

The Good, The Bad, The Lessons Learned

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## Abstract

This research investigated the impact and effects of participating in a full-time, on-site learning experience in an elementary classroom while completing a pre-service teacher preparation program. The participant in this study served as a long-term substitute in a fourth grade classroom in a local school district that partners with University of Arkansas Fort Smith School of Education. Working with school administration and University of Arkansas Fort Smith School of Education faculty, the participant was part of a pre-service pilot program in preparation for a year-long internship. While serving as a full-time fourth grade classroom teacher, the participant was mentored by university faculty. The mentorship provided regular support and coaching through email, phone conversations, and on-site visits which included modeling of best practices in teaching. Roles of the participant included daily lesson plans, classroom management, differentiation, organizational skills, collaboration among colleagues, administrating and tracking student assessments, accommodation/remediation, and daily teacher obligations (duties, clubs meetings, grading, etc.), while implementing strategies and methods learned previously in the teacher preparation program. Information was gathered to test effectiveness of the strategies learned, improve preparation program instruction, and work with University of Arkansas Fort Smith School of Education faculty and local school districts to plan for full implementation of the year-long internship. The research also provided, from the

participants and the mentors view, valuable information of benefits for both local school districts, the university, and future participants in the year-long internship experience.

### Introduction

The School of Education at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith is working with partnering school districts to find successful recruitment and retention practices for the field of education. One such practice is the potential implementation of a Teacher Apprenticeship Program that will be piloted in the 2019-2020 academic year. One student in the Elementary Education program was offered a long term substitution position in a different partner school for the Spring of 2019. The School of Education made arrangements for the student to remain enrolled in school while being the long term substitute in a 4th grade classroom with the stipulation that the student would share her experiences with university faculty. This paper describes the experiences of that student.

### Literature Review

There is a plethora of literature about first year teachers and the difficulties that they face when entering the field and their reasons for leaving (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004; Riley, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001; Wise, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 1987). Teacher attrition in the US is higher than other countries like Finland or Singapore and it is imperative that we find new ways to retain teachers as a teacher shortage continues. (Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. 2017). According to the Learning Policy Institute (2016), in Arkansas, between 2011-2012 school year (the latest available data) 7.7% of teachers left the profession, 14.2% left the profession or moved schools, and another 6.6% planned to leave the profession.

When teachers leave the profession in the middle of an academic year, the practice in many states is to hire a long-term substitute to teach for the remainder of the academic year or until a certified teacher can be hired. Glatfelter (2006) stated that while classroom teachers must be 'highly-qualified' to teach, substitutes can teach with no training or experience. Glatfelter also found that substitutes would appreciate being involved in the same professional development as certified teachers. The Northeast Nebraska Teacher Academy developed a program allowing pre-service teachers to serve as substitute teachers while still in their teacher preparation program. The hypothesis was that entry level problems facing first year teachers could be lessened by experiencing "real" teaching prior to that first year. The Academy outlined required selection, preparation, support, and compensation for participants. As a result, student participants benefited from more field experience, creating contacts in the field, developing a more realistic view of teaching, and becoming more reflective practitioners than non- participating pre-service teachers Sharer (2009).

### The Good, The Bad, The Lessons Learned

"You will either run *from* teaching or run *to* teaching." I heard these words from my mother more times than I can count. Growing up, with my mother as a teacher, I remember saying to myself, "I am running as far away as I can." I would watch her spend countless hours investing in her classroom and students. The task seemed

exhausting. Over the years, I slowly began to see just how important her job was. Eventually, I began to feel the calling to become a teacher myself. The part of me that loved all things organization and cute classroom decorations was anxious to begin the journey. While the other part of me that had a front row seat to the reality of teaching by watching my mother was nervous. My first experience teaching was nothing like I had expected. Looking back, I say, "Oh my goodness. My mother was so right."

In Fall of 2018, the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith School of Education faculty and a partnering school district administration began the discussion of a year-long paid internship. Together, they decided to take steps toward implementing the program partnership as soon as possible. This new program would allow Practicum 2 students to become the classroom teacher for an entire year while receiving support from the university and school district. During this time, a local school district that I had substituted for reached out to me about an opportunity to be a long-term substitute in an elementary classroom. After conversations with the university and partnering school district, I accepted the position to serve as a pre-pilot study for the program.

Stepping into the classroom, I was not as nervous as I had expected to be on my first day as a classroom teacher. However, that quickly changed when I began to see the challenges that my students faced in and outside of the classroom. When I look back on my first experience teaching, I think of one student in particular who taught me more than I could have ever imagined. Frank walked in my classroom after I had been teaching for about two weeks and pulled me aside to say, "Mrs. Dean I'm sorry if I fall asleep or act different today. I was up all night taking care of my sibling who was sick, I did not get to have dinner or breakfast, and I have not taken my ADHD medicine." He

went on to tell me that the night before, his parent had left him with the task of cleaning up the bed the children shared that was covered in vomit. Frank did not have the cleaning supplies or knowledge of how to clean it up, so he laid in it all night. After discussions with the school counselor administration, I began to see the importance of this “job”. This job is not just any job, it is a calling. Frank needed me to love him where he was. He was not concerned with what my teaching credentials were or how many hours I had spent on lesson plans. Frank needed someone to love him in that moment and provide a safe place for him to just be a kid. Needless to say, Frank got to sit behind my desk that morning to eat and lay his head down. Oh, and he was also eating the head lice out of his hair. That was definitely not in my lesson plans for the day.

Over time I began to build a relationship with Frank and my other students. I learned that each student in my class had a unique set of needs. I had to find a way to reach every single one of them in a short amount of time. It seemed impossible and I began to get discouraged. I found this attitude was beginning to transfer over to my students. I quickly learned that the key to success was communication. I had to *listen* to my students in order to know what they needed. One day that will stay in my memory forever was the day that Frank came into my classroom with the worst behavior I had ever seen him display. Frank walked in screaming, yelling, and hitting students. After I was able to somewhat calm him down, students began eating their breakfast. Frank’s surprising behavior continued and he began stealing students food and licking it. If you have ever been in a classroom first thing in the morning, you know that there are a million things to do. I had my nice little checklist of things to accomplish in a short amount of time, and Frank’s behavior was messing it all up. Frustrated, I escorted

Frank out of the classroom and to the counselor's office. After my morning checklist was complete and all students had been dropped off to their activity class, I welcomed Frank back into my classroom. Tears streamed down his face and the first words out of his mouth were, "Please don't kick me out of your class. I promise I'll be good and do whatever I have to do to stay with you. Please don't get rid of me." Frank began telling me the heartbreaking story of how the police came to his house the night before and evicted him and his family. They had spent the night in their car. He was worried that he would get taken away from his family and never see his house again. He had gotten kicked out of his house, and I had just kicked him out of our classroom. My stomach sank. If only I had taken the time to listen to him and understand what was causing his behavior. This was a hard lesson I wished I had learned earlier.

After completing seventy-nine hours of coursework to prepare me for the field of education, I felt fully prepared to begin teaching. The university faculty invested time and resources into me to ensure that I had the knowledge necessary to become a teacher. However, upon entering the classroom I realized that knowing what to do, and actually doing it were two completely different things. I had written what felt like one-hundred lesson plans during my college courses. I was shocked when a lesson plan that normally took me forty-five minutes to write now took me an hour and a half. I began to think about lesson plans in a different way. I was no longer planning a lesson for the content, I was planning a lesson for *my* students. Factors that I had never had to consider included: I wonder if my students will come to school with their medicine? I wonder if my students will eat dinner the night before this lesson? I wonder if my student will sleep in their bed the night before this lesson or if he/she will be up all night

trying to find a foster home? The lesson plans slowly became less about my knowledge and agendas and more about my students.

The lessons I have learned through this experience are invaluable. This opportunity provided hands-on experiences that have further prepared me for my career in education. I have had the opportunity to learn the day-to-day routines and responsibilities of a classroom teacher while learning classroom management and curriculum instruction strategies. By experiencing these responsibilities first hand with the support of the school district and university faculty, I feel more confident when looking forward to my “first year” of teaching. At times when I felt that I was not capable of moving forward, I received support from my fellow teachers, school administration, and university supervisors.

While the experiences mentioned above were crucial to me growing as an educator in my skills, there was more to this experience. This opportunity allowed me to solidify my calling. I am no longer likely to be part of the 7.7% of teachers that leave the profession. Teaching in my classroom took every ounce of knowledge, passion, energy, and love that I had. I walked into the classroom determined to be the best math and science teacher the students had ever known, and walked out hoping I provided students with the opportunity to witness someone loving them, investing in them, and believing in them. There is not a textbook in the world that can teach someone to love students so much that your nightly dinner conversations with your husband include, “You’ll never believe how much Frank grew today! ”. To me, teaching is more than a lesson plan. It is more than cute classroom decorations. It is more than the perfectly



outlined agenda or checklist (as much as I love them). It is loving students where they are and helping them get where they need to be. Whatever it takes.

Moving forward, I am eager to carry all of the lessons that I have learned through this experience and apply it to my own classroom. I used to be afraid of not being perfect. Now, I welcome it because it shows growth. I strive to be a lifelong learner that is never “comfortable” where I am. I am so thankful to work in a profession where I know there are people ready and willing to support me. Teaching is a group effort. I am so thankful that I had the opportunity as a long-term substitute to participate in the professional development that the school district provided. I was also very grateful to have the opportunity to work closely with master teachers in team meetings and PLC meetings. Walking into the classroom is a shock that cannot be described. If you are an intern, seek every opportunity to step out of your comfort zone and do not be afraid to try something and fail. If you are a teacher, love your students and reach out to other teachers to support them and be supported in return. If you are a building administrator, encourage your teachers and give them the resources that they need to be successful and in turn your students will be successful.

Teaching is an art that can never be perfected. Whether you have been teaching for one year or forty years, there is still room for growth. The good far outweighs the “bad” and the lessons learned will be invaluable. Two things should always be remembered: Love your students and seek growth.

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