Effective Mentoring of Student Teachers: A Further Contribution

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INTRODUCTION

Lyn McDonald's helpful, well-written article in a recent issue of this journal (Volume 1, Issue 2, 2004) highlighted the important role associates play in the development of student teachers. Drawing on relevant literature and her own research, she outlined the attitudes, characteristics and practices of successful associate teachers. The main factors in the associate teacher/student teacher relationship were systematically considered. Both the associate and the student teachers' personal pedagogy were seen as important, especially the associate teachers' ability to articulate their practice and to help the student teacher link theory and practice. In acknowledging that associates are role models for student teachers, the article emphasised the importance of providing examples of best practice, the basic premise being that students on practicum need to be exposed to excellent teaching. Again, the ability to talk about practice and to encourage student teachers to think more deeply was highlighted. Reflection (that is, critical awareness and self-analysis) was alluded to as essential if student teachers were to be innovative during their practicum, and if their teaching experiences were to result in development. All of these aspects were dependent on the associates' ability to give feedback.

Several important issues were emphasised in the article and the conclusion contained some serious calls to action. I would like to contribute to and extend the discussion on three of these that I consider to be of paramount importance. In doing so I will refer to insights gained from two surveys conducted amongst associate teachers in Tauranga. Eleven associate teachers from the same school completed the first survey (Survey A), and the results contributed to a Masters thesis on practicum experiences (Sanders, 1999). The second survey (Survey B) was a replication of the first one, but this time it was completed in 2004 by 57 teachers from the wider Tauranga area who have been associates for student teachers from Bethlehem Institute. The questionnaire yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. The number of participants meant that neither of these surveys produced a result that could be generalised. However, analysis did lead to some interesting and helpful conclusions, some of which will be included in the discussion here.

The literature is full of descriptions of the ideal mentor, which were well summarised for us by Lyn McDonald. However, the literature also advises us that many associates fall short of this ideal (Fairbanks, Freedman & Kahn, 2000; Sanders, Dowson & Sinclair, 2005). Therefore, the question of professional development for associates is very relevant, indeed pressing. One aspect of this training must focus on strategies available to the associates to

help them articulate their professional knowledge, as this is a key component of a successful practicum, and certainly a desire on the part of the student teachers. The end goal of any training must be the associates' increased confidence and competence. Teachers who feel a sense of fulfilment in their role will bring to it the passion and commitment that is required to make the practicum the pivotal experience suggested in the literature. So let us now look more closely at these elements, particularly the training and status of associate teachers.

TRAINING FOR ASSOCIATE TEACHERS

A key motivation for accepting the role of associate teacher is altruistic. Practicum supervision is seen as an opportunity to contribute to the new generation of teachers, with many associates wanting to give something back to the profession. They recognise they have knowledge to offer, and they want to support new teachers. Some also hope to inspire the student teachers to gain some of the passion the associate has for teaching in general, and children in particular.

> *It's important to encourage new people to teaching. I have enjoyed my career and want to repay something back. Perhaps my experience can help others.*
>
> *I consider myself an expert teacher and I therefore have a professional responsibility to mentor new teachers.*
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> *I hope that I can help inspire (student teachers) in some way.*
>
> *I enjoy fostering student teachers into their chosen career. I have a passion for teaching. I believe experienced teachers have something to offer.*
>
> *Basically it comes down to your heart for it. We should only take on the responsibility if we have the heart for it. It was when I was a student that I had such a cool associate that I thought, 'That's what I want to do one day.' So I do it because I want to.*

Combatting complacency

So, if associates hold generous and giving attitudes towards mentoring, why do some associate teachers volunteer for their role, then demonstrate neglectful supervision? Why do others who take their role seriously, still find no interest in attending professional development/training sessions designed to enhance that role? There appears to be an element of complacency amongst some associates. When asked what support they would appreciate as associate teachers 44% of the teachers in Survey B either made no comment or said they did not need any support. This could possibly show that as experienced teachers they feel they have all the necessary skills already, or at least enough to get by on. However, a more likely explanation is the busy life of a teacher. There is no doubt that time is a key factor in this issue (Ganser, 2000; Gore, 1995), and that lack of time not only reduces effectiveness as a mentor (Turner, 1995), but also makes attendance at workshops and seminars less

attractive. There is a great deal of pressure felt in many of our schools today, with very full curriculum expectations, meetings, extra-curricular activities, large class numbers and so on. Associate professional development is just another extra meeting at the end of an already complex, unpredictable, taxing day.

Recognition of roles

There is broad agreement that associate teachers are key contributors to pre-service education (Beck & Kosnik, 2000). There is a clear link between a positive practicum experience and excellence in supervision. But there are many reasons why associates do not actively seek to enhance their mentoring performance. We have already discussed the influence of time-consuming expectations on the associates.

A less obvious contributor to the lack of interest in training for supervision are the conceptions held by associates about their role. As Beck and Kosnik (2000: 208) explain, there are two broad definitions of the mentoring role. The first is the practical initiation model, which emphasises the practical role and sees practicum as an apprenticeship that provides an initiation into the realities of teaching by supporting the student teacher sympathetically. In this approach associate teachers tend to focus on specific teaching events rather than teaching in general – the nuts and bolts rather than the ultimate goals.

The second definition relates to a critical interventionist model where associate teachers encourage questioning of current practice so as to develop theories of teaching and learning. This critical dialogical approach requires the associate teacher to engage in giving feedback and advice, as well as modelling reflective practice. The associate seeks to not only support but also challenge the student teacher. This approach is more time consuming than the first, and requires a discrete set of skills.

However, many associate teachers completed their training at a time when practicum was accorded a socialising role, before the current emphasis on reflective practice and critical enquiry. Many experienced a dichotomy between theory and practice themselves, and expect it to still be present today, unaware that teacher educators now value negotiation, dialogue, reflection, enquiry and collaboration (McDonald, 2004). In Survey A, all the associate teachers named gaining practical experience as the major focus of practicum, and 82% admitted to seldom speaking about the theory of teaching to their student teachers. In Survey B, two-thirds of the teachers stated the purpose of practicum as giving hands-on experience of classroom reality and allowing student teachers to practice their craft in a supportive environment. Only 14% spoke of their role as helping the student teacher put theory into practice.

> *The theory is important, but most of the learning is done when we are working with children.*

There is often still the attitude that the real learning happens for the student teacher in the classroom, not the lecture room, and that it is the practical tasks that truly educate, not the theory discussed in the university. Such responses could show that associate teachers do not necessarily recognise the raft of roles available to them in their mentoring (Ramsey, 2000; Sanders *et al.,* 2005). Professional development would expose them to alternative roles, which could bring a richness and depth to their mentoring, resulting in increased confidence and competence.

Accessing of pedagogical knowledge

Associate teachers need to both support and challenge their students. The practicum becomes, then, an opportunity to share professional knowledge, something which most associate teachers identify as a reason for accepting the role. But the documented dilemma that student teachers face when trying to access the associate teachers' professional knowledge is a fascinating phenomenon (Zanting, Verloop & Vermont, 2003). There are several explanations for this situation. One suggestion is the power imbalance in the practicum pairing. The associate, according to McNay (2003), holds epistemic power (the authority of expertise). The very position of observing, recording and commenting is a position of power. Those with power are frequently least aware of it and those with less power are most often aware of its existence. Students may receive mixed messages related to status, responsibility, and expectations, which can be a disempowering experience (Dobbins & Mitchell, 1995: 5). While associates speak of affording the student teacher equal status in the classroom, the student teachers' perception is often different (Sanders, 1999). The associates' belief statements are not always carried out in fact either, with those same associates admitting they do not negotiate their role with the student teacher (p.128). Professional development could help build explicit awareness of the power balance including limits of power and the shifting nature of that power (Tom, 1997).

A second factor leading to difficulties in accessing the associates' professional knowledge may be the lack of relationship-building foundational discussions between the associate teacher and the student teacher. Choosing a deliberate relationship (Tom, 1997) would help build the trust and openness needed to share at a profound level. Rogoff (1990, 2003) suggests that early discussions need to include mutual bridging of meaning, the developing of shared oral vocabulary and the mutual structuring of participation, recounting, elaborating and listening to narratives. Learning is a process of changing participation in community activities that does not happen incidentally or haphazardly.

But this leads to the third factor, which again is the influence of time, or lack of it. Discussion, particularly critical discussion is time-consuming. To take the required time for this pedagogical interchange requires commitment, a belief in its value, and for some, a mind shift about roles and responsibilities.

Some could say that genuine pedagogical dialogue is an unrealistic goal in the busy classroom and professional development needs to focus on other methods of transfer of knowledge such as experiential learning or modelling (Crave, 2002). The goal for the associate in this approach is to present as many different scenarios, possibilities and vignettes concerning classroom behaviour as possible, and allow direct observation, participation and modelling to be the instructors. I think this approach is very helpful in earlier practica when the emphasis is on supporting the student teachers as they move from the fringes to active participation in the teaching arena. But it is not sufficient as the student moves into later practica, where there is an expectation of more responsibility in teaching and the hope that formational explorations in teaching and learning will occur.

Thus, a more intentional approach in assisting associate teachers to engage in pedagogical discourse is needed. Tertiary providers need to be both supportive and challenging in their interactions with associates. In fact, the critical dialogue expected from the associates towards student teachers is

exactly what tertiary providers need to be offering their associates. If Glickman and Bey (1990: 518) are correct, a preparation and support programme for associate teachers would result in more interactions, better feedback, more active listening, an eagerness to accept students, and increased confidence in their role as an associate.

Taking the time to address known needs in the supervision of student teachers will help build confidence and competence. In the process the associates' view of their involvement will be enhanced. They will more clearly recognise the importance of their contribution, and with that recognition will come added commitment and interaction.

IMPROVING THE STATUS OF THE ASSOCIATE TEACHERS' ROLE

There is clear evidence that the practicum experience is pivotal in the preparation of student teachers and that the associates' role in this is crucial. Practicum provides a unique opportunity to develop teaching competencies in a context of support and challenge, guided by an expert in the field who can encourage the student teacher to be more than they imagined they could be, setting them on the path to becoming inspirational, effective teachers. At no other time during their teaching career will such an opportunity exist.

It seems to make sense to me that those interested in the health of the teaching profession would want to focus on these highly influential experiences. So at a time when our educational focus is on excellent practice and the Ministry of Education is calling for increased standards in teaching, it is surprising that little focus has been given to this important and influential period of a teacher's life. Attitudes, beliefs and skills established during practicum experiences often remain as a permanent part of a teacher's repertoire. Those seeking to improve the teaching profession can undervalue the role that associates play in setting the commitment and effectiveness of the future generations of teachers.

Attention to practicum experiences is being given by those involved in teacher education, as the recent article attests (McDonald, 2004). The development and honing of the practicum experience itself will be an on-going endeavour. However, we need to also find ways to honour associates in their crucial role. How can we help them see their role as significant? There are three actions that could be taken by the teaching profession to lift the status of associate teachers and acknowledge their valuable role.

Firstly, we could emphasise the importance of the role and raise awareness among teachers of the many benefits of mentoring fledgling teachers. Those noted in the literature include new dispositions and satisfactions, developing thinking about teaching (Campbell & Kane, 1996), additional classroom input, improved pupil:teacher ratio, exposure to new ideas (Glover & Mardle, 1995), and professional renewal and regeneration (Zachary, 2000). Teachers in both surveys acknowledged they enjoyed the collegiality and the adult company, the extra 'pair of hands', the enthusiasm of the student teacher and the joy of watching the student grow as a teacher, knowing that they have contributed to that growth.

Secondly, the key motivational aspect of mentoring is contributing to the new generation of teachers, giving something back to the profession (Glover & Mardle, 1995: 77). By acknowledging this altruistic attitude more explicitly, we can build on it and develop associates who passionately contribute to the ongoing health of the teaching profession. However, the current rate of

reimbursement for associate teachers shows that we rely heavily on this altruistic attitude towards the role in recruiting new associates. The weekly allowance in no way recognises the time, effort, professional judgment and wisdom that associates bring to the task, nor the importance of their contribution to the teaching profession. Maybe it is time to increase their reimbursement for fulfilling their role.

Finally, a key innovation that has the potential to critically improve the practicum experience for both the associate and the student teacher is that of planning for release time while the practicum is in progress. At each stage and for each component of the practicum lack of time is a key impediment. Time is needed to establish relationship, to observe each other, to give feedback, to engage in pedagogical dialogue, to evaluate teaching practice, to reflect, and to write reports. Currently there is little non-contact time, especially in the primary setting. To my best knowledge, non-contact time that is available in primary schools is never assigned to those taking an associate teacher role.

> Time is needed for reflection, discussion, administrative demands and research. However most schools do not allocate time within the school day for mentoring responsibilities.
>
> (Glover & Mardle, 1995: 68)

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I am suggesting a cyclic process which has the potential to increase the effectiveness of the practicum experience for student teachers in New Zealand. The importance of providing professional development for associate teachers is widely acknowledged in the literature. The changing nature of the practicum, and indeed education in general, predicates this. But time is at a premium for busy teachers and attendance at workshops and seminars on mentoring is not high on their list of priorities. If the status of associate teaching was lifted through more realistic reimbursement, through public acknowledgement of their contribution to the teaching profession, and through more release time being allocated to the performance of their mentoring duties, then maybe professional development sessions would be more eagerly attended. The outcome of this professional development would be more effective mentoring which would lead to increased significance being afforded to the mentoring role. Thus, the status of associates would increase even further, and the cycle would continue. I look forward to such a scenario happening in New Zealand education.

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As part of her Master of Educational Studies, Marion conducted a small scale research project into the verbal interactions between associate teachers and student teachers. She is currently completing doctoral studies in the area of professional development for associate teachers.

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