

# Requirements, Benefits, and Concerns of Technology Education Cooperating Teachers: An Exploratory Study among Nine Midwest Universities

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## Abstract

Student teaching experience is important in the professional preparation of teachers. Successful teaching practice hinges on the effectiveness of cooperating teachers (CTs) who spend considerable time supervising and mentoring student teachers. Unfortunately, the welfare of the cooperating teachers is often neglected, and this is detrimental to student teaching practice. This study established the requirements of becoming cooperating teachers, the rewards for cooperating teachers and challenges faced by technology education cooperating teachers in five upper Midwestern states of the United States associated with a program at one university. Data were collected from a sample of convenience (eight technology education cooperating teachers for one university), university websites, and interviews with university representatives. The minimum requirements for cooperating teachers ranged from teaching qualifications or license to additional graduate education classes or training. The CTs received cash, free meals or tickets or college tuition waivers as rewards. The CTs cited the following challenges: constantly changing administrative procedures from the students' universities, under-prepared student teachers, and lack of appreciation by the student teachers. Suggestions for improving the welfare of cooperating teachers are provided.

## Introduction

Student teaching has been identified as the most important experience in the professional preparation of teachers (Arnold, 1995). To become effective teachers, student teachers are required to learn what the career of teaching is about and then to practice their teaching skills during student teaching. However, the success of the teaching practice hinges on cooperating teachers (CTs) who will effectively supervise and mentor the student teachers (Coulon, 2000). Cooperating teachers are qualified teachers who are assigned to supervise student teachers during the student teaching experience. Although the cooperating teacher is only one member of the student teaching triad, that is, student teacher, university supervisor, and cooperating teacher, he/she has the most influence on the student

teacher (Koskela & Ganser, 1998). Student teachers have identified CTs as very significant in their training because they spend more time with them than college instructors (Hynes-Dusel, 1999). With so much importance placed on the cooperating teachers, establishing the needs and challenges faced by the CTs becomes important. Essentially, the welfare of the CTs is important as they perform their vital roles in the preparation of tomorrow's teachers.

The processes and requirements for becoming a cooperating teacher vary from state to state. In some states, practicing teachers who meet a minimum number of years of teaching experience undergo formal training through workshops or education courses in addition to their teaching qualifications to become CTs. In all cases, the CTs serve as the primary guide and role model for the student teacher by providing evaluation and feedback (Rio Salado College, n.d.). Other desirable qualities of CTs include: willingness to share students and stand back while the student teacher tries, being a good role model, sharing teaching strategies, possessing a genuine enthusiasm for teaching, exhibiting sound behavior management, and honoring the requirements of the student teacher's university (Smoot, 2000).

The interaction between student teachers and their respective cooperating teachers has several benefits. The Oregon University System (2002) identified six benefits that CTs receive by working with student teachers:

1. Self-improvement, that is, working with students teachers helped to keep them current
2. Caused them to reflect upon their practices and instruction
3. Their students received more attention because of the presence of another teacher in the classroom
4. Increased level of satisfaction because of working with student teachers in a mentoring relationship

5. Camaraderie as the CTs participated in a shared experience and experienced a team atmosphere
6. Re-energizing experience for the CT.

Other rewards and benefits for cooperating teachers include payment (e.g., in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and Utah), and validation of veteran teachers' knowledge and teaching skills (Koerner, 1992). In addition, student teachers can heighten CTs awareness of innovative instructional and management techniques, which the CTs can subsequently incorporate into their own practice (Bowers, 1994). Other authors view the supervising of student teachers as boosting the CTs enthusiasm toward children and teaching (Tannehill, 1989).

Despite the intangible rewards outlined above, CTs also face problems and challenges. Anderson (1993, p. 607) identified thirteen most prevalent problems for cooperating teachers:

1. Not knowing the college's goals and objectives for the field experience
2. Student teacher often absent and/or frequently tardy
3. Lack of expertise in operating instructional equipment by the student
4. Student teacher that does not ask questions
5. Students with difficulties conducting lessons
6. Failure by the students to give clear and precise directions
7. Shortage of time to sit down and work with student teachers
8. Student teachers with inadequate classroom management skills
9. The college/university does not know what the student teacher has done or is doing
10. Student teachers with no interest in getting to know other teachers
11. Student teachers that do not prepare before teaching

12. Unprofessional behavior when interacting with students
13. No assistance from the college/university on working with student teachers.

For CTs, another problem with student teaching is reluctance to opening their programs to student teachers and university supervisors' scrutiny (O'Sullivan, 1990). Based on the reviewed literature, the importance of the CT during the student teaching experience cannot be overemphasized. However, CTs also have needs and may experience problems as they supervise student teachers. Such problems can affect their morale and can ultimately lead to a compromise of their services to the student teachers. Therefore, to maximize the student teaching experience, the concerns of the cooperating teachers should be identified and addressed.

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Study**

This study established the requirements for becoming a CT; its authors reviewed the rewards and challenges faced by teachers serving as CTs in the field of technology education. Specifically, the researchers sought to: 1) describe the requirements for becoming a cooperating teacher; 2) identify the benefits and rewards for the cooperating teachers; and 3) identify the challenges faced by the cooperating teachers. Further, the researchers sought to compare the requirements for becoming a technology education cooperating teacher and the rewards provided to the teacher by universities with Technology Education programs in the following states: Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Recommendations for improving the welfare of technology education CTs are also provided.

### **Method**

A qualitative study approach was deemed appropriate to gain in-depth information in a natural setting (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data for this study were collected from a sample of convenience of eight cooperating teachers (CTs) in western-central Wisconsin. Each CT was supervising a technology education student teacher at the time of the study. All except one of the CTs had previously supervised student teachers. The CTs had 5 and 32 years of teaching experience and five of the CTs had supervised least four student teachers. Two of the CTs had supervised twelve or more student teachers. Because of their teaching experience and role as

CTs, these teachers were considered experts on this subject.

The respondents were asked nine questions pertaining to their demographic characteristics, the process of becoming a cooperating teacher, their responsibilities as cooperating teachers, and the rewards, problems, or concerns for cooperating teachers. The data were collected through open-ended questions sent to the respondents via email.

Additional data were collected from nine state-supported, public universities in Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin offering technology education-for comparison of the process of becoming a cooperating teacher and rewards received by the cooperating teacher. The data were obtained from the student teaching web sites of the participating universities, and telephone interviews with the universities' representatives who coordinated the student teaching programs. This triangulation of data sources (Denzin, 1984) was considered important to ensure accuracy of the data.

## Results

Eight male technology education cooperating teachers responded to the survey. The teaching experience for the CTs ranged from 5 to 32 years (mean =16). Five teachers had bachelors' degrees, and three had MS degrees in related teaching areas. The number of student teachers supervised by the respondents ranged from 1 to 13 and collectively totaled 80. The CTs were supervising student teachers from the same university.

### Becoming a cooperating teacher

The process of becoming a cooperating teacher varies from state to state and also university to university. In Wisconsin, the Department of Public Instruction outlines three requirements for one to become a cooperating teacher:

1. Hold a Wisconsin teaching license and have volunteered for assignment as a cooperating teacher or practicum supervisor.
2. Have at least three years of teaching experience with at least one year of teaching experience in the school or school system of current employment or have at least three years of pupil

service or administrator experience with one year in the school or school system of current employment, and

3. Have completed training in both the supervision of clinical students and in the applicable standards in Subchapter II PI 34.15 (see, Wisconsin Legislative Council, 2002 p.4; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

According to the UW-Stout, School of Education (2005) educational professionals who desire to become cooperating teachers for UW-Stout have two options: complete the EDUC-727 "Supervision of Student Teachers" course or the "Cooperating Teacher Module". EDUC-727 is a 2-credit graduate-level online course offered to participants usually with two years of teaching experience. The second option, the Cooperating Teacher Module covers the framework for teacher education, duties and definitions, policies and procedures, evaluation of a student teacher, and e-portfolios. For further details on the modules, see the University of Wisconsin-Stout – School of Education (2005).

The requirements for becoming a CT for all nine of the universities in the study afford similarities and marked differences. CTs were required to have a minimum of three years experience by six of the nine schools. Seven of the universities required the CTs to hold a teaching certificate/license, and two of these universities required the same type of teaching certificate as the class the CT is teaching and that the student teacher is fulfilling. One university that required a teaching certificate/license allowed an alternative of a master's degree plus 30 hours to equal a teaching certificate/license. A master's degree is required by two universities and preferred by another. One university requires the CT to have tenure and another university requires the CT to live within the city where the university and the school district are located. Another university reported the contracting school district is responsible for any other requirements for the cooperating teacher other than the required teaching certificate/license. Two schools, located in the same state, required a training workshop or specified course offered by the university.

The information for becoming a CT is provided on-line by two of the universities. One interviewee for another university said the

information was on-line but could not lead the researcher to the location. The researchers did locate a link titled *Cooperating Teacher Handbook*, but the link was password protected. One other university had information regarding the rewards of being a CT, but it did not list the requirements for becoming a CT. Five of the universities did not have any CT information on-line.

### **Benefits for CTs as indicated by the universities**

Rewards offered to the CTs by the universities are primarily stipends and graduate tuition wavers. Stipends are given by eight of the nine universities and range from \$25 for a half semester assignment to \$200 for the entire semester. Graduate tuition wavers are offered by five universities and vary from one to six hours of graduate credit. Four of these five universities offer the wavers without specification of courses to use the wavers other than for graduate credit. Two of the universities offer stipends and graduate tuition wavers to the CTs. A senior administrator at one of these universities reported that the current stipend is, “\$75 for 15 weeks of supervision, \$80 for 16 weeks, plus three hours of graduate tuition. The graduate tuition changes each time tuition rates increase, so currently this equals about \$600. For some programs, the waivers also cover “fees and textbook rental.” In addition, she reported that building administrators earn one transferable graduate tuition waiver for each three tuition waivers earned by their teachers. The university tries to group student teachers in sites, so administrators earn more tuition waivers. She said, “These waivers really help out beginning teachers.”

Two universities have certain requirements that must be satisfied to receive tuition waiver or reimbursement. One university requires the graduate student to agree to become a CT before the tuition is waived for the required course. The other university facilitates the coordination of tuition reimbursement to the CT by their state department of education for the required course. A university offered an option of a stipend, graduate tuition waver for one hour, or performing arts event ticket valued at \$125. All of the universities that offered graduate tuition wavers limited the wavers to their university.

A question arises as to origin of the money used to pay the stipend to the CTs. Three universities reported charging student teachers fees

and using the fees to pay the stipend. One informant said this practice was clearly stated in the written material their student teachers received and the student teachers were fully aware of the use of the fee. It is unclear if this is a common practice utilized by the remaining universities that pay stipends.

### **Benefits identified by cooperating teachers**

The majority of CTs felt their main responsibility was to supervise and counsel the student teachers to become successful teachers. Other responsibilities cited by the teachers included preparing student teachers for the workforce, providing leadership and quick coaching up front, allowing yourself to let go as the quarter progresses so they gain independence, and providing constant feedback and insight, overseeing the student teacher in development of curriculum, helping build classroom management skills, demonstrating skills in specific area, and being role models.

The cooperating teachers reported receiving \$50.00 for one-half semester and \$100.00 for a full semester of service supervising student teachers. Other rewards for serving as cooperating teachers include the ability to see the student teachers grow and gain confidence in teaching technology education and gaining new ideas from the student teachers.

One teacher noted, “Seeing the progress student teachers make during the term, getting to work with great people, using student teachers as a resource to see things from another perspective, keep material fresh by using new ideas, and . . . helping me constantly re-evaluate the teaching practices I’m using,” [is my] reward. Another teacher remarked, “Seeing the student teacher come away from the experience with the confidence to operate [his/her] own class, [and] watching how students respond to different teaching methods.” Additional benefits of supervising student teachers cited by CTs were:

“[Become] more aware of what I do right and wrong. I not only evaluate them, I ask them to evaluate me. I also have made some great relationships because of this association.”

“Developing the future of the profession [and] developing personal relationships with others in the profession [networking].”

“Working in a small, one-person department, student teachers break the isolation barrier and bring in new and fresh perspective/ideas.”

“Knowing I have contributed in helping student teachers become good teachers or knowing that I had a part in the continuation of technology education in the public schools.”

“Knowing I made a difference and will make a difference in the future of how technology education teachers teach. Teachers may not receive too many positive strokes from the public or from past students but when we do [from the student teachers] it makes us feel like we have contributed to our future.”

“Many of my student teachers have developed into good friends and colleagues [and this will] continue [through] their professional careers. [Also,] I can provide my students a better learning opportunity with another teacher in the room.”

### Concerns of cooperating teachers

Despite the rewards and benefits cited, CTs face numerous challenges. Many CTs acknowledged having been very fortunate to have well-prepared student teachers from the college. As one teacher noted, “It’s always a lot of work at first but I’ve been very lucky with the people I’ve had a chance to work with. I’m concerned my luck might run out some day.” However, not every cooperating teacher felt the same way. Among the main problems and concerns cited by the CT were administrative procedures that changed very often, lack of communication with incoming student teachers, unmotivated and overwhelmed student teachers, and unprofessional student teachers.

The CTs were concerned with the lack of or changing of administrative procedures. Over the years, the NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) has required a change in data-collection procedures for accreditation purposes. In some cases, the data-collection process has been passed on to the CTs. One CT noted, “[The University] seems to change its forms on almost a yearly basis. It has also been unclear which forms should be filled and by who.” Echoing the confusion, another CT asked, “Why are area high schools holding preliminary interviews with their student teachers? Is this something I should be doing? Is this something they shouldn’t be

doing? I know practice interviews are important, but what is the objective or the outcomes of the cooperating teachers holding these? Are they able to pick and choose who they take after agreeing to take someone initially?”

Regarding the lack of communication with incoming student teachers, the CTs also needed advance information on the student teachers they would be working with and they should be able to communicate with the student teachers before they started their assignment. In some cases, the timeframe in which students are placed at schools for student teaching by their host institutions leaves little time for relaying the information to the CT.

Other concerns cited by the CTs were unprofessional behavior by student teachers, such as improper relations with students, late work excuses, partying during the school week, and improper dressing. In one incident, the “student teacher was getting too friendly with female students. [I] explained repercussions and discussed what I saw, and [the problem] seemed to resolve itself.” On unprofessional dressing, “[A student teacher] came to school dressed in less than a professional manner, [I] discussed what was appropriate for our school environment . . . and that seemed to take care of the situation,” one teacher said. Added to these concerns are “student teachers who do not take constructive criticism.”

CTs also felt student teachers were overwhelmed with work required by their colleges. According to one CT, “the student teachers seem to be so concerned with getting things completed for [their college] that they let the classes take a back seat.” For one of the colleges, the students had to develop an online portfolio in a specific structure and this was very labor intensive and cumbersome. Again, this took away time from the assumed student teaching responsibilities.

Too many useless college evaluations were another concern cited by the CTs. As one CT noted, “the number of things doesn’t really reflect what the student [teacher] is or has learned and what might be areas of concern. I could almost pull an evaluation from my files and write down what the Supervising person from [the college] will write on the first evaluation. Maybe some of these things should be incorporated into [the college’s] curriculum.”

A final concern on the quality of supervision of student teachers by CT was raised. One CT pointed out that, "I know several cooperating teachers who are doing a disservice to their student teachers by their lack of feedback and consistency . . . [student teachers need more guidance, and therefore] placement should be done more carefully."

### **Suggestions for improvement**

To improve the welfare of the CTs, a number of suggestions were presented. Among these were offering incentives to CTs, providing opportunities to interview student teachers, surveying the CTs to establish any concerns, and conducting occasional workshops for CTs to discuss expectations and concerns. Here are some specific suggestions by the CTs:

"Offer a course to provide consistency that is enticing to all cooperating teachers – [and] providing key responsibilities."

"I interview all candidates and make my choice [of the student teacher] based on that interview."

"The free meal offered by [the college] is appreciated to develop consistency among teachers, but offering a course with free credits would interest me more."

"I think [the colleges] need to "evaluate" their programs and try to find ways to better prepare students to deal with students who do not conform to the norm."

"The colleges should give student teachers more opportunities to learn to be speakers."

"Student teachers are required to return to [the college] for discussion days. I think bringing in cooperating teachers for one day per year to update or review paperwork, and discuss expectations would help out a great deal."

Overall, the process of becoming a cooperating teacher varies from one state to another and among universities, even within the same state. To become a CT in some states, one has to attend formal training or take a college course in addition to attaining basic teaching qualifications. Other states as well as universities currently do not require any formal training before a person becomes a cooperative teacher. Despite enjoying their responsibilities, many CTs experi-

ence challenges ranging from lack of clarity or changing requirements and procedures from universities, lack of communication with incoming student teachers, and dealing with unprofessional student teachers. Among the suggestions to improve the welfare of the CT were consistency when dealing with all cooperating teachers, affording the CTs an opportunity to interview student teachers, requiring CTs to attend a day workshop at the college to review paperwork and touch base about student teaching expectations.

### **Conclusion**

Since data were collected from a sample of convenience, the results of this study are not representative of all technology education CTs in the Midwest and therefore cannot be generalized. Furthermore, the data were collected using email (providing the possibility of identifying the respondents) and this may have affected the credibility of the responses provided by the teachers..

Two issues cited by the CTs as concerns that need further analysis were rewarding of graduate tuition waivers as benefits for cooperating teachers and the evaluation of the CTs. The use of graduate tuition waivers in conjunction with a stipend appears to be a novel solution for attracting more CTs. Although not a part of this study, one senior administrator at a university that gave both the stipend and transferable graduate tuition waivers, indicated the university benefited from the graduate tuition waivers by gaining more graduate students. The tuition waivers seemed to help the recipients to pursue and complete graduate programs.

To improve the quality of supervision that student teachers receive from CTs, there is need for an evaluation of the CTs. Because the CTs play such an important role in the training of student teachers, it seems important to have mechanisms in place to measure the quality of their service. The evaluation of CTs can provide useful information for the further training of CTs or the recognition of performers and non-performers. Information from evaluations of this nature could be useful when placing student teachers.

A CT is a volunteer position and not an assigned function of a teacher's job. However, there is a need for the CTs to have a clearer understanding of what they are expected to do

(i.e., college expectations) and be recognized for the wonderful and hard work that they do to prepare tomorrow's teachers.

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