desirable for educators.

A teacher's visibility in the learning environment as well as in the greater community invites students to see her or him as a model. For this reason it is important for educators to reflect on their behavior and make wise choices. A male elementary teacher stated,

As teachers we have to kind of be a role model. I know we can't impose our values, but if we are late coming to school, or if we're coming to school with a hangover, that sends a message. I wouldn't tolerate that in a student teacher. I know the type of teachers I want my children to have. I want them to be moral. I want them to be someone that they can trust.

Veteran teachers understand this weighty responsibility, but it may be more difficult for a young person to be aware of the complexities without direct suggestions from the host teacher. A high school English teacher commented, "I hope they realize they are under scrutiny and therefore must behave as models in every context where they may be observed. How-
ever, it's hard for them to know where to draw the line and understand their identity as professionals." By emphasizing the importance of assuming a professional demeanor in all circumstances, mentors encourage neophytes to see themselves as professionals meeting public expectations.

Participants articulated their desire for student teachers to recognize the diverse backgrounds from which their students come and to understand and empathize with them. One middle school special educator strives to impress on her student teacher the need for "a general acceptance and love for all kids. And a willingness to stay patient and try different things with them." A family and consumer science teacher echoes that notion.

Often student teachers say, "Oh wow, you have to deal with that pregnant girl who doesn’t want anybody to know? You have to deal with the kid who just got beaten up in the hall, and you have to take him to the office with his mouth bleeding? What is much more routine, however, is the kid who just sits there. He has the skills; he's just not going to do it. They are not prepared for that. That is the kid that you need to teach to. You need to anticipate that you will have more of them in the classroom than the hungry little kids who are willing to take your pearls.

This awareness of what kinds of empathy students deserve is essential. Their diverse needs call for diverse supports, and in many cases the school is the only place where such support is forthcoming.

Because an educator should be an advocate for every student in her or his charge, an understanding of the students’ individual circumstances is imperative. In order to learn about one’s students it is vital to ask questions about their out-of-school time, read the local newspaper to note sport and academic achievements, attend PTA meetings to familiarize her or himself with the family, and peruse school files to gain a sense of the students’ history. A high school business teacher asserts that a good teacher is aware of abilities of students, what their home life is like, how to deal with the students, finding out what their interests are. Knowing things that are hurting them or holding them back outside of school can help them then in the classroom in maybe teaching a little differently so that the student can grasp the material.

Recognizing the kinds of issues usurping the students’ energies outside the classroom can lend insights to ways they can better learn in school. Oftentimes simply listening closely when students offer information can provide a wealth of insights into their home and peer cultures.

Another priority voiced by the participants is to help the student teacher to recognize the joys of teaching. A high school English teacher exclaimed, "I hope that the student teacher will learn that this is a great thing to be doing. I love my job. I really do love my job." This love of teaching surfaces across the data. Another high school English teacher concurred, "I hope they would know how dynamic this profession is—how exciting it is—how stimulating it is to a person who chooses
it as a career.” Because teacher job satisfaction is a predictor of teacher retention (Shann, 1998), believing that teaching is a joyous encounter may serve to aid in retention of induction-stage teachers.

Mentor participants hoped their mentees would learn the value of establishing a positive rapport with parents as integral to effective teaching. A middle school science educator noted, "Getting along with parents is probably the most important thing." An elementary educator parroted this, acknowledging the importance of "putting your best foot forward with parents." These experienced teachers avow that a good working relationship with their students’ parents can make teaching a more positive experience.

Another desire the host teachers articulated was to impress upon their mentees the awareness that teaching is a profession that carries with it responsibility. One high school speech teacher explained,

Teaching is a profession. It is not something you need to come into wearing blue jeans and tennis shoes. You’re not there to be good friends with the students; you’re in there for them to learn, and they need to maintain professionalism and keep that line between student and teacher.

For beginning teachers it is sometimes difficult to remain cognizant of the difference in age and status between themselves and their students. Because high school students often do not look all that different from the college students they relax with, preservice teachers may behave less like the professionals they need to be for the job. It often takes time to develop an awareness of the desirable distancing expected.

The final outcome participants looked for was adaptability. The challenges posed by orchestrating instruction while exercising classroom management may seem overwhelming at times, but when those circumstances are upended, a quality teacher is able to adjust plans to go with the flow. For this reason student teachers need to be able to plan lessons subject to unexpected changes in routine. Fire drills, assemblies, standardized exams, and field trips can all throw a tightly knit schedule awry. A family and consumer science teacher elaborated,

Teachers need to be flexible, be able to work with a situation that comes up or a tragedy that comes along. For example we had the death of a student this semester. We had to be able to handle that. You can plan a good lesson, but if something happens can you execute a different plan?

Such occurrences can test even a seasoned veteran, but a rookie needs to be on guard for shifts in routines and feel ready to make adjustments as needed. Demonstrating adaptable leadership in following plans can lessen stress on both the teacher and the students.

Expectations of student teachers come from a variety of investors and take formal and informal shapes. For this reason upon receiving only subtle indicators of
what is expected the student may fall short of meeting those outcomes. It is essential that all stakeholders in the process be forthcoming with explicit descriptors of what is expected with guidance regarding how such performances can be achieved. Whereas the novice may take her or his lead from those who model desirable professional behavior, mapping out the intricacies of such expectations can be mutually rewarding.

References


