



Effective Mentoring of Student Teachers: Attitudes, Characteristics and Practices of Successful Associate Teachers Within a New Zealand Context

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INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that student teachers are more likely to have successful practicum experiences if associate teachers demonstrate certain attitudes, characteristics and practices. This is the finding of a research study into the role of associate teachers in preservice teacher education based on collective evidence from a number of associate teachers, student teachers and visiting lecturers. It clearly showed the practicum is an essential and important part of preservice teacher education and its success is dependent to a large extent on the associate teacher and his/her supervision practices (Mayer & Austin, 1999).

The argument is based on my research study (McDonald, 2001) which indicated that an effective associate teacher needs to motivate student teachers, find out about their learning needs, discuss their perceptions about teaching and model effective teaching practice. Associate teachers should also provide regular feedback and ensure that their classroom is supportive of student supervision. Student teachers should have the opportunity to engage in critical reflection. The data collected supported the idea that associate teachers' own personal pedagogy should be effective, that they should have up-to-date curriculum and professional knowledge and should also be clear communicators with the ability to talk and listen to students. The findings confirmed the importance of successful practicum experiences for student teachers in the development of becoming an effective practitioner.

Encouraging and implementing better supervision practices by associate teachers would lead to a higher calibre of student teachers and ultimately improved learning and teaching for children in the classroom. In order for the practicum to realise the potential it has as a significant learning experience for future teachers, changes need to be made based on notions of empowerment, collaboration and reflection. This argument (Dobbins, 1996) aligns with the move over recent years from a teacher-dominated approach by associate teachers to a more learner-dominated approach of enquiry and investigation by student teachers. It has also led to a change from the associate teacher being the problem solver, decision maker and goal setter to the student teacher and associate teacher working together in a collaborative, problem solving way with joint decision making and goal setting.

This paper examines each of the attitudes, characteristics and practices identified as being best supervision practices. It concludes with a discussion of some of the issues and tensions that preservice teacher education needs to address in order to ensure the quality and success of practicum experiences for both associate teachers and student teachers.

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

The research was a case study of four associate teachers in the Auckland area. These teachers work in preservice teacher education in partnership with what was formerly Auckland College of Education now the Faculty of Education at the University of Auckland. The teachers were identified as being 'effective' by student teachers and visiting lecturers. Four visiting lecturers were asked to participate in the study which involved individual interviews. They were invited to participate from feedback received from students and associate teachers. Three groups of six 3rd year students were asked to volunteer to take part in semi-structured group interviews. Data was collected from associate teachers, student teachers and visiting lecturers by means of a semi-structured face-to-face audio taped interview. Their responses were analysed and grouped into common sets of themes; for example - teachers' content knowledge, role models, personal pedagogy, reflection, feedback, communication, personal professional qualities and professionalism.

Practicum involves an interpersonal and interactional process between student teacher and associate teacher. Teaching and learning are therefore complementary concepts and the activities of the student teacher and the associate are linked (Cooper, 1999). In the study, visiting lecturers, associate teachers and student teachers all indicated that the characteristics, attitudes and practices of excellent associate teachers included an ability to motivate student teachers and in most cases be motivated by them. This involved the teachers finding out about students' needs and interests and discussing their own perceptions about teaching practice. All three groups in the study mentioned that associate teachers are able to give regular feedback to student teachers, be supportive, reflective and have a passion and enthusiasm for teaching. According to student teachers this passion needs to be reflected in 'clear interpersonal skills of communication, being approachable and a good listener'. Four of the student teachers also commented that the 'way' associate teachers teach, is clearly reflected in the fun and inventiveness expressed by them in learning activities, and the teaching and learning strategies used. It was also noted by all of the visiting lecturers and student teachers that strong pedagogical practice and curriculum knowledge is essential.

So, what are the attitudes, characteristics and practices of successful associate teachers?

1. Personal pedagogy

Associate teachers should aim to provide student teachers not only with a solid foundation for their thinking, but with opportunities to make connections

between practical experiences and their theoretical knowledge (Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). This was evident in the research findings. Student teachers indicated that associate teachers with a sound knowledge base were able to explain their pedagogy to them clearly. The following comment illustrated the importance they placed on a knowledge base:

Associate teachers have to have content knowledge because you're trying to understand teaching and kids, and if associates don't have the skills or experience to tell you what is happening, it makes a really huge gap.

(Student teacher)

McNamara (1994) indicated that the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter and the skills necessary to apply knowledge in the classroom, are of central importance for practical pedagogy:

To be a successful associate you have to have good curriculum knowledge, you have to have a variety of learning styles you use effectively, and can model them for student teachers...

(Associate teacher)

It is also necessary for the associate teacher to not only have sound subject knowledge but be able to apply this knowledge effectively in the classroom. Shulman (1987) and Reagan (1993) highlight the importance of teachers possessing a sound knowledge base, one that is clearly visible to student teachers. In this study it was generally felt that as student teachers gain experience they might begin to think differently about subject matter, and in fact classroom practice may reshape their pedagogical content knowledge. Knowledge and experience are closely intertwined characteristics of good teachers. Teacher education is characterised by concerns with quality and professionalism, and in order to achieve quality education there is a need for high quality teachers who have sound content and subject knowledge. Associate teachers, student teachers and visiting lecturers alike, confirmed that teachers need to be able to explain their practice while at the same time being critical and reflective.

2. Role models

It was clear from comments made by both visiting lecturers and student teachers that the ability of the associate teachers to model teaching practice and behaviour is extremely important.

I think it's so important for our student teachers to experience excellent teaching and excellent role models because there's a flow on effect. It inspires them, and the idea of having high standards and high expectations of children and achieving excellent outcomes, is essential. A highly proficient practitioner as a role model is vital.

(Visiting lecturer)

All three groups indicated that, for a start, the associate teacher needs to want to guide the student teacher professionally. The associate teacher should be talking about their own beliefs, own thinking processes while at the same time encouraging the student teacher to think more deeply about their own practice. Such a process, with the assistance of an associate teacher, helps student teachers understand and negotiate the process of socialisation which is, as Zeichner and Gore (1990) comment, also inherent in becoming a teacher.

3. Reflection

It was generally recognised by associate teachers and visiting lecturers in the study that it is important for students to develop a critical awareness of their own practice and that practicum does play a vital role in this process. The associate teachers were aware that they needed to ensure that student teachers have opportunities to develop reflective practice. This, as Klenowski (1998) suggests, will encourage them to be innovative and developmental in their teaching and learning. Reflection practiced within a supportive environment encourages student teachers to take risks and be able to articulate on their actions.

Student teachers need to be taught to engage in practice, reflect on practice, and articulate practice, which in turn will better help them understand and improve their practice.

(Visiting lecturer)

The importance of reflection is not for the associate teacher to demonstrate and explain how practice should be carried out, but for the student teacher to be given the opportunity for self-analysis and reflection in connection with their own teaching. The focus then is on how the associate teacher transfers professional knowledge to the student teacher.

4. Feedback

All student teachers mentioned the importance of regular, clear, constructive feedback from associate teachers and the relevancy and necessity of this. This feedback can be in the way of formal, informal, formative or summative assessment. Feedback can be defined in two ways; as information about the quality of work, or the effect it has on learning. Feedback is, as Hinett (1998) suggested, not just looking backwards but also about looking ahead to improve performance and learning.

Student teachers love feedback both oral and written. We can go home and look at it and reflect on the feedback and when we're planning we can refer back.

(Student teacher)

Associate teachers should then be able to provide experiences in teaching practice needed by student teachers to progress and develop. It is often the

continual communication between associate teacher and student teacher, and the constructive criticism and feedback that is needed for this to occur.

5. Communication

The dynamics of the interactions between associate teachers and student teachers is an important issue. Lang (2000) in her research commented that significant numbers of student teachers preferred associates who allowed them to experiment and take risks, and associates who did not expect the student to be a 'clone of themselves'. Students learn by making mistakes and 'having a go'. In the research this was evident where student teachers constantly indicated that they were able to 'try things out' without worrying about the repercussions. This demonstrates confidence and faith in the student.

Just being a good listener, being approachable and friendly, being well organised and a good manager in your class as well, that's what I think is an effective associate.

(Associate teacher)

6. Personal professional qualities

Personal professional qualities such as enthusiasm, flexibility, being supportive and approachable, and having a sense of humour rate highly with student teachers as being characteristics of effective associates:

Having an enthusiastic, lively associate is wonderful - one who truly loves their job with a passion. It stands out in what they say, what they do and is so obvious.

(Student teacher)

Both associate teachers and student teachers commented on the importance of the relationship between associates, student teachers and staff in general at a school. This enhanced the teaching and learning opportunities for all parties.

A positive, professional, collaborative relationship between associate and student teacher involves open and frank communication where constructive criticism can be given and received more easily. Blunden (1994) noted that from a student teacher's viewpoint good supervisors are friendly, approachable and supportive and have pedagogic knowledge and advice to give.

7. Professionalism

It has been suggested that an effective associate is not only committed to the teaching profession but is an articulate upholder of that profession (Mayer & Austin, 1999). They go on to suggest the idea that the associate teacher is acting as a 'gatekeeper to the profession' and they have a central role in building and maintaining teaching as a high status profession. It is about showing a passion and love of teaching and being able to pass this on:

If you didn't love it and didn't like being with kids and having a laugh and things like that you'd just be the worst associate in the world, because you'd just pass on those ill feelings.

(Associate teacher)

Associate teachers mediate student teachers' learning by supporting their acquisition of practical and professional skills (Fairbanks, Freedman & Kahn, 2000) and these skills are so important. This development of professionalism is closely related to the guidance, mutual learning and friendship between associate teachers and student teachers.

ISSUES, TENSIONS AND DEBATES

There are a number of issues and tensions which arise for student teachers and associate teachers during practicum. An important issue relates to the lack of associate training and the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of supervision practice. Other issues referred to by student teachers were the lack of feedback and guidance by associate teachers, and the feeling of powerlessness that resulted from this for students. The assessment practice of passing or failing a practicum was an issue for some students, as were the constraints of working in someone else's classroom. Associate teachers who are directive in their supervision practice, and expected the student teachers to be 'clones of themselves', were mentioned as a concern by some student teachers.

For associate teachers there were also issues and tensions. One associate was concerned about having to hand over her class to a student teacher and then have him/her lose control and management of it. Some student teachers, according to a few associate teachers, displayed an arrogant attitude and the associates felt intimidated by this. One associate teacher indicated that maybe too much time and effort was needed to be put into supervising students for very little professional and financial reward.

These issues and concerns are in keeping with (Groundwater-Smith, 1993: 137) who noted, 'The practicum experience is one fraught with difficulties, dilemmas and challenges as the student attempts to negotiate his or her way along a hazardous path of professional policies and practices'. Student teachers and associate teachers indicated that they dealt with and interpreted these difficulties in many ways. Some had success and saw the issues as a challenge, while other associate teachers struggled with the issues.

In the opinion of many associate teachers, their role was complex and required preparation and training. Being a good classroom teacher doesn't always guarantee a teacher will be an effective mentor or associate teacher. As Edwards and Collinson (1995) argue, 'What our data suggests is that mentoring is not an instinctive activity which can be carried out by good practitioners as another layer of their professional function as class teachers' (p. 9). Mentoring or supervision has a set of skills which have to be learned, and a knowledge base which requires training (Sanders, 2000). It was clearly indicated in the study by all groups that associate teachers need to have this training and preparation:

It is so important for associate teachers to have the training in the required skills of supervision. They have to be effective practitioners and role models for the students. They can't be narrow in their approach. Also the trainers of these associates need to be effective practitioners with current or recent classroom experience.

(Visiting lecturer)

All student teachers in the study expected the associate teachers to have read the practicum brief and been to a briefing meeting beforehand. These meetings are organised and run prior to practicums by preservice staff but it is not compulsory to attend. Teachers, on becoming associates, also have access to training programmes run by preservice staff. Visiting lecturers and student teachers confirmed that these courses or briefings assist in the building up of the associate teacher's knowledge base, and should be part of their professional development and I would support this also. The courses include the skills of supervision and building of reflective practice. However, many associate teachers never attend any form of professional training.

I think it has to be given more than just lip service. I think it actually has to be resourced and that means staff.

(Visiting lecturer)

Because the importance of supervision for student teachers can't be underestimated, processes that promote the involvement of student teachers in reflection and action are said to have the most successful outcomes (Gibbs, 1996). Price and Sellars (1985) indicate that 'excellent supervisors use basic principles of clinical supervision in that they are collegial, non-directive and supportive rather than coercive in style and seek to foster professional autonomy in students under their care' (p. 21). The skills of collaboration, reflection, feedback and support are skills which result in more effective supervision practices of student teachers by associate teachers.

1. Issues for student teachers

There were several issues mentioned by student teachers. They felt that some associate teachers were being neglectful in their approach through their lack of feedback and offering little guidance to them.

One associate I had actually only allowed me to teach what she said I could teach. There was no collaboration and then I had to plan it all myself with no guidance.

(Student teacher)

I was often left to fend for myself with no feedback or guidance. I sort of got left to do it and I felt neglected.

(Student teacher)

Cameron and Wilson (1993) commented that these neglectful and directive styles are characterised by low student-teacher satisfaction and low communication between student and supervisor. Students mentioned that when provided with these styles they had been afraid to take risks because there was little collegiality and support from the associate teacher.

A few student teachers also said that some associate teachers wanted the students to be 'clones' of themselves which allowed for very little experimenting:

There are some associates out there who believe their way is the best way and you know they are very reluctant to change in any way and that becomes difficult for student teachers.

(Student teacher)

2. Issues for associate teachers

One issue for an associate teacher was the student losing control over the class and then leaving the associate to 'put it all back together'.

A number of times I've had my class turned upside down and then away goes the student. It's taken me usually about a week to get them back on track.

(Associate teacher)

For this associate the stress of dealing with this type of incident was too much and had become a serious problem. This follows on from another associate who had dealt with some student teachers who were arrogant in their attitude. Under these circumstances it was difficult to build up any sort of professional relationship. One associate commented that she had been intimidated at first by the professional language the student used. Several associates also mentioned the time and effort that had to be devoted to be an effective associate, and they listed feedback, discussions, reflections, and disruption to the classroom as some points. The initial enthusiasm, dedication and sense of mission in these instances were replaced with expressions of stress, reluctance to have students, and dissatisfaction with the role of being an associate (Sanders, 2000).

In the light of this information it is clear that there are a number of issues and tensions highlighted by both associate teachers and student teachers. Associate teachers observed that student teachers should be prepared to assume some responsibility for their learning processes within practicum. Conversely, associate teachers should also be prepared to assume responsibility for their role in supervising and guiding student teachers into the professional role of teaching.

CONCLUSION

It is clear there is evidence of strong links between associate teachers and student teachers in practicum experiences. The evidence strongly

demonstrates the importance of positive practicum experiences along with excellence in supervision by associate teachers. The quality and success of the practicum is dependent very much on the role and effectiveness of the supervising teacher (Koerner, 1992). As this study indicates, observation of successful associate teachers who effectively model teaching practice will lead student teachers to innovation and development in their own teaching practice.

For preservice teacher education it means that associate teachers need to be trained in supervision practice which includes identifying the purposes, styles, approaches and the ability to develop effective supervisory relationships. It also means that associate teachers need to keep up-to-date in terms of professional knowledge, curriculum knowledge, learning and teaching styles, and resources in order to be successful and effective associate teachers. And for teacher education, it indicates that associate training and being an associate teacher needs to be funded and available in recognition of the status and importance of the role.

Encouraging and implementing better supervision practices by associate teachers would lead to a higher calibre of student teachers and ultimately improved learning and teaching for children in the classroom. The importance of associate teachers as supervisors has been clearly established. It follows then, that their views on teaching and learning, their curriculum and professional knowledge, and their interpersonal skills are important for student teachers to observe in the development of their own pedagogy and teaching style. The importance of a successful practicum experience for student teachers has been well documented and the role of the associate teacher is crucial to this success.

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