



Innovative Teacher Prep Program Leverages Substitute Teaching

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by Paul Oh | Jan 30, 2018

Gabby De La Paz, a fifth year senior in the school of education at New Jersey's Monmouth University, is in the middle of an innovative year-long residency that requires significantly more time in the classroom than a typical program.

The year-long residency involves at least 100 hours of clinical experience in the fall (or first semester) and full time student teaching in the spring (or second semester). After one semester, where Gabby also worked as a sub 4-5 times per week, what's her verdict?

"I think that being in the classroom is what teaches you how to be a teacher," De La Paz said recently. "I don't think you can teach how to be a teacher. You have to see it, you

have to experience it. The way to get better is to be in the field."

Fostering Flexible Thinking

John Henning, Dean of the School of Education at Monmouth, couldn't agree more. As the architect of the residency program, still in its infancy, he believes that the more opportunities pre-service teachers have to be in classrooms, the better they'll get at the kinds of flexible thinking and quick decision-making skills needed to be a classroom teacher. And he sees substitute teaching as a great way to provide students with more time in the classroom, honing those skills, as well as providing compensation for that fieldwork. Though the residency program doesn't yet require students to sub, a number, like Gabby, have latched onto the option, not just to improve classroom skills but also to sharpen professional skills, develop a positive reputation in a district where she might seek a job, and try her hand at different grade levels.

Though it's not unusual for teacher prep programs to let their students substitute teach for their cooperating teachers, often that experience is deliberately limited. Monmouth on the other hand embraces substitute teaching writ large as a positive,

generative professional learning experience for its future teachers.

Henning said more exposure in the classroom, whether through a practicum or subbing, allows you not only to develop quick decision-making skills, but also to make those skills automatic. That way, as a teacher, you can effectively manage the many different things that occur moment-to-moment in a classroom full of young people.

"When you're teaching, you have to do 4-5 things at once," Henning explained. "You're watching the clock, pacing your lesson, you're observing how students are reacting to a certain activity so you can assess your next move, you're thinking about what to say to the students next. You can't do that well after reading about it or hearing me talk about it."

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But extending clinical experiences as they've traditionally been arranged presents issues, not the least of which is that for undergraduates, more time student teaching means less time working at paying jobs. Undergraduates in general scrape by during their school years and this added burden would be hard for any student. For those students from lower socio-economic groups, becoming a teacher becomes even less accessible.

"They're not expecting to get rich from this," Henning said of students who want to become teachers. "They just need enough to make it worth their while."

Henning ultimately realized that including a robust level of substitute teaching, as part of an expanded fieldwork commitment for students, could check several boxes. Clinical experience—check. Opportunity to be in charge of a classroom—check. Paid work—check.

Residency Program

The residency program at Monmouth arose after conversations Henning had with Karen DeMoss at Bank Street College of Education, who was promoting the idea as well as ways to support a year-long field experience.

The Monmouth residency program allows a senior education major to spend an entire year in one classroom, with one cooperating teacher. The year is viewed as a school year—rather than a college academic year. The preservice teacher therefore is expected to be present at the start of the school year and at the close, which Henning says provides invaluable experience.

The senior residency, with about 35 students this year, is broken up into two semesters—the first focuses on clinical experiences in which the student is required to be in the cooperating teacher's classroom for 100 hours. After that, the student is required to get a license to substitute teach in the district where she is doing fieldwork but has the option to sub or not. The second semester is deemed the "professional internship" in which the entire semester is spent working in the cooperating teacher's room.

Altogether, there are about 100 teacher student teachers involved in some kind of year-long clinical experience. "They are participating at all levels,"

Henning said. "We have juniors who are substitute teaching in schools and teacher candidates at the sophomore and freshman levels who are working with children in compensated positions. For instance, we have begun a partnership with the YMCA so our students can work with their after school programs. We are offering some scholarship monies and graduate assistantships for participation in the program. Some of our students are compensated for tutoring, helping the teacher, etc."

Changing Landscape

Henning said the entire field of teacher preparation has been moving towards increasing clinical experiences. In fact, the Clinical Practice Commission of the American Association of College Teachers of Education, of which Henning is a member, recently unveiled a report that described 10 foundational elements of an effective, clinical educator prep program. First and foremost, the report states that "clinical practice is central to high-quality teacher preparation."

Henning believes there is great promise in undergraduate students being certified to teach as substitutes. Districts are on board because they need subs, particularly subs who know the school and its culture, such as student teachers. Students are on board because they see an opportunity to expand their understanding of teaching while being paid. And the university believes it is developing better teachers.

In a similar vein, we at Substantial have been aggregating models of college students learning how to sub. Read more about our SubstantialU project as it manifested itself at the University of California, Berkeley.

For all his optimism about the residency program, Henning recognizes that alongside fieldwork there must be theory and reflection. "I'm a great believer in the power of ideas and research, reading and course work, and theoretical work," he said. "And I know that I got better as a teacher because of the reading I did and what I learned from books. Simply walking in a classroom doesn't teach you all you need to know about teaching."

This formula—coupling substitute teaching by undergraduates with seminars on pedagogy and theory, and opportunities to reflect on practice—is leading to powerful

experiences for students. As the residency program flourishes and grows, Henning hopes the wider field of teacher preparation will take notice and help reimagine the important role substitute teaching can play in an expanded fieldwork experience.

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