

The Acorn

A Newsletter for CSB/SJU Cooperating Teachers

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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.



The Importance of Building Relationships

As our student teachers have entered their new classroom placements and familiarized themselves with the expectations of the university and their cooperating teachers, I am reminded of the vital role cooperating teachers play in helping our young people develop as educational professionals and in providing tools for their pedagogical and management tool boxes. As we know, it is in these placements that student teachers have extended opportunities to observe and engage in what it means to be a teacher, building opportunities and relationships that are stronger and greater than those developed in practicum assignments. I cannot help but think about how important relationships are in that process; thus, this issue's focus article is on the value of a quality relationship between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher.



A critical element in a successful student teaching experience is the relationship built between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher. Building a working relationship grounded in mutual goals and open communication is necessary to a productive environment. As the leader in the classroom, it becomes the cooperating teacher's responsibility to "establish a supportive emotional and professional climate" (Henry & Weber, 2016, p. 19). While this seems to be a natural element of the student teaching set up, it is important to be intentional about the climate and relationship that is established early on in the student teaching experience. Not only does a collaborative and supportive environment help student teachers develop their confidence (Hawkey, 1997; p. 328; Rajuan, Biejaard & Verloop, 2007, p. 238), it helps all stakeholders grow their craft (Palmer, 1998, p. 144). And, isn't that the purpose of student teaching?

According to Palmer (1998), if we want to "grow in our practice" (p. 141), we need to associate with the community of fellow teachers "from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft" (p. 141). Implicit in that idea of community is the concept of relationships. Sergioivanni (1996) noted that communities are "organized around relationships and ideas" (p. 47), the heart of the student and cooperating teacher situation. So, how do we create this? In *Preparing for a Student Teacher*, Henry and Wallace (2016) advocate for actively building a sense of "our" (p. 20), essentially, a supportive, professional community that exists in the connections between the student teacher, the cooperating teacher, and the environment of the school. To actively build that relationship, climate, and community, cooperating teachers should:

- *Be available
- *Spell out expectations
- *Establish and maintain communication
- *Give the student teacher options in pedagogy and management
- *Include the student teacher in all aspects of school (p. 20, 22).

Being available goes beyond physical presence. Availability involves having an openness to questions or being a listening ear, having empathy and objectivity (Henry & Wallace, 2016, p. 39). Availability recognizes the value of the person as a person in order to provide time for that individual. A second part of building the relationship is the clear articulation of expectations. Expectations may be ground rules for the classroom, established by contracts or schedules, or tied to roles in and out of the classroom space (Crane, 2009; McNulty & Quaglia, n.d.; Rajuan, Beijaard & Verloop, 2007, p. 226). Without a doubt, communication is the key to a quality relationship and the most difficult of each of these responsibilities. Having daily check-ins and weekly reviews of skills and strategies will help the student teacher to feel supported. Setting aside time to address and reflect on difficult situations will help the student teacher. Often our communication challenges come from differences in personalities or generation gaps (Henry & Wallace, 2016, pp. 26-27). Rather than see these as impediments, if we re-vision personality differences to complementary perspectives and our generational gaps to offering dimension, we can develop a greater, broader understanding of the thoughts and ideas that may have been in conflict with one another. Next, providing options for your student teacher to have choices with pedagogy and classroom management allows them to experiment within a place of trust and safety. Palmer (1998) refers to this as the "heart of authentic education" (p. 89). It is in making choices, following through with them, and reflecting on their successes or failures that we learn for ourselves; we develop experiential memory. Finally, the student teacher/cooperative teacher relationship does not exist exclusive of the school environment, so the cooperating teacher should introduce, nurture, and support opportunities for the student teacher to be involved throughout the school community. Student teachers need collaborative and personal relationships beyond the classroom in order to further create a "sense of 'we' from the 'I' of each individual" (Sergioivanni, 1996, p. 47).

Let me close with this dandy tidbit from Daggett and Nussbaum (n.d.): Positive relationships and learning environments nurture and cultivate brain health, encourage engagement, and have a notable

effect on neurogenesis and brain plasticity (p. 7). If this is truly the case, developing good relationships will help us learn better and keep us young.

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Moving into Weeks 3 & 4: What are the Cooperating Teacher's Responsibilities?

Now that student teachers have been oriented to the school and classroom, it is time to provide more opportunities for involvement in the classroom. The CSB/SJU Student Teaching and Cooperating Teacher handbooks outline a schedule for building up teaching time in order to ease the student teacher into a place of greater responsibility. However, if the cooperating teacher and university supervisor deem the student teacher ready to take on more responsibility and teaching time, time may be added to those guidelines. It is still important to be available and assistive, but the opportunity for additional teaching time may be in order. It is also OK to keep to the provided guidelines. Knowing that every student teacher comes with different levels of skill, confidence, and readiness, the guidelines are just that--guidelines. As noted in the previous newsletter, a gradual progression is preferred, but levels of competency and comfort must be part of that decision.

In these weeks where the student teacher emerges as the primary teacher in the classroom, the role of the cooperating teacher often shifts from that of model to facilitator and mentor. The cooperating teacher facilitates learning for both the student teacher and the students, providing curriculum, strategies, and supports for the learning process. Mentorship comes into play with developing organizational strategies, performing observations, and providing feedback that is specific, honest, and clear. Additionally, the cooperating teacher serves as a mentor throughout the edTPA process in helping to select the central focus, lessons, and class in which the edTPA will be performed.

So, what are the areas of focus for the cooperating teacher in the next few weeks?

*Conduct informal observations with feedback

*In the 4th week of the student teacher's experience, conduct one formal observation using one of the following forms:

[Student Teacher's Instructional Evaluation](#)

[Student Teacher's Observation and Disposition Evaluation](#)

(Please forward the emailed copy of the observation to your student teacher's university supervisor.)

*Make sure your student teacher is completing the weekly schedule (submitted to the university supervisor) and providing lesson plans 24 hours in advance of teaching a lesson.

*Assist in the edTPA process. Refer to the following links for more information:

<http://edtpaminnesota.org/resources/edtpa-minnesota/>

https://secure.aacte.org/apps/rl/res_get.php?fid=1619&ref=rl

*At the end of week 4, complete the following form:

[Cooperating Teacher's Mid-Placement Evaluation of Student Teacher](#)

Documentation Required for Weeks 3-4

In your student teacher's 3rd and 4th week, please...

*Observe—informally and formally (see the observation forms above)

*Complete the mid-placement evaluation (see above)

A Voice from the Field: Week 1 Reflection

The following document was prepared by Luke Olley, secondary English student teacher as a reflection on his first week as a student teacher. With many teacher candidates shying away from the middle level, this is a good reminder of how necessary we are in the lives of adolescents. This also provides perspective into the eye-opening nature of the first weeks of student teaching. Thanks to Luke for being willing to have this published.

Week one has been an eventful one, to say the least. I've broken up two fights, been told to go &^%\$ myself by a student, and I already feel that I have been at [my placement] for much longer than four days. I was somewhat nervous going into a middle school classroom, having spent more time in a high school setting; I have always envisioned myself as a high school teacher. My first couple days of student teaching has challenged that belief. Middle schoolers can be oppositional, easily distracted, and still quite immature, but they wear their hearts on their sleeves, and there is never a shortage of energy. There have been a few instances this week that have stuck with me.

The first instance is that of the hallway in general. Despite me towering over every child in the building, I find that I have a level of anonymity while standing in the hallway during passing times. I see small, mice-like sixth graders dart in and out crowds as they try and get to class. I see groups of friends chattering, talking, or admittedly, shrieking as they greet one another. I see eighth grade couples holding hands, side hugging, or even a quick peck on the cheek. I also see fights, arguments, and a lot of posturing of who can be the alpha of the hallway. As hectic and uncontrollable as it can be, I see it as a raw representation of their personalities. I see them navigating identity, hormones, and their own social standing. They just see me as the bearded giant who stands outside [the cooperating teacher's] room.

Another notable experience happened today, when I did a little name game to prove that I could name all my students. If I got their name wrong, they got a piece of candy. As I explained the rules, I could

see many of my Somali students smiling to each other, positive that I couldn't get their names. In one of my classes, I have five guys named Abdi. It was going to be a challenge. But, to their surprise, I got all of them right, albeit I did struggle with pronunciation. Ironically, it was the white kid's names that I struggled with. One of the Abdis flat out told me he didn't think I could do it. This simple act of getting students' names correct may seem fairly innocuous, but their behavior prior to the activity leads me to believe that other practicum students, subs, or student teachers struggle with naming them. Naming a student shows that they are valued in the classroom.

The last notable experience is a somber one. My sixth hour class is co-taught and has a number of students with accommodations, many of which include behavior disorders. A lot of big personalities. One of my students had been flouting classwork all week, and seldom to never does homework. My cooperating teacher has informed me that he is raised by a single mom, who is often not home due to work. He has also witnessed her be physically abused by different boyfriends. Throughout the week, it was a constant battle keeping him on task. As soon as I got him reading/writing, and I turned to work with another student, he'd put his book down and pick up his phone, iPad, or start talking to anyone near him. This afternoon, I sat down with him and gave him undivided attention, yet he still wouldn't read. He'd give the typical, "I don't like reading," or "This book is boring." I prodded further, I asked him if he struggled reading. He denied it, just saying he didn't like it (a lie). He could decode just fine, but I figured he struggled with the comprehension part. As I asked more questions, I could see his guard let down, and I could see his shame and disappointment. It destroyed me. I felt so helpless, knowing that given his socioeconomic status, it was very unlikely that he would get the individual help that he needs to catch up. I also knew that if this was giving him fits, high school English would be a gauntlet. And I realized that I'll have to see him tomorrow, and the for the next seven weeks. And I know that there are others like him in his class, in his school, and in my future classes. It is galling to know that not all of my students will be successes. I will have students that will fail, but will keep moving up grade levels because districts don't want to hold them back. It is a sobering reality, a teacher hangover that I don't know when will go away. As I talk to teachers in the lounge, hallway, and classrooms, I don't know if it ever will.

Submissions Welcome!

Submissions to this newsletter are welcome from stakeholders in the CSB/SJU student teaching process. Send copy, pictures, etc., to Jennifer Meagher at jmeagher001@csbsju.edu.



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