

A Qualitative Study of the Student Teaching Timeframe

Sally E. Arnett-Hartwick

Illinois State University

Recently, a Midwestern state university family and consumer sciences (FCS) teacher education program extended the length of student teaching from 10 to 16 weeks. To determine if the extension was a positive move for the program, a pilot study was undertaken. Interviews were conducted with university supervisors who supervised student teachers for two different timeframes: one of a 10-week duration (Spring 2013) and another of a 16-week duration (Spring 2014). Stakeholders cited the additional time available for the student teachers to progress as the most notable reason for the six-week extension. This study provides support for extending the student teaching timeframe in FCS programs.

Student teaching is considered the final clinical capstone experience in teacher education programs. This field-based assignment involves supervised teaching in a prekindergarten to 12th grade school setting and is often viewed as the most challenging, rewarding, trying, and enlightening component of student teachers' entire teacher education preparation (McMahon-Giles & Kent, 2014; Pena & Almaguer, 2007). In the United States, student teaching ranges from 10 to 15 weeks in length (National Commission for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010).

Emphasis on teacher candidates' clinical or in-school experiences has gained attention by U.S. policymakers as a result of the need to improve the quality of teachers produced by teacher education institutions (National Council on Teacher Quality [NCTQ], 2011). Promoted as an effort to improve teacher quality, the NCTQ recommended extending the student teaching timeframe. In fact, extending the length of student teaching has become a national trend as well as a requirement of NCATE among teacher preparation programs. Some researchers, however, have not been convinced that lengthening the student teaching time will not develop more effective, thoughtful teachers; instead, they advocate for more attention to quality than quantity during the student teaching experience (Clift & Brady, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 2005; Dewey, 1938; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). So one question for consideration within teacher education is: Is more time necessary for student teaching?

Existing research literature related to the student teaching timeframe and its effects are limited (NCTQ, 2011; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012) especially in the area of family and consumer sciences (FCS) teacher education. Therefore, the research objective of this pilot study was to determine the qualitative impact of extending the student teaching timeframe in the FCS teacher education program at a Midwestern state university. This study will provide qualitative evidence for program evaluation as well as a resource for other teaching areas considering the student teacher timeframe.

Review of Literature

During the typical student teaching experience, student teaching candidates must synthesize everything they have learned about teaching from their three to four years of coursework. This includes planning instruction (collecting or developing instructional materials), developing teaching lesson plans, using student learning styles/theory, establishing

and maintaining classroom management, practicing lab management (culinary, textiles, Pre-K), implementing evaluation and assessments, and meeting the expectations of the cooperating teacher and school site as well as that of the teacher education program.

The duration of student teaching varies from institution to institution. While 39 states set a minimum length for student teaching, about half require that student teaching last at least 10 weeks, which is widely accepted by the field of teacher education to be the minimum acceptable duration (NCTQ, 2011). The average range for student teaching, however, is between 10 to 15 weeks (NCATE, 2010). Interestingly, in international comparisons, student teaching length ranges from three to 80 weeks (NCTQ, 2011).

A report by the NCTQ (2011) found secondary school district superintendents often express dissatisfaction with the caliber of teachers coming out of many institutions. To improve the teacher quality, U.S. policymakers and educational professionals have called for teacher candidates to spend more time in the classroom, including extending the length of student teaching. Extending the time for student teaching is based on the assumption that teachers learn from experience so more experience is valuable (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). Some researchers, however, have found more is not inevitably better (Chambers & Hardy, 2005). Dewey (1938) cautioned that experience is not necessarily educative, and can be mis-educative if there is a lack of quality. Similar, Darling-Hammond and Cobb (2005) contended that if the interactions the candidate gains in the schools and classrooms do not enhance the quality of learning, then more is not better. To illustrate this, for example, after the “newness” wears off, the cooperating teacher eventually may revert to a status quo environment that becomes more custodial in orientation and in their supervisory role of the student teacher. The focus, then, needs to be on quality rather than quantity.

Of the limited research available regarding the student teaching timeframe in general teacher education, there have been mixed results. Chambers and Hardy (2005) found no differences among student teachers in one versus two semesters of student teaching when they examined the variables of classroom management, self-efficacy beliefs, and self-perceived teaching ability. Likewise, Ronfeldt and Reininger (2012) suggested the duration of student teaching has little effect on teacher outcomes specifically in instructional preparedness, teacher efficacy, and career persistence. While studies provide limited support for extending the student teaching timeframe, each concludes that the quality of the experience is imperative in student teaching (Clift & Brady, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 2005).

In support of more time for student teaching, Spooner, Flowers, Lambert, and Algozzine (2008) found more time and experience provided opportunities to identify areas in need of growth and development and to hone skills the supervisors identified as lacking for student teachers. Also, reported were more time to develop a relationship with the supervisors and an increased comfort level with knowing school policies and procedures. Additionally, Silvernail and Costello (1983) observed a reduction of anxiety among student teachers who participated in a semester long practicum.

Context of this Study

A Midwestern state university FCS teacher education program extended the length of student teaching from 10 to 16 weeks. To determine if the extension was a positive move for the program, a pilot qualitative research study was undertaken. University supervisors were selected as the subjects for this study because the same supervisors worked with student teachers in Spring 2013 when the required timeframe was set at 10 weeks and then in the next cycle Spring

2014 when the change was made to 16 weeks. This provided consistent subjects with working in both timeframes. Additionally, research examining the perspectives of university supervisors, in comparison to student teachers and cooperating teachers, is rather sparse and outdated (Brown & Steadman, 2011). Therefore, this study contributes to this area of the body of knowledge in teacher education.

Methodology

Objective

The research objective of this pilot study was to determine the qualitative impact of extending the student teaching timeframe in the FCS teacher education program at a Midwestern state university.

Method, Respondents, and Data Collection

A descriptive research design using interviews was implemented in this study. Interviews allow the interviewer to understand in a qualitative way the perspectives of participants (Kvale, 1996). Specifically, an in-depth interview technique with open-ended questions provided the structure for the interviews. The researcher developed a set of tailored interview questions to answer the research objective. Questions were pilot tested with two university professional educators to determine internal consistency and were revised to reflect the suggestions from the professional educators prior to data collection. Interview questions included:

1. Describe the perceived benefits for extending the student teaching timeframe for student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors.
2. Describe the perceived negatives for extending the student teaching timeframe for student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors.
3. Reflect on your thoughts about student teaching length at 10 weeks and at 16 weeks.
4. Explain your perception of the student teachers if they received the same experiences and were prepared for their own classroom at 10 weeks as those who student taught for 16 weeks.
5. Describe how you approached your role as the university supervisor from 10 weeks to 16 weeks.

Because of the small number of student teachers, data were only collected from two female FCS university supervisors who supervised student teachers in Spring 2013 for the 10-week experience and Spring 2014 for the 16-week experience. Independent interviews were conducted in the Summer of 2014. These interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and were audio-taped. Narrative analysis was used to analyze the data. The data was transcribed and categorized then an expert panel of reviewers reviewed the established data and finally, the data was summarized and interpreted.

Findings

The research objective of this pilot study was to determine the qualitative impact of extending the student teaching timeframe in the FCS teacher education program at a Midwestern state university. The FCS teacher education program extended student teaching from 10 weeks

to 16 weeks in Spring 2014 which exceeds the national U.S. average of the student teaching timeframe (NCATE, 2010). Overall, the data collected from the university supervisors provided support of the additional time student teachers were required to complete as opposed to the previous timeframe of 10 weeks.

Respondents were asked to share the benefits they perceive for the student teacher, cooperating teacher, and themselves [university supervisor] related to the extension. The most common response was that the extension “allows the student teacher to start with students from the beginning of the semester.” One university supervisor noted that “the extra weeks allowed for students to become more comfortable and see a regular progression with this time length because before student teaching started towards the end of February.” The second University supervisor added that the extension “also allows the cooperating teacher and the student teacher to learn about each other and develop a positive comfort level before the cooperating teacher trusted the student teacher with their classes.”

The perceived benefit for the time extension among cooperating teachers from the respondents was the increase in comfort or trust level with their student teacher. One supervisor explained:

Many cooperating teachers are reluctant to release their classes in fear of the student teacher’s teaching ability in content knowledge and/or delivery of essential and correct content or just plain ownership of the class. It helped the cooperating teachers that were not as comfortable passing off classes have more time to become trusting of the student teacher and pass the classes off with more ease and confidence.

The final perceived benefit of the student teaching extension was targeted at the respondents themselves. The common response was more visits were possible which allowed for time to develop and correct concerns. One supervisor commented that “there is more of an opportunity to see real growth and maturity with the student teacher. In the old method [10 weeks] we would just see the beginning of development.” Although both respondents were asked to describe any negatives they perceived with the student teaching extension, neither of them thought there were any disadvantages to extending the student teaching timeframe to 16 weeks for all involved stakeholders.

With respect to the length of the student teaching experience, participating university supervisors agreed that 10 weeks was too short. One indicated:

There was a great deal of pressure and not that much time to correct problems in 10 weeks. In 16 weeks, student teachers have a greater opportunity to bond with the students given the longer period of time. As a supervisor I have more time to see the students and deal with issues. It allowed time to explain the new process to the teachers and have time for questions and answers. I felt we had time to process everything this session.

Another noted that “students were just getting into the swing of the semester and then it was all over! The 16 weeks allow for the students to become more comfortable with the school, cooperating teacher and their students. It made an enormous difference in their comfort level.”

When asked, if they felt that student teachers “received the same experience and were prepared for their own classroom at 10 weeks as those who student taught for 16 weeks”, both respondents stated, “yes.” However, each added an explanation for her responses. One supervisor explained, that she thought “some students were able to make 10 weeks work for them, but, for the most part, 16 weeks provided more experience in the classroom and the assumption is that the more time in the classroom equals more preparedness for their first year of teaching.” The second supervisor also clarified her response:

I think they were prepared in both instances. I see the difference in the time for processing. The student teacher has time to absorb criticism and make corrections and see positive results. There is time for more positive reinforcement. There is time for the student teacher to evolve and succeed with the 16 weeks. They also have more experience when it comes time for job interviews.

When asked how her approach to the student teaching experience as a university supervisor differed between the 10 and 16-week experiences, one supervisor commented:

I visited often and early in this semester [16 weeks] process to make sure ‘we’ were all on the same page. The last semester [10 weeks] I allowed time at the beginning for the student teacher and cooperating teacher to get to know each other. That was a mistake. I think starting early on and explaining what needs to be done keeps everyone on task and focused. In some situations I found the cooperating teacher using the student teacher to take over a bad class they couldn’t even control. I realize I am here to protect the student teacher from being used. They are here to learn and not babysit a teacher’s class.

Discussion

The FCS teacher education program at the Midwestern state university responded to the call from U.S. policymakers as well as dissatisfied secondary school administration to produce a more qualified teacher workforce by extending the time in the classroom, specifically the student teaching timeframe. The research objective of this pilot study was to determine the qualitative impact of extending the student teaching timeframe. The findings suggest that the extension positively impacted the program.

While findings in this pilot study, like previous research (Chambers & Hardy, 2005; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012), indicated that more student teaching time is not necessarily needed for student teacher success, the respondents provided insight into why the extension could benefit the program. In essence, the additional time available to process, develop relationships, take on classes, correct concerns, and increased time for meaningful visits, and growth were considered important in this study. As one supervisor noted, that at end the of 10-week period, she was just beginning to witness development in one student teacher and then the experience was over. The additional time that allowed for development, corrective action, and reflection for student teachers in this study was also reported by Spooner, Flowers, Lambert, and Algozzine (2008).

Like Silvernail and Costello (1983), the extension of the student teaching timeframe also increased the comfort level between student teachers and cooperating teachers. The added weeks allowed student teachers to start at the beginning of the semester as opposed to two months into

the semester thereby giving student teachers time to bond with the students and their cooperating teachers. Although Dewey (1938) and Darling-Hammond and Cobb (2005) indicated they felt that more student teaching time is not necessarily better if the quality is lacking, the respondents in this study perceived the extension was positive and quality was not an issue. As one supervisor alluded to, with the extended timeframe both parties were able to learn about each other, their roles, and the school climate which increased their comfort levels dramatically. Furthermore, this allowed cooperating teachers who were reluctant to release their classes to the student teacher feel more at ease with the transition.

Finally, for logistical purposes, responding university supervisors supported lengthening the student teaching timeframe. The six additional weeks allowed the university supervisors to strategically schedule their visits to observe progressive development. Also, meeting the cooperating teachers before the start of the semester allowed for a brief training session that reduced the ‘unknowns’ associated with their role.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the university supervisors involved in this study supported lengthening the student teaching timeframe from 10 to 16 weeks for the FCS teacher education program at a Midwestern state university. According to this pilot study, the time available to progress was considered the most identifiable benefit for all stakeholders (student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors). Respondents indicated they perceived the extension served positively for the FCS student teachers they observed and ultimately for the good of the program and efforts to produce quality teachers.

This research pilot study provides qualitative data to support extending the student teaching timeframe in the FCS teacher education program at a Midwestern state university. This study provides one perspective that could be considered by teacher education programs considering changes in the length of the student teacher timeframe. Additionally, this research shares the perspectives of university supervisors often absent from teacher education research.

While not previously mentioned nor the focus of this study, the new state-mandated Educational Teacher Performance Assessment (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2015), will require extensive time to implement during student teaching and the six weeks added to student teaching will be helpful in completing this assessment for the FCS teacher education program. To close, this pilot study provides some evidence that time to progress within quality conditions was beneficial for this FCS teacher education program at the Midwestern state university where the study was conducted.

References

- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. (2015). *EdTPA*. Retrieved from <http://edtpa.aacte.org/>
- Brown, S., & Steadman, S. (2011). Defining the job of university supervisor: A department-wide study of university supervisors’ practices. *Issues in Teacher Education, 20*(1), 51-68.
- Chambers, S., & Hardy, J. (2005). Length of time in student teaching: Effects on classroom control orientation and self-efficacy beliefs. *Educational Research Quarterly, 28*(3), 3-9.
- Clift, R., & Brady, P. (2005). Research on methods courses and field experiences. In M. Cochran-Smith & K. Zeichner (Eds.). *Studying teacher education: The report on the*

- AERA panel on research and teacher education* (pp. 309-424). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Cobb, V. (2005). *Teacher preparation and professional development in APEC members: A comparative study*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, N.Y.: Touchstone.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- McIntyre, D. J., Byrd, D., & Foxx, S. (1996). Field and laboratory experiences. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* (2nd ed.). (pp. 171-193) New York: Macmillan.
- McMahon-Giles, R., & Kent, A. M. (2014). An exploration of factors contributing to the perceptions of preparedness for elementary candidates in a clinically based program. *ISRN Education, 2014*, 1-6.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2010). *Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers*. Report of the blue ribbon panel on clinical preparation and partnerships for improved student learning. Washington, D.C.: NCATE.
- National Council on Teacher Quality. (2011, July). *Student teaching in the United States*. Available at www.nctq.org/edschoolreports/studentteaching/report.jsp
- Pena, C., & Almaguer, I. (2007). Asking the right questions: Online mentoring or student teachers. *International Journal of Instructional Media, 34*(1), 105-113.
- Ronfeldt, M., & Reininger, M. (2012). More or better student teaching? *Teaching and Teacher Education, 28*, 1091-1106.
- Silvernail, D., & Costello, M. (1983). The impact of student teaching and internship programs on preservice teachers' pupil control perspectives, anxiety levels, and teaching concerns. *Journal of Teacher Education, 34*(4), 32-36.
- Spooner, M., Flowers, C., Lambert, R., & Algozzine, B. (2008). Is more really better? Examining perceived benefits of an extended student teaching experience. *The Clearing House, 81*(6), 263-269.

About the Author

Dr. Sally Arnett-Hartwick is an Assistant Professor and Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Education Coordinator at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois.

Citation

Arnett-Hartwick, S. (2015, Spring/Summer). A Qualitative Study of the Student Teaching Timeframe. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education, 32*(1), 42-48. Available at <http://www.natefacs.org/Pages/v32no1/v32no1Hartwick.pdf>