An Administrator's (Mentors) Guide to the Beginning Teacher's Needs

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ABSTRACT

Administrators need to be reminded that the beginning teacher, while trying to achieve the necessary competency ratings, encounters both problems and dilemmas that need to be dealt with in a manner that does not impede growth. This period of growth is embedded in experiences that are the cause of a great deal of reflection, deconstruction, reconstruction and planning. Much of this transitional journey is emotionally, physically and spiritually demanding. Beginning teachers strive for success on a stage that is not their own yet this same stage is the focus of evaluative mentors who must interpret and record a great deal of each performance in order to judge the progress of the beginning teacher in a supportive manner.

INTRODUCTION

School administrators need to be reminded that a beginning teacher immersed in practicum must confront several dilemmas and attempt to resolve multiple problems in order to realise success. Most often practicum success is defined, as it is herein, as attaining or exceeding expected standards (competencies) of practice that are detailed on observation sheets supplied by Education Faculties. Often these analytic checklists of competencies include the observation of required attitudes, which are important ingredients for success in teaching (Ryan, 2007). Teacher development is holistic and includes consideration of all domains, cognitive (teacher thinking), psychomotor (teaching actions), and affective (teaching emotions/stance).

DILEMMAS AND PROBLEMS

Student teacher dilemmas and problems frequently are framed as surprising, unexpected, and perplexing events. By definition a problem is distinct from a dilemma as "problems are orderly situations for which solutions can be found" (Beynon, Geddis & Onslow, 2001, p. 36), and dilemmas are the opposite of this. Both problems and dilemmas can be utilised (framed/reframed) in order to discover either a solution or in the case of a dilemma, a coping strategy. For instance, I observed one of my student teachers, while correcting the behaviour of a student (disruptive) in class, later defending her actions at the conclusion of the class. As it turned out, the student's mother was an educational assistant in the same classroom and wanted some answers. This situation was really a dilemma as it could not be easily resolved and would have to be managed throughout the remainder of the practicum. Following the event I met with the

student teacher and co-operating teacher in order to listen, support, coach, and facilitate the development of a management plan that would ensure continued growth and success thereafter. The focus was on the student teacher as a learner as she deconstructed, analysed, and made meaning from her experience.

INTENSE TRANSITION AND AUTHORITY

Admittedly, the practicum is a time of rapid student teacher development that requires student teachers to effectively face problems and deal with dilemmas in an authoritative manner. I say this because a teacher is an authority by virtue of their position and expertise (Peters, 1959). This situation can create tension since "student teachers are uncomfortable during these early stages because they dislike seeing themselves as authoritative figures" (Boudreau, 1999, p. 458). I would argue that it is not entirely the challenge of being in authority that is unsettling; it is the requirement to do this in another teacher's classroom while being evaluated by mentors that heightens discomfort.

EVALUATION AND STRESS

Evaluation is a necessary reoccurring activity within the practicum. It is also a source of tension and stress. Teaching performance evaluation involves the interpretation and judgement of the student teacher while they are not only teaching but also while they are on the school grounds and within the community (professional conduct). Evaluation allows supervisors to determine the degree to which changes are actually taking place. At different points in the practicum student teachers have to perform while a co-operating teacher and faculty supervisor appraise the teaching observed. We are looking for change and development over time. It is a continuum and not a single performance that causes failure or success within a practicum. Stakeholders need to be reminded that teaching is something that is never mastered, the art of teaching is elusive and the demands change as the context changes within the classroom, school and community. Admittedly, we are currently "in complex, rapidly changing times, if you don't get better as a teacher over time, you don't merely stay the same. You get worse" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 49). Hence the transition or gradual shift towards improvement comes from a combination of embedded experience, shared reflection, and refined action that enhances practice.

Learning to teach via classroom experience is difficult and not without stress. Often the stress is due to the transition from learner to teacher as growth is encumbered by many classroom realities. One of these troublesome realities resides in the fact that "while beginning teachers may have internalized theories of classroom management from their pre-service program and own experience, they typically lack the complex skills needed to manage actual situations effectively" (Beynon, et al. 2001, p. 109). This problem is magnified by the many beginning teachers who embrace the belief that "unless the teacher establishes control, there will be no learning and that if the teacher does not control the students, the students will control the teacher" (Wideen, Smith & Moon, 1998, p. 145). Supervisors, being aware of this predicament can facilitate the personal transition of a student teacher by addressing these same issues.

However, co-operating teachers "receive little or no training … resulting in communication with the university [being] tenuous at best" (Beynon, et al. 2001, p. 58). My response to this predicament is to speak to these issues directly, openly and raise specific questions that provoke discussion. The co-operating teacher and I address the competency checklist variables one-by-one, and focus on the positive attitudes and actions of the student teacher first. We then address needs and each person in the conference is in a position to lead the discussion. The approach is systematic, strategic and understood by participants following our initial orientation at the beginning of our practicum. This approach is akin to one used in facilitative action research (Ryan, 2001). I believe this course of action lends itself to conferencing. It causes reflection, questioning, reconstruction, and encourages both the student teacher and the co-operating teacher to speak about trials and errors. Our conferences are points of personal transition built upon experiences, dialogue, and plans for future action.

SENSING AND INTERPRETING

Meeting to share observations and check perceptions requires participants to make feeling statements. At one conference I had nothing but praise for what I had observed and I began by saying, "I really enjoyed your lesson; it made me happy to see the students so attentive". Following an open conference I am often motivated to write about my experiences to record new perspectives, shared understanding, and tensions. The conferences motivate the student teacher and the co-operating teacher, as value is uncovered.

The practicum, in its current form, creates a need for immediate interpretations (dilemma/problem), reactions (coping strategy/ solution), and reflection to deal with tensions encountered in the classroom. This need arises because student teachers have only a limited time to exhibit teaching competence during a practicum and they have many demands upon their time. For example, my student teachers often will have coursework to complete on-site, daily reflective logs to develop, and the usual classroom teacher tasks to attend to. This situation escalates tensions and makes the experience somewhat of an emotional, spiritual and physical test. I listen to student teachers explain that they were working until midnight or later just to meet deadlines. The result is, I believe, that most tasks get superficial attention and students tend to adopt or gravitate towards a traditional (efficient) approach. Most often, the traditional approach is found by following the lead of the co-operating teacher who has also realised an increased workload by volunteering to supervise a student teacher. This predicament influences performance and as Rosaen and Schram (1997) explain, beginning teachers have "feelings of isolation and loneliness … [due to] the shock of facing multiple demands … [and often fear] the challenge of teaching subject matter for which they are inadequately prepared" (p.257). With these problems and dilemmas to overcome the metaphor of a journey, perhaps upstream is fitting. The concept of sink-or-swim, well known to most educators, is something that seems appropriate, however there are lifeguards.

MENTORS: LIFEGUARDS

The 'lifeguards' are the same people who make up some of the best co-operating teachers. These *volunteer* mentors are skilled in coaching and aware that the progress of student teachers can be slow and frustrating to observe. The most successful co-operating teachers are those who seek to build a mentoring relationship that is constructed upon the shared understanding of expectations, beliefs, and responsibilities.

> Mentors should be knowledgeable of the beginning teacher's needs as they progress developmentally as a professional … [and] should possess good interpersonal skills … listening, counselling, guiding, supporting, and showing confidence in the novice teacher's ability … [via usage of] knowledge of adult education principles … and problem finding, not just problem solving.
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> Alaniz, Brott, Gomez, Kajs, Maier & Willman (2001, p.3)

A student teacher needs a mentor, someone who can help, guide, advise, and encourage while offering opportunities to grow (Bourdreau, 1999). Indeed, on-the-job nurturing and support by mentors can accelerate growth and promote change, of not only the student teacher but also the profession.

CONCLUSION

In sum, beginning teachers need to be aware of not only their practicum but also the fact that it is a time of intense transition from learner to teacher. Throughout this experience-based transition student teachers need to carefully identify, define, and engage in problem solving and dilemma management. To do this requires a level of communication that can only be attained if it is facilitated by concerned and informed mentors who support and assist the beginning teacher's attempts to refine practice. Being evaluated in another teacher's classroom makes the achievement of success that much more challenging yet there are 'life guards' (mentors) on-site who are there to nurture, coach, and support each beginning teacher. The process is at risk, however, when there is a lack of communication and shared understanding. This is something that needs to be overcome by actively working towards a functional relationship between the student teacher, co-operating teacher, and the Faculty advisor.

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