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Robert A. Duke, Chair TMEA Research Committee
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Cooperating Teachers’ Perceptions of Student Teacher Needs

Debbie Rohwer  
*University of North Texas*

Effective teachers have a complex, interactive battery of skills at their disposal that they use to develop the musicians in their program. Research literature has attempted to describe traits of effective teachers through investigations of component parts that are evident in those teachers that have been cited as being effective. For instance, Goolsby (1997) compared expert and novice teachers and found experts to be less verbal and more specific in their feedback. And VanWeelden (2002) found that visual characteristics such as teacher dress impacted students’ perceptions of effective teaching.

Many studies have described traits of effective teachers through a combination of three basic categories: musical, instructional, and personal; with Kelly (2007) finding musical skills to be rated highest, Rohwer and Henry (2004) finding instructional skills to be rated highest, Rohwer (2009) finding that personality was rated highest, and Teachout (1997) finding that personality and instructional skills were rated higher than musical. Some of these differences in perceptions may be attributed to age, experience or ensemble setting of respondents; high school band students rated musical skills highest (Kelly, 2007), however senior citizen and middle school band students (Rohwer, 2009), pre-service and experienced teachers (Teachout, 1997), and faculty (Rohwer & Henry, 2004) rated musical skills lowest.

In addition, studies have documented field experiences and student teaching as important parts of socialization and skill acquisition involved with becoming an effective teacher (Campbell & Thompson, 2007). Perceptions of inexperienced teachers have been investigated to determine their needs in this pivotal time of learning and growth. These studies have found that preservice teachers documented optimistic perceptions of their skill levels (Richards & Killen, 1993), that preservice teachers of all levels were most concerned about the impact that they would have on student learning (Campbell & Thompson, 2007), and that beginning teachers cited increased support as the main need of preservice teachers (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004).

While literature has stressed the importance of each of the voices in the student teaching triad (the student teacher, the supervising teacher and the cooperating teacher), “the cooperating teacher has received the least attention as the primary focus” (Zemek, 2008, p. 9). Articles have acknowledged importance of the dialogue and reflection that happens as a result of cooperating teacher’s interaction with the student teacher (Krueger, 2006; Stegman, 2007; Strand, 2006), and have investigated the process used to choose cooperating teachers (Zemek, 2008), and have stressed what cooperating teachers should do with student teachers (Fenton & Rudgers, 1988).
Two research studies asked for cooperating teacher input when also asking for the input of other sources; Yourn (2000) documented both preservice teachers’ and cooperating teachers’ concerns over the novice teachers’ classroom management skills, and Conway (2002) documented the agreement of mentor teachers, administrators, and beginning teachers in their desires for a more comprehensive set of courses and an extended student teaching experience. But, there are few investigations that have asked for indepth and focused information from cooperating teachers concerning their perceptions of how the student teaching process works.

The few studies that have asked for cooperating teacher input have tended to investigate student teaching processes. In 1964, Bennie asked cooperating teachers to rate supervising teacher behaviors and found that supervisors tended to cover the student teacher issues a great deal, but were less likely to address the assessment of the students in the classroom. In a non-research article from 1967, Fitzgerald went beyond processes to describe what cooperating teachers wanted in a student teacher; citing issues such as musical skills, humor, admitting mistakes, and flexibility. Additionally, in a qualitative research study of cooperating teachers, Draves (2008) found that power issues were a major theme, with cooperating teachers valuing shared, collaborative partnerships.

There is a need for more information concerning what cooperating teachers think about student teaching and student teachers. It may be important to ask for the guidance of experienced teachers who have served as cooperating teachers, for research has shown that experienced teachers are more critical than less experienced teachers (Madsen & Cassidy, 2005). Specifically, in Texas, where the musical skill level of students is so high, it may be important for experienced teachers to document necessary skills and characteristics of a student teacher preparing for teaching in Texas public schools. The purpose of the current study was to describe the perceptions of cooperating teachers concerning the process, product, challenges, and their vision for student teaching.

Method

Sixteen experienced teachers from the Dallas-Fort Worth area were interviewed to provide the data for this study. The experienced teachers were middle school \((n = 7)\) and high school \((n = 9)\) directors from choral \((n = 7)\) and band \((n = 9)\) settings. 10 males (4 high school band, 2 middle school band, 3 high school choral and 1 middle school choral) and 6 females (1 high school band, 2 middle school band, 1 high school choral and 2 middle school choral) had an average of 19.25 years of teaching (range of 10-32 years, SD = 7.19) and had served as a cooperating teacher for an average of 15.62 student teachers (range of 3-40 years, SD = 9.73). respondents were predominantly Caucasian \((n = 17\), and 1 African-American), and were an average of 42.18 years of age (range of 33-55 years, SD = 7.42).

Interviews were conducted in face-to-face format \((n = 12)\), and also via email format \((n = 4)\). Each interviewee was asked 10 open-ended and 3 demographic questions. face-to-face interviews took an average of 60.16 minutes to complete (range of 45 - 72 minutes, SD = 9.97). questions on the interview schedule were assessed for content validity by a panel of three experts in the field of teacher education and ensemble settings. All face-to-face interview content was transcribed and confirmed by an external evaluator for authenticity. Interview material was coded into similar content categories to provide results for the study. It should be noted that the total number of comments for a question topic area may exceed the number of participants due to some respondents’ in-depth responses that provided multifaceted, overlapping answers.
Results

Results for the current study cannot be generalized to other cooperating teachers due to the small sample size and purposive sampling used. The results can, however, provide an initial view of a group of cooperating teachers’ perspectives on student teaching. Future research would be beneficial from a larger and more widespread group of cooperating teachers so as to direct future knowledge in the area of teacher preparation.

The most common student teacher weaknesses cited by participants in this study were higher-order instructional skills (15 comments), such as breaking down concepts for students, reading the room to modify instructional decisions, being able to digress from a lesson plan to meet students’ needs, and being able to manage while also instructing the class. As one cooperating teacher stated, “The student teachers have the skills they need to be good teachers, they just need more time on the podium so that they don’t get paralyzed by a lack of real world experience; they are worried with what to say next and then they don’t use their ears to hear what is really going on.” Musical skills were also cited as weaknesses (12 comments), including “pragmatic, public-school-appropriate, non-collegiate conducting”, piano skills, beginning literature knowledge, and secondary instrument skill.

In order to rectify these weaknesses, cooperating teachers cited the need for additional collegiate experiences in contextual teaching (14 comments) including additional classes with onsite observations and teaching, classes that experience UIL, and classes that deal with the “nuts and bolts” of real world teaching. Additional instruction in musical issues was also cited (10 comments), including lab groups using secondary instruments, improvisation experience, accompanying experience, and beginning literature courses. The cooperating teachers stated that high school, prospective teachers may be able to get a head start with remedying weaknesses through theory classes (10 comments), serving as a teaching aid (6 comments), Future Music Educator program participation (5 comments), or taking piano lessons (3 comments).

The greatest challenge that cooperating teachers noted with having a student teacher in their schools was getting the student adequate podium time (12 comments). As one cooperating teacher stated, “I struggle with balancing the need for the ensemble to be musically prepared and the need for the student teacher to be able to teach, make mistakes, and learn from the mistakes. This is a delicate balance.” Communication between the supervising teacher and the cooperating teacher was also cited as problematic (4 comments).

When asked specifically about the greatest challenge that they experienced in working with the supervising teacher, communication was the most common response across the cooperating teachers (10 comments), followed by the need for clear expectations in the evaluations of the student teacher (5 comments), the need for more observations of the student teacher (3 comments), and the need for respect of the site and the cooperating teacher’s decisions (2 comments).

When asked about their dealings with student teachers who do not appear to have an appropriate teacher personality, the most common response was to handle the student on an individual basis, sequencing steps for them to progress (11 comments), including teaching them to learn to act out facial expressions that they can apply in class, mentoring them on how to hide their specific weaknesses, and exposing them to social settings with the students so that they can come out of their shell. As one cooperating teacher stated, “I can break down the steps they need to do to achieve for the introverts. Those who don’t want to be teachers are more troublesome for me. I don’t want to give up my class for that.” And, yet, another cooperating teacher added, “Some great directors have terrible personalities. People compensate for their weaknesses in a
variety of ways. Personality can impact retention, but if you are an amazing teacher and musician you can be successful.”

When asked how universities should handle undergraduate music education students who do not appear to have an appropriate teacher personality, the most common response was for university faculty to discuss with those students early on concerning how their personality may not be a match with music education (9 comments). As one cooperating teacher stated:

Advisory feedback is needed with options given to students about other possible degrees and professions. The greatest challenge I see with this idea, though, is that they may have many faculty across the program but in many cases, no one may really know them and track them across the whole program. They could fall through the cracks until it would be too late.

Other cited solutions that universities could consider were the use of personality tests (3 comments), taking acting and leadership classes (3 comments), and teaching more throughout the program to get more feedback (2 comments).

When asked the global question of their vision for how student teaching should “really work” the cooperating teachers tended to agree that if student teachers came to student teaching with a high degree of preparation, that would make the experience better from the start (14 comments). Once in the student teaching setting, cooperating teachers wanted student teachers to experience as much as they could in order to help them be successful in their first teaching job. One other common statement concerned logistics of student teacher placement in two sites across the period of student teaching (8 comments); the cooperating teachers felt that scheduling decision of when the student is in each site should be made in conjunction with public school cooperating teachers and the student teacher so that the most appropriate decisions could be made. As one cooperating teacher stated, “sometimes I get the student teacher in the second half of the fall semester when we are already in full swing; it probably would have been better for them to spend half their day in each school so they could see starting procedures in each setting. That would have been best for the student.”

The most common debate was how to get all of the experiences that student teachers need across the year when student teaching is only one semester. Six cooperating teachers felt the best solution was for student teaching to span across one year. As one cooperating teacher stated:

In most careers, like a doctor, internships are longer. Give them a stipend and make the experience longer. You really can’t be a teacher who is ready to take on their own program without experiencing starting a program in the fall and UIL preparations in the spring: especially if you aren’t from Texas.

Other cooperating teachers felt that one semester sufficed. As one cooperating teacher stated, “I don’t want to give up my class for a year and student teachers don’t get paid. They learn in a semester what they need from me, and then they need to move on.” As another cooperating teacher stated:

They need to observe a lot in their classes so that they see how to start beginners and they see UIL. Student teachers also need to take the initiative to start early if they are in the fall, or stay late in the spring, so that they get the most of their time in the setting.
Conclusions

The current study findings highlight complicated issues associated with student teachers, cooperating teachers, and supervising teachers. Extensive interaction and directed communication between these three entities both before and during student teaching may help make the student teaching time a productive and enjoyable one for the student teacher. Further research on this multifaceted partnership may add ideas to hone and develop the relationship between student teacher, cooperating teacher and supervising teacher.

Since higher order instructional skills were documented as the most common weakness of student teachers as they enter student teaching, universities may want to consider adding to their curricula as many teaching experiences as possible in contextual settings that will allow for real world problem solving. These experiences could also help to improve the musical weaknesses that were cited by the cooperating teachers. Since students differ in their weaknesses, having regular diagnostic measures to assess progress in teaching and musicianship may help instructors organize experiences that can meet student-specific needs. For instance, if one student needs extra practice with piano skills and another needs extra work on clarity of conducting, and yet another student needs practice on giving appropriate feedback, a lab experience teaching opportunity could be set up that would have the one student accompanying while the other student is conducting and the third student is providing verbal feedback as the external evaluator.

In addition to these skill-based needs, cooperating teachers noted that students should experience the school environment, such as attending UIL, before student teaching. University instructors may benefit their students by contacting area region chairs to see if the university students could help with fall all state auditions or spring solo and ensemble or UIL as monitors in the contest and sight reading rooms. While many Texas university students have experienced UIL as high school students going through the system, having students view the process through a teacher lens may help them in their student teacher preparations. As a further preparatory move, high school students can be encouraged to improve their prospects as music educators through experiences in leadership positions and teaching in a variety of settings, whether it be church, karate, or private music lessons. Having high school and even middle school teachers discuss career issues and ask for students to self-assess their interest in teaching could help young students consider and act upon the broad musicianship needs that are required of music teachers. Also, having teachers of all levels have their students conduct, play piano, and assist in the assessment of group learning could help improve broad musicianship skills for all students enrolled in ensembles.

For university faculty, it is important to realize that proactive and regular communication needs to be conducted so that cooperating teacher feels like their voice is getting heard in the student teaching process. Making contact directly with the cooperating teacher and cc’ing all observation information to the cooperating teacher may help aid the teamwork mentality and ease the student teacher’s feeling of being caught in the middle. Communicating all expectations, rubrics, and feedback measures to both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher, as well as discussing and implementing the cooperating teacher’s scheduling preferences for the student teacher may also help in the positive working conditions between the three entities. Once in the setting, having the university supervisor show deference for needs of the setting may be of importance to cohesive and productive workings involved in student teaching. That may mean that the supervisor will need to put aside his/her concept of rightness in favor of deferring to what will work in the interest of the setting and the student teacher.
Universities may also want to consider the best measures for helping those students who may not have an ideal teacher personality. Whether it is advising students regularly or having them take acting classes, protocol need to be in place so that students can be advised appropriately. Especially since students may have many faculty members across their time in a university program, protocol may involve documenting any concerns that a faculty member may note in a class with a student, and then having these concerns be reviewed by all music education faculty so that trends can be noted as a tracking measure across the program.

For those students who clearly don’t want to go into teaching, advising them early into another field may benefit the student teaching settings. Since students who do not want to teach can be a drain on cooperating teachers, it may be important to have the students find out early, through teaching in authentic teaching sessions that the career is not for them; the students might, then, have the time to find their true passion. For those students who unfortunately get to the end of their program and realize that they do not want to teach, advising those students concerning the options available to replace student teaching with courses that would allow them to get the degree without certification may be the best way to avoid burning out cooperating teachers by placing students with them who have no desire to go into music.

Since early preparation of students before student teaching was stated as the most efficient way to have student teaching be a successful endeavor, music educators at each level may want to consider how they can educate the whole musician so that they have the best chance to excel in teaching. In addition, for those universities that cannot change their student teaching class to a year-long structure, it may be beneficial to consider how to integrate fall public school issues into classes for those who will be student teaching in the spring, and spring public school issues into classes for those who will be student teaching in the fall. This by no means is an easy endeavor, but it may be the best way for music education graduates to feel prepared in their first experience as a teacher in the field.
References


