Principal Involvement in the Student Teaching Process: Benefits for the School

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to assess the extent and type of involvement in the student teaching process by current public school principals and the resulting benefits to the school. A survey was mailed to 94 elementary, middle, and high school principals in two diverse school districts in Louisiana. Forty-nine (52%) surveys were returned. The results showed that principals viewed the student teaching process as being positive. A total of 79 positive experiences were described by the principals compared to 19 total negative experiences. The three major benefits for the school from these experiences were: 1) the student teacher brought new/creative ideas to the school, 2) the student teacher was hired or was a potential hire in the future, and 3) the student teacher was an extra resource for the students/school.

Rising accountability for school performance scores and student achievement have forced principals today to assume multiple roles. These include instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micro political leadership roles and responsibilities (Portin, 2004). The question arises as to the priority principals place on each of these roles, especially given the unending problem of never having enough time to successfully fulfill all the responsibilities associated with each one.

Cushing, Kerrins, and Johnstone (2003) reported that principals work from 60 to 70 hours per week and still do not feel like they have accomplished all of their responsibilities. In a survey conducted by the Milken Family Foundation in collaboration with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, high school principals identified establishing a supportive learning climate, dealing with personnel issues, and providing curricular leadership as their top three responsibilities with a shortage of time being a major factor in the lack of adequate attention to these duties (George, 2001).

The survey also revealed that principals believe that quality of teachers, climate among teachers and administrators, quality of candidates for teacher openings, and parent satisfaction were the four most important factors that determine success for a school (George, 2001). In fact, the teacher was found to be the most influential school-based factor according to Stronge and Tucker (2000). Teachers are the key component in all of the roles of leadership that a principal must assume as well as having the most impact on school and student achievement.

Time invested in the process of training student teachers is a primary way for a principal not only hire the best teachers possible, but also provide for professional growth.
for the current faculty. The purpose of this study was to assess the extent and type of involvement in the student teaching process by current public school principals and the resulting benefits to the schools.

**Method**

Ninety-four public elementary, middle, and high school principals in two diverse school districts in Louisiana were subjects in the study. The cultural diversity within these two districts provides a unique backdrop to the study. One parish is the fourth largest in the state with approximately 44,456 students and 75 schools. The parish includes the extremes in terms of location with some of the most rural schools being located in the northwestern part of the district contrasted to large, urban, inner city schools. The district is 62% black and 35% white; the Hispanic population of the city is growing as well and now three schools have been established to house the English as a Second Language programs. Poverty vs wealth provides more diversity in this area with approximately seven school populations falling in the poverty category, two of which are located across the street from Federally funded housing units. Fifty-five percent (55%) of all children qualify for free/reduced lunch.

The second parish in the study is smaller and more rural as a whole but has the unique characteristic of being home to Barksdale Air Force Base. Thousands of base children, with national and international origins, attend local schools. The nature of the base itself with regard to parents contributes to diversity in terms of needs, as well. The district serves 18,686 students in 36 schools with 41% receiving free/reduced lunch. Sixty-five percent (65%) are white; 30% black and 3% Hispanic.

In addition to these characteristics, diversity in terms of other special populations such as students with disabilities is also noted in both districts. Only 19% of the adults in this area achieve a college education with 79% graduating from high school.

The survey, piloted with a group of graduate students, professors of education and psychology, and former administrators, consisted of 18 questions including demographics, the level of principal involvement, procedures used with student teachers, and three open-ended responses relating negative and positive experiences encountered during the student teaching process (see Table 1). Surveys were mailed to all the principals in the two school districts with instructions for completing the surveys.

Forty-nine surveys were mailed back for a return rate of 52%. Percentages were calculated for objective responses. A content analysis (Stemler, 2001) was performed on the open-ended responses. Emergent coding (Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros, 1998) was used to determine categories and reliability (98%).

**Table 1. Survey of Principal Participation in the Student Teaching Process**

1. Please list each school (name and level) where you have served as principal, the total number of years as principal at that school, the approximate number of students at that school, and the location of the school.
2. Have you ever served as a cooperating teacher in the student teaching process? Yes / No
   If so, please list the number of student teachers that you have worked with on each school level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Number of Student Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary (K-5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (6-8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior High (7-8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School (9-12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. If you have worked with student teachers in any position other than principal or cooperating teacher, please list the position(s), the school level, and the number of student teachers that you worked with at that position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Number of Student Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Do you encourage your teachers to become certified for Supervision of Student Teachers?
   a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

5. Do you encourage local universities to use your school for student teacher placement?
   a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never
6. Do you use the student teaching process as a means to recruit and hire teachers for your school?
   a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

The following questions pertain to actions that might be performed by you or your designee. The cooperating teacher should not be considered as a designee but rather an assistant principal, counselor, coordinator, etc. If you do use a designee please list the position(s) here:

When a student teacher is placed at your school do you or your designee...

7. Introduce them to the staff at a faculty meeting?
   a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

8. give them a copy of the faculty handbook?
   a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

9. review policies and procedures used at your school with them?
   a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

10. offer to observe/evaluate them on an informal level?
    a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

11. assign them to the duty schedule?
    a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

12. encourage them to attend extracurricular activities?
    a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

13. encourage them to meet and talk with the guidance counselor(s)?
    a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

14. encourage them to attend all faculty meetings?
    a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

15. become actively involved in the training of the student teacher?
    a) all of the time   b) occasionally   c) rarely   d) never

16. Do you ever consider student teachers to be a burden/problem for your school and its resources?
    If so, please list the top three situations from the most problematic to the least problematic.
17. Have you ever had any negative experiences with the student teacher process while serving as principal?  
If so, please list no more than three experiences from the most negative to the least negative.

18. Have you ever had any positive experiences with the student teacher process while serving as principal?  
If so, please list no more than three experiences from the most positive to the least positive.

Any other comments or thoughts on this topic: 

Results  
Twenty-eight (57%) of the respondents were male, and the average number of years in a principal position was 7.3. Twenty-four (49%) stated that they had previously served in the role of cooperating teacher. Forty-eight (98%) encouraged teachers to become certified to supervise student teachers all of the time or occasionally; 47 (96%) encouraged local universities to use their school for student teacher placement all of the time or occasionally; and 39 (80%) stated that they use the student teaching process as a means to recruit and hire teachers all of the time or occasionally (see Table 2).

Table 2. Procedures Used With Student Teachers (n=49)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question: When a student teacher is placed at your school do you or your designee</th>
<th>All of the Time</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Did not respond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... introduce them to the staff at a faculty meeting?</td>
<td>42 or 86%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... Give them a copy of the faculty handbook?</td>
<td>34 or 69%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... review policies and procedures used at your school with them?</td>
<td>31 or 63%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... offer to observe/evaluate them on an informal level?</td>
<td>28 or 57%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... assign them to the duty schedule?</td>
<td>19 or 39%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... encourage them to attend extracurricular activities?</td>
<td>33 or 67%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... encourage them to meet and talk with the guidance counselor(s)?</td>
<td>14 or 29%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... encourage them to attend all faculty meetings?</td>
<td>41 or 84%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... become actively involved in training of the student teacher</td>
<td>19 or 39%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions 7-15 assessed the procedures most frequently used by principals in the student teaching process. The two most frequently cited procedures were “introduce them to staff at faculty meeting” (86%) and “encourage them to attend faculty meetings” (84%). The two least cited procedures were “assign them to duty schedule” (39%) and “encourage them to meet and talk with guidance counselors” (29%) (see Table 3).

### Table 3. Level of Principal Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avg. years principal at that school</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served as cooperating teacher</td>
<td>24 or 49%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage teachers to become certified</td>
<td>48 or 98%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage placement with Universities</td>
<td>47 or 96%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teaching process used to recruit</td>
<td>39 or 80%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were 19 total responses to the open-ended question regarding negative experiences with the student teacher process. The most frequently cited negative experiences were: (1) poor performance or ineffective skills of the student teacher-7 responses; (2) high absenteeism of the student teacher-3 responses; and (3) improper dress of the student teacher-2 responses.

There were 79 total responses to the open-ended question regarding positive experiences with the student teacher process. The most frequently cited positive experiences were: (1) the student teacher brought new/creative ideas to the school-23 responses; (2) the student teacher was hired or was a potential hire in the future-22 responses; and (3) the student teacher was an extra resource for the students/school-12 responses.

### Discussion

The principals in this study were obviously experienced with the average number of years 7.3 at their current school and almost half (49%) having served as a cooperating teacher. They seemed to indicate a high level of involvement in the student teaching process collaborating with local Universities as well as promoting the use of student teachers in their school.

Procedurally most responses were clustered between the All of the Time and Occasionally. The assigning of student teachers to the duty schedule, however, showed more variation. Thirty-nine percent (39%) indicated that they assigned student teachers to the duty schedule whereas 33% said they Never assigned duty to student teachers. Most universities expect that student teachers will shadow the cooperating teacher and will participate in duty alongside of the cooperating teacher. That expectation could explain when some principals indicated that they never assigned student teachers duty. Not surprising was the finding that only about half (57%) offered to observe student teachers on an informal level. One would expect evaluation of a student teacher to be of critical
importance to a principal and that this percentage would be greater. Again, the time factor becomes a major deterrent for principals in the evaluation process.

Principals cited only 19 negative experiences related to involvement in the student teacher process compared to an overwhelming 79 positive experiences. This finding supports the view that even busy, often overworked principals, can and do make time for involvement in the student teaching process. It should also be noted that some of the time and effort involved can actually be completed by someone designated by the principal. The principal relies on other staff members at times. “He or she often shows leadership by enabling others to exercise direct influence” (Portin, 2004, p.16).

It is, of course, the negative experiences with student teachers that cause principals as well as cooperating teachers to avoid future involvement in the student teaching process. However, a closer look at the most cited negative experiences indicate that these problems can be solved without much time demand on administrators. For example, high absenteeism and improper dress could be corrected simply by a meeting with the student teaching supervisor from the local university and the student teacher without much time demand on the principal.

Poor performance and inadequate skills of the student teacher, which could create significant problems in the learning process of the students, is much harder to correct and should be a cause of concern for a principal. Principals should not hesitate to step in and correct any situation that would be irreversibly detrimental to the students and their education – even if it means recommending the removal of the student teacher. A collaborative team approach, consisting of the principal, student teacher, cooperating teacher, and college supervisor, will often solve this type of problem. The principal must communicate with the cooperating teacher and have full confidence in his/her judgment during the daily observation of the student teacher. The cooperating teacher should view the experience as a chance to practice and improve supervisory, problem solving, and communication skills (Babkie, 1998), thus making this a positive personal experience as well as a positive experience for the school.

Negatives aside and as supported by the findings of this study, the potential benefits to the school and those involved from a positive student teaching experience are definitely worth the risk. “In a successful experience, student teachers and cooperating teachers will have learned from one another” (Henry, Beasley, & Brighton, 2002, p.67). Student teachers bring new and creative ideas with them including knowledge of the latest technologies.

Principals and cooperating teachers should vigilantly observe student teachers for any skills or knowledge that they possess that may be beneficial to the school. Opportunities should be provided for these student teachers to share the skill or knowledge with other members of the staff (Henry, Beasley, & Brighton, 2002), allowing for teachers to experience leading-edge technologies in their field and to refresh their skills (Babkie, 1998).

With new and creative ideas student teachers can also instill enthusiasm and pride into the cooperating teachers and staff. Weasmer and Woods (2003) noted that a cooperating teacher taught his best when a student teacher was watching and that the interaction with the student teacher motivated him to be the best teacher possible.
Enthusiasm from student teachers can be contagious not only to the cooperating teachers but also to the staff and school as a whole.

The potential hiring possibilities are also a major benefit of principals engaging in the student teaching process. With No Child Left Behind and other school accountability programs come the demands of hiring certified and “highly qualified teachers.” However, according to a report by NEA (Statistics, 2004), Louisiana is experiencing a teacher shortage statewide. The teacher shortage increases the competition for available certified candidates. Student teaching programs are the best source of quality teacher candidates (George, 2001) and student teachers are often hired by the school where they were placed. As noted in this study, 80% of the principals stated that they use the student teaching process as a means to recruit and hire teachers all of the time or occasionally.

The principals’ involvement with student teachers allows them an opportunity to actually observe an individual in a teaching environment and his/her performance in all of the situations that come with it prior to hiring. “In an ideal situation, administrators and selection teams observe promising applicants teaching” (Stronge & Hindman, 2003, p.51). It is extremely hard to gauge a prospective teacher’s potential solely on an interview and resume. Daugherty, Logan, Turner, and Compton (2003) found that with student teachers, an individual’s personal qualities, especially creativity and originality, could be used to predict classroom performance. Student teaching not only allows a school to observe a candidate teaching and his/her personal qualities, but it allows it to be done over an extended period of time in a variety of settings. Even if there is not a job opening presently for the student teacher, he/she can become a potential hire for future needs. The student teacher can also be recommended for employment to other schools in the district, thus still contributing to district improvement.

This study also noted the student teacher as an extra resource for the students and school as a major benefit. An immediately visible benefit for a school participating in the student teaching process is the presence of an additional adult to help with classroom management and instruction. Student teachers can be used in team teaching roles (Weasmer & Woods, 2003). Other assignments could include involvement in extra-curricular activities and student tutoring.

**Conclusion**

Countless demands are placed on principals to fill varied leadership roles while satisfying accountability requirements. Teacher quality directly contributes to the potential for success or failure of the principal in the fulfillment of these roles. A principal must find ways to hire the best teachers possible as well as providing opportunities for professional growth in the current staff.

Principals must allot a portion of their limited time to ensure that their school participates in the student teaching process. Teachers should be encouraged to become certified for supervision of student teachers so the school is qualified to participate in the program. Principals should foster a collaborative partnership with teacher education institutions that service their area. Not only will this relationship place student teachers in their school but it also allows the principal to provide input into the teacher-training program itself. Investment of time in the student teaching process will directly impact teaching thus maximizing the potential for benefits across all areas of school leadership and accountability.
References