

Knock, Knock: Who's There?

Paid Student Teaching

Susan Fernandez

Author's note: This story's narrator is a composite character based on student teachers who shared their experiences regarding paid internships through qualitative survey data.

Teaching teddy bears, producing homemade playdough, creating characters' costumes, and recycling instructional resources. This was my childhood as the daughter of a kindergarten teacher. Early on, I experienced the passion, purpose, and power of the education profession. I was determined to follow in the footsteps of my educator ancestors.

Flash forward to my 21st year of life and senior year of university studies. I was continuing to progress in my teacher education program when opportunity knocked *and* unexpected information simultaneously knocked me down.

Across the nation, negative news bemoaning the severity of our nation's teacher shortage flashed across the headlines of multiple media sources. Diverse solutions had been proposed, but the education profession was repeating old patterns by doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different outcome. Hope-filled future teachers continued down the path of traditional student-teaching scenarios while the teacher shortages deepened.

And then something different happened.

During the summer of 2015, the state of South Carolina announced an innovative opportunity for well-prepared student teachers. [State department-initiated internship certificates](#) came into being, and I leapt at the chance to become a teacher of my very own classroom while concurrently finishing the final semester of my educator preparation program. The caveats were significant, but I was ready, willing, and able with a high GPA, my professors' approbation, passing scores on my content area teacher certification exams, and an ambition to excel. The icing on the cake was the news that this would be a *paid* internship.

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Brimming with questions, I remained enthusiastic about the possibility of contributing to the teacher shortage solution in my own backyard and earning compensation as I honed my craft of becoming an exemplary educator.

In the blink of an eye, I went from college student to full-time teacher.

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Will this paid practice persist? My fervent hope is that my struggles and my successes will facilitate positive change and help to enhance our profession. I think about my tale of salaried, solo teaching before graduation with the acronym of BATS: Balance, Acceptance, Team, and Self-Selected Supports.

Balance

The importance of work-life balance was addressed in my freshman seminar course and interlaced throughout some of my educator preparation pedagogy courses. It took my first week of student-teaching to recognize the realities of what balance really meant. My new bedtime became eight o'clock! I had never been so exhausted in my entire life. It was easy to take work home and to obsess over my teacher obligations or to take ownership of student, parent, and colleague challenges. Gaining life balance through this experience added to my resilience and kept me in a positive state of mindfulness and gratitude. Over time and with support, I became energized rather than depleted.

Acceptance

In my capstone philosophy of education paper, I emphasized the acceptance and inclusion of all students. But I soon realized that the power of acceptance is not just about students. I too was seeking acceptance in a new school community filled with experienced educators. I felt like a lone fish in a deep sea, but the slow process of gaining teacher friends, forming harmonious relationships, and letting go of things that really did not matter provided the path I needed to accomplish goals and gain acceptance.

Teams

Being part of a collaborative team is a necessity for novice teachers. My kindergarten team consisted of an eclectic mix of professionals with 3 to 30 years of diverse teaching experiences. Learning is a social process, so growing in my profession with the help of my team was no different from the learning experiences of my students. Planning, prioritizing, praying, and even partying and celebrating together made my internship experience both palatable and pleasurable.

Self-Selected Support

Another component of the internship certificate process is assigned mentorship. Each intern is assigned a mentor. Often, assigned mentors are teachers within the same grade level, so the planning period is concurrent with their mentee's. Sometimes shared time may not be feasible which can lead to challenges.

My saving grace was a self-selected support system.

I found a mentor extraordinaire who was kind, caring, and a kindred spirit. Mentorship is key to a novice teacher's survival, and finding one who fits through self-selection can be more valuable than formally assigned mentors.

The bottom line is that my internship certification semester was a bumpy road that started me on the path to my profession in which I am continuing to love, grow, share, and shine. For that initial experience, I will be forever grateful.

My unexpected knock arrived the fourth week of my internship life.

I received news pertaining to my hero, my first teacher, my confidant, my best friend, and a kindergarten teacher of 24 years: my mom. She was diagnosed with stage five breast cancer. My world was shattered, and within six short weeks, my anchor was gone.

I share this because being a teacher is tough, and if I, as a novice internship teacher, can survive and thrive during a time of trauma and grief, then others can too. My mom taught me to love, appreciate, and “keep on, keeping on.” She wanted to make the world a better place one student at a time.

Everything has come full circle because I am now walking in my mom’s footsteps as a kindergarten teacher who was kindled by the opportunity of a paid internship. This opportunity occurred during a dark time but brought light to my life and the education profession.

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Paid internships are not the only solution to offset our shrinking population of teachers, but it is one of the viable possibilities. It worked for me, and I encourage others to embrace this opportunity. Seasoned teachers and administrators must continue to accept new means of growing teachers and step up as official and unofficial mentors for their newest colleagues: paid interns. Helping to create a team and form new collegial relationships are essential ingredients for the success of both novice *and* veteran teachers.

The face of education is changing. Being open to new and creative means of teacher preparation is a step toward having continual, competent, and caring teachers in all South Carolina classrooms.

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