

**“I don’t know if I want to be a teacher anymore”:
The effect of cooperating teacher burn-out on student teachers**

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One of my favorite class sessions in my ‘seminar on teaching’—a course reserved for student teachers about to finish their major—is the one devoted to creating a professional development plan. Aimed at supporting future World Language educators, the cohort of students who enroll in the course is quite small. The general atmosphere is positive, and students feel free to share their dreams and concerns, roses and thorns alike. Teacher candidates share their immediate and mid-term goals, and we, as a group, devise strategies that will help them work successfully toward reaching those goals. As our university motto reads, “Think big, we do.” We underline the importance of continuing to develop their proficiency in their world language (“Don’t get stuck speaking German 102 for the rest of your life!”), remain up to date with new teaching methodologies and research, advocate for language education at the local, state, and regional levels, join and actively contribute to professional associations, etc.

Last March, the situation was different. As I entered the room, I immediately noticed a negative vibe: It looked as if the gray, cold, rainy weather had infiltrated the classroom. I began my class plan. To get students engaged, I asked them a very direct question: “Where do you see

yourself in 3-5 years?”. I posed the question expecting that it would generate all kinds of optimistic answers to be followed by a vibrant, energetic discussion. Instead, I was faced with long, serious faces. Students did not volunteer their answers: I had to drag the answers out of them. The most common reply was, “I don’t know”. I asked Linda (all names in this article have been changed to guarantee anonymity) to elaborate a bit. She went on, “I don’t know if I want to be a teacher anymore.” Her answer hit me like a rock, and I am certain that they could see the surprise on my face. This cohort of student teachers had worked so hard to achieve their dream of becoming teachers, and they were about to give up now that the finish line was within their immediate reach. Linda explained that she felt that most of the teachers at her current placement (a suburban middle school) were manifesting signs of educator burnout. The negativity that teachers manifested was extremely high. That statement did not surprise me as I knew that more than 50% of current teachers are considering leaving the profession and that 90% of teachers say that feeling burned out is a serious problem for them (Jotkoff, 2022). I simply had not considered the significant impact that the attitudes of burnt-out teachers could be having on the future of the profession. In response to this conversation, I did more research into teacher burnout and discovered that it might actually start during the student teaching experience (Fives, Hamman & Olivarez, 2007). As a result of these realizations, the topic of burn-out and, what I view as the opposite of burn-out—sustainable professional satisfaction—became regular segments in our subsequent class discussions; and I made a conscious effort to counterbalance the negative effects that concomitant teacher burn-out might have on our teacher candidates.

During these months I have been able to identify a series of common trends that took a toll on our student teachers’ experiences:

1. Lack of time to devote to mentor, advise and provide feedback to student teachers.

Larkin (2013) underlines the importance of feedback that cooperating teachers¹ provide, and stresses that student teachers, especially during the first months of their experience, reported their need for feedback to be higher than their desire for autonomy. During the last two years the existing pre-pandemic teacher shortages have become more acute. In fact, 80% of teachers reported that, due to unfilled vacancies, their job obligations have increased as they must take over new responsibilities (Jotkoff, 2022). Under such extreme circumstances, it is simply not possible for teachers to devote the necessary time for effective mentorship of student teachers. They cannot meet with them as often as they likely intended and wanted to meet with them, nor as much as the student teachers feel that they need to meet with them. When cooperating teachers provide feedback, some worry about the effect that comments of constructive criticism might have on the student teacher, as they know that student teachers are also under tremendous amounts of stress. One of our cooperating teachers, a strong advocate for social emotional learning, before submitting her evaluation of a student candidate, commented, “There is still a part of me that worries that my feedback could negatively contribute to” the student teacher’s self-image as an emerging educator. But, if cooperating teachers do not provide this kind of feedback, mentorship, and guidance, the student teachers are denied essential opportunities for learning and growth.

2. Exhaustion, low morale, and negativity.

The pandemic has significantly exacerbated what was already a troublesome consequence of the K-12 teacher shortages: The classroom teachers who remain are continually asked to take

¹ Cooperating teachers are certified classroom teachers who guide and support visiting student teachers, usually for a full semester. They serve as mentors, models, instructors, and evaluators in the student teacher program. For more details on cooperating teachers’ role and responsibilities, please, see the University of Rhode Island School of Education “Student Teaching Handbook” (pp. 13-20).

on additional duties, without tangible consideration for or adjustments based on the significant demands of their “normal” duties. Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, stated: “This crisis is preventing educators from giving their students the one-on-one attention they need. It is forcing them to give up their class planning and lunch time to fill in for colleagues who are out due to COVID. And, it is preventing students from getting the mental health support needed” (quoted by Jotkoff, 2022). Their work/personal life balance has suffered, and educators are “exhausted, overwhelmed, feeling unloved, disrespected” (Kamenetz, 2022). During our class discussion, Linda’s comments confirmed that the teachers in her Middle School are part of this trend: She noted that they suffered from “overwhelming levels of stress and fatigue” and she was particularly alarmed by the fact that, “many teachers actually went out on stress leave in my time there”. Likewise, another educator, Anna felt that negative vibes were “brewing in the atmosphere at the school, and the positives seem to be outweighed by the negatives on most days”.

3. Persistent questioning of student teachers’ decisions regarding career choices.

Student teachers reported that multiple faculty members at their placement schools (not only cooperating teachers) often questioned if their decision to become language teachers was a wise one, for example:

- “Are you sure you want to be a teacher?”
- “Make sure you have a plan B”
- “If you leave running and screaming from the building in your first year, we won’t blame you for it!”

Such statements, intended to lower tension, provide some comic relief, and create a more relaxed, humorous atmosphere, were repeated so often that they ended up taking a toll on teacher candidates and motivated them to seriously question their own goals and aspirations.

4. Cooperating teachers' low expectations regarding their own students.

Student teachers reported that on multiple occasions when they tried to implement rigorous class plans and to apply best practices, such as conducting class in the target language, cooperating teachers would shoot down those attempts alleging that their students were not ready or capable of handling such activities. One cooperating teacher at an urban high school stated: "During the last two years, students have done absolutely nothing, and they have continued passing to the next course. Two of my classes at the level III are discouraging, they should be at level I. In previous years students have not even attended classes and they don't know anything. Consequently, our classes are a little unorthodox." Student teachers, such as Meagan felt that distance learning has made classroom teachers "soft and [that they do] not really hold [students] accountable anymore."

5. Lack of confidence in student teachers' abilities.

Despite multiple difficulties that teachers face due to the pandemic, they are still responsible for the learning of the students in their classrooms. They are being observed and evaluated by supervisors and administrators. Student performance in different standardized assessments is being used to judge their effectiveness as professionals, which limits their ability to adjust content and methods to the actual students' needs. After being forced to adapt to an ever-changing environment and spending countless hours on a screen, one of our CTs mentioned that she was ready to teach in "more old-fashioned ways". Consequently, she was reluctant to

give our teacher candidate full control of her classroom and asked her to teach in an old-fashioned traditional way.

The idea is not to simply identify the problem and create a list of all that is wrong. That is only the first step. The key issue is to find solutions to such problems. The future of the profession is on the line. During the semester, I tried to create some habits and strategies that could positively influence the experience of these future educators. I have grouped them under five general epigrams:

1. “Do not be overcome by evil; rather overcome evil with good.”

Present student teachers with a myriad of successful stories, especially those of people with whom they can relate. If possible, invite to your own course recent graduates from your program to share their success stories and experiences with current student teachers. Don't hide the difficulties they encounter but make a conscious effort to close those sessions with positive, high notes, such as asking them to speak about the favorite parts of their jobs. Also, celebrate each little victory of student teachers during the practicum experience. Give them an opportunity to share those victories with their peers and to create a peer-to-peer support system. From a constructivist point of view, we must not forget that learning (which includes learning how to teach) is a sociocultural endeavor. In fact, research has suggested that a constructivist-oriented mentoring style has a positive effect on student teachers, and it also lowers their levels of exhaustion (Burger, Bellhäuser, & Imhof, 2021).

2. Provide even more detailed feedback.

As previously mentioned, teachers are required to do more. This is especially true for cooperating teachers. It is natural that they might not be able to provide the same amount of detailed feedback that they were able to provide in the past. It is the role of the university

supervisor to compensate for that. It becomes crucial that after each class observation, they provide detailed, constructive feedback in a timely manner and devise ways to bring the cooperating teacher into that feedback loop by sharing some of the recommendations offered to the student teacher so that both the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor can support the student teach in tandem. It is also important that we provide student teachers with the opportunity to self-assess the effectiveness of their own teaching and help them cultivate a lifelong learner approach to their own teaching by reflecting on their strengths and areas for potential growth.

3. Underline the good relationships that student teachers create with the students in their classrooms.

One of our teacher candidates (Norma) was placed for the first part of her semester of student teaching in one of the high schools with the lowest graduation rates in the state. Upon my first observation, I commented that her group of students was very well-behaved. She responded that this was not usually the case and that some students' behavior was often disruptive, even when the cooperating teacher oversaw the lesson. Apparently, they were at their best behavior solely because I was observing the class. In her mind, they wanted to impress me. I sincerely doubt that those students wanted to impress a guy they had never seen before and that would have zero influence in their future lives. The motivation that modified their behavior was apparent to me: They liked her and wanted Norma to do well. I shared my perspective and assessment of the situation with Norma, and when the students asked her if she had "passed" her observation, they confirmed my hypothesis. Underlining this fact helped Norma bond with her students.

4. Remind teacher candidates that cooperating teachers do care – about them and especially about their students.

Everyone has the right to have a bad day, especially if you are overworked and under constant pressure. Teachers in our schools have a key virtue that is often overlooked --perseverance. Why do they keep showing up to school every morning? Why did they choose to become teachers? The answer is easy—because they care about the world and about people, and they want to make a difference in the lives of their students by helping them to learn. Sinclair (2008) confirms the findings of Fox (1962) who indicated that two of the four main reasons that motivate individuals to become teachers are, 1) service to society; 2) helping students to acquire knowledge (the other two being their desire to work with children or adolescents, and opportunities to further their own education. Funny enough, becoming rich does not appear to be one of those four!). Many things have changed in 60 years, but not why teachers become teachers.

5. Remind cooperating teachers that what they do is key for the future of the profession.

Show gratitude to and appreciation for your cooperating teachers, clearly and frequently. Despite being accountable to their supervisors and school districts during an extremely complicated time, they have chosen to take on additional responsibilities. They have very little to gain by opening their classrooms to teacher candidates with no teaching experience. Our Teacher Education programs are only possible thanks to teachers like them who are willing to serve as role models and guides for our teacher candidates. Remind cooperating teachers that they are key to making the student-teacher practicum a productive, enjoyable, and formative experience. Foster this culture of gratitude and appreciation in your teacher candidates, remind them that they are guests in another teacher's classroom and that they must respect and follow their rules.

Invite them to have open and respectful communications with their cooperating teachers. Tell your students that their responsibility is to be a helping hand and not a source of additional stress. And never forget that thanks to the hard work of cooperating teachers, our students have grown immensely during their final semester in the program.

Conclusion

“Mentoring a student teacher is challenging and rewarding” (Larkin 2013, 43). The crisis of teacher shortages and the pandemic have only increased the challenges that classroom teachers face. This is also true for cooperating teachers, whose “job” has become even more complex and demanding than before. They are under constant pressure, and this has an effect both on them and on our teacher candidates. As supervisors of these experiences, we need to make sure that our teacher candidates are not a source of added stress for those who open the doors of their classrooms to them. We have to do everything possible to compensate for that potential added stress and to make sure that our teacher candidates have a positive, formative experience. And while doing so, we need to make sure that we let cooperating teachers know how thankful we are. So, I cannot find a better way to finish this article than by expressing my wholehearted gratitude to and appreciation for all those who accept to serve as cooperating teachers. Your hard work is shaping the experience of our future students and of the profession.

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