Growing, Nurturing, Developing, and Supporting

"The Acorn" is a newsletter for the cooperating teachers working with student teachers from the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University. This publication is intended to help our cooperating teachers understand their roles and responsibilities as well as provide them with current research and best practice on working with student teachers.

Let's Start at the Very Beginning…Preparing to Host and Mentor a Student Teacher

Inviting a student teacher into one's classroom can be a daunting task, but it can also be one of the most rewarding personal and professional development opportunities a veteran teacher can have. I can remember my feelings each time I was asked to host a student teacher—anxiety, fear, joy, pride, relief, excitement, and combinations of those in play with one another at any given time. It didn't take long for me to realize that my student teachers were often feeling those same emotions in magnified form throughout their experience. With that realization, it
became increasingly important for me to be purposeful in how I supported my student teachers and how I mentored others in hosting student teachers in their classrooms.

Like teaching our own students, hosting and mentoring student teachers requires development of relationships, strong communication skills, establishing expectations and systems, and clearly designed supports.

Student teachers come to our classrooms with “the best of what we know from research and practice about effective teaching” (Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 3), but they have limited experience in how to effectively manage, juggle, and reflect upon the many responsibilities and needs of day-to-day teaching. While we can be confident that our pre-service teachers come to the classroom very prepared for the responsibilities of student teaching, we must remember that they are expected to take on what a veteran teacher has been doing. That in itself should remind us that support, nurturing, and mentoring are important facets of our roles as cooperating teachers. And, there is much we can do to assist our student teachers in “apply[ing] the theoretical knowledge acquired in their teacher preparation programs to the complexity of real-life teaching” (p. 2).

As we plan for our students’ learning and support, we can also plan for our student teachers’ learning and support. Research has suggested that student teachers (and new teachers) need three types of critical support: personal and emotional support, task- or problem-focused support, and critical reflection of teaching practice (Kzanznak, 2014; Pitler, 2016; Staake, 2018; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). Following are ways to provide assistance to student teachers in each of these areas.

**Personal and emotional support**—Student teachers often find their first experiences in the classroom to be challenging as they are dealing with competing demands from the university, the needs of the classroom and understanding the norms and expectations of a new environment. They can become fatigued and may feel isolated in the process. A cooperating teacher can be of great assistance in promoting emotional well being, connectedness, and positive culture.

*Provide an orientation to the building, to staff, to the ‘unwritten rules’ (Pitler, 2016)*
* Treat them as a colleague (Cox, 2012)*
* Check in at the beginning and the end of the day, and many times throughout (Podsen & Denmark, 2000; Rudney & Guillaume, 2003)*

**Task- or problem-focused support**—Much of the on-the-job training of becoming a teacher revolves around understanding the logistics, expectations, culture, and customs of a school. From lesson planning to conferencing with parents, from grading to where to make copies, from disciplining students to navigating the faculty lounge, the assistance of veteran teachers can help student teachers become more comfortable, effective and independent in their daily work.

*Include student teachers in your process—lesson planning, grading, establishing class expectations (Pitler, 2016; Podsen & Denmark, 2000)*
*Explain what you do—have the student teacher shadow you throughout the day and explain processes and choices; don’t assume the student teacher knows why you’re doing what you’re doing (Cox, 2012; Rudney & Guillaume, 2003)

Critical reflection of teaching practice—A hallmark of our program at CSB/SJU is that our students are encouraged to be reflective practitioners. Yet, how to do this in the busy daily life of a teacher can be challenging. We know as veteran teachers that it is easy to be self-critical when lessons don’t go as planned or when students don’t perform or behave as we want. Having the ability to work through these issues is important in building skills and confidence.

*Debrief, debrief, debrief—take time to review lessons, actions, strategies, and moves the student teacher makes throughout the day in a timely manner (Pitler, 2016)

*Establish a time for regular reflection (Podsen & Denmark, 2000)

*Keep a journal of comments, reflections, and ideas to share together

*Model reflection for the student teacher

As cooperating teachers, we know our role in preparing the next generation of teachers can be a big one, but we also know that this can be rewarding. As with anything that is meaningful and purposeful, it will take time and energy. But, that time and energy will undoubtedly be time and energy well spent.

References:

What to Do the First Few Days

The first few days as a cooperating teacher are important in setting up the student teacher for success. Prior to the student teacher’s arrival, it is especially helpful to:

*Review the cooperating teacher handbook and student teaching handbook

*Connect with the student teacher and university supervisor

*Make arrangements for the student teacher in your classroom by setting up a workspace, gathering materials, providing internet access

*Inform appropriate individuals of your planned student teacher including support staff, department or team members, and parents/guardians of your students.
Once the student teacher arrives, ease the student teacher into their new role as would be done with any scaffolded unit. A gradual progression is often best for our student teachers, regardless of how competent and confident they appear upon arrival (Henry & Weber, 2016, p. 5). Student teachers have had experience observing and teaching mini-lessons or units, but the entry into full responsibility has a steep learning curve. Allow your student teacher to:

* Observe you and other staff members
* Participate in planning and staff meetings
* Collaborate on a few lessons prior to gaining individual responsibility
* Team teach
* Be observed by you
* Receive specific, guided feedback on strengths and improvements

At the end of each day of those first few weeks, visit with the student teacher about how they are doing, what plans you have, how they can contribute, and deliver any feedback you have about the day. It is best to be transparent, upfront, and clear! Student teachers appreciate honestly knowing how they are doing. It helps calm their nerves and assists in building communication.

**First Week Documentation**

In the first week of being a cooperating teacher, please complete:

Cooperating Teacher Information Form

AND

An informal observation followed by discussion with specific, guided feedback (nothing submitted to the university; this is for the student’s benefit)

**Cultural Competency and Culturally Relevant Teaching**

Beginning in 2020, Minnesota teachers seeking Tier 3 and 4 licenses will be required to have cultural competency training. Some may see this requirement as just another set of meetings and workshops, but I see this as an exciting and relevant step in professional development, reflection, and equity building in classrooms and schools. Recently, I attended a Cultural Competency Training session hosted by PELSB at Lakes Country Service Cooperative. (If you are interested, more information can be found at https://mn.gov/pelsb/board/news/?id=1113-376976)

The training walked participants through the gist of the legislation, provided opportunities to connect with other educators from around the state, and offered materials and insights that
are relevant to the ways in which we think about culture, equity, and access for our students. In that training, participants were encouraged to develop a goal that would put our learning into action, and mine was to include relevant information or ideas regarding cultural competencies and equity for cooperating teachers. A few tidbits will be shared in each edition of *The Acorn* this year.

Culturally responsive teaching is not a new idea. Geneva Gay published *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Practice, & Research* in 2000 outlining that culturally responsive teaching brings students’ experience, cultural knowledge, and learning/performance styles to their learning in ways to legitimize what students already know. By bringing this knowledge into their teaching and classrooms, culturally responsive teachers create communities that reflect their students and provide means for students to learn, develop, and grow. Culturally responsive teachers recognize and transcend their own biases and preconceptions to mediate learning opportunities and to shift paradigms to equity and access for all.

As the school year begins, I encourage you to consider the Equity Literacy Framework in which Paul Gorski challenges educators to be “a threat to the existence of bias and inequity in our spheres of influence” and to recognize the knowledge and skills that prepare us to “root bias and inequity out of our classrooms, schools, and communities” (p. 10).

As we consider our work this year, let us examine our abilities to:

*recognize* even the subtlest biases and inequities in classroom materials, interactions, and policies.

*respond* to biases and inequities in the immediate term (in classrooms, meetings, other contexts)

*redress* biases and inequities in the long term (in materials, systems, practices)

*create and sustain* a bias-free and equitable learning environment (expressing high expectations for access and equity)


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