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WHO TEACHES TEACHERS TO TEACH?
Investigating the role of the classroom teacher in teacher education.

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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers who work with student teachers in the practicum setting play a critical role in pre-service teacher education. Faculties of education acknowledge the importance of this role, but largely overlook and undervalue its importance in conversations about pedagogical practices in teacher education (Loughran & Russell, 1997). While there are many studies that document the work of supervising teachers from the researcher's perspective, there are few studies which provide teachers with the opportunity to explore and examine their *own* work in the practicum setting or that give consideration to the diversity of backgrounds, experiences and supervisory practices explained from the teachers' own perspectives which influence their work with pre-service teachers in the practicum setting (Clarke, 2002a).

The purpose of this study is to develop a profile of classroom teachers who supervise the practicum experiences of pre-service students from the University of Wollongong and to engage some of these teachers in action research to explore and examine their supervisory practices. A multiple case study design will be used to address this purpose by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the backgrounds and beliefs of the classroom teachers who supervise pre-service teachers from the University of Wollongong during practicum?
2. What supervisory practices do these teachers use when working with pre-service teachers?
3. In what ways do these practices change when teachers engage in an action research group?

Information from this study will be used to gain a greater understanding of the backgrounds, beliefs and supervisory practices of those teachers who work with pre-service teachers in the practicum setting. This knowledge will enhance practicum experiences for all stakeholders (classroom teachers, school administrators, university educators, pre-service teachers, students) and inform the type of inquiry based professional development program which the University of Wollongong can provide with and for our school-based peers.

This conference presentation reports results from the first stage of this study, which involved the participation of primary teachers in the Wollongong area of the Illawarra region (NSW, Australia) in a questionnaire about themselves, as well as their beliefs and underlying assumptions about their current supervisory practice with pre-service teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Learning to teach involves far more than just acquiring content knowledge of a particular subject area or a set of classroom management techniques. The skills and strategies needed are exhibited in the everyday actions of practising teachers. It is they who are able to give insight into the cultural context of the classroom and how to apply appropriate pedagogical techniques befitting the situation.

(Beck, Howard & Long, 1999, p.2)

Background to the Study

There exists a sense of urgency in education to reform teacher education so that it adequately prepares teachers for the demanding and complex task of teaching in the twenty-first century (Beck et al, 1999; Bentley, 2002; Clarke, 2000a; Cooper & Jasman, 2002; Peters, 2002; Sachs & Groundwater-Smith, 1999; Thomson, 2000). This opinion is widely held, not only by educators but also by governments and communities in general (Ramsey, 2000).

Schooling, as we currently know it, has been in place for more than a century. While the infrastructure of education has changed dramatically in that time, the organisation of schooling and teacher training has changed very little. Even the technological advances of the twentieth century (e.g. radio, television, video), made very little change in the delivery of schooling, although they did allow for 'alternative delivery methods' (Bentley, 2002, p.2). The last two decades, however, have seen not only rapid changes in technologies and how they impact on teaching and learning, but also in social structures, which are moving our society away from traditional family form and traditional career paths (Bentley, 2002).

These changes not only complicate the development of effective teaching skills which will prepare the beginning teacher for the reality of the classroom, but also impact on the effective teaching practices and ongoing development of experienced classroom teachers who need to adjust to the changing times. This in turn, creates the need for careful reflection on the practicum experience for all stakeholders, for although it is acknowledged that the practicum is a crucial element in pre-service teacher preparation, the pivotal role of the classroom teacher in this process is often overlooked.

In consideration of this gap, one of the present challenges in reforming teacher education is to create professional development opportunities which support and develop the supervisory role of the classroom teacher, whose role is so important in the practicum.

Significance of the Study

While the role of the classroom teacher in realising reform in teacher education is clearly acknowledged, little is known about their backgrounds or about the assumptions, beliefs and supervisory practices which they bring to their work with pre-service teachers. Clarke (2002a) makes the observation that:

Given the central role that cooperating teachers play in practicum settings it is curious that their work languishes as a research area. The absence of in-depth research is surprising given the present climate of reform at the pre-service level with emphases on diverse practicum formats and school/university partnerships.
(pp.4-5)

Only a few studies to date (Knowles & Cole 1996; John 2002 cited in Clarke, 2002a; Williams 1995; Zeichner, Liston, Mahlios & Gomez, 1987) have sought to consider the backgrounds, beliefs and underlying assumptions about supervisory practice that classroom teachers bring to their work in pre-service teacher education. Clark (2002a) makes the observation, 'given the high priority that professional development opportunities are attributed in collaborative partnerships, the omission of any profile on this critical group from most studies is quite extraordinary' (p. 5).

The purpose of this study is to develop a profile of classroom teachers who supervise the practicum experiences of pre-service teachers from the University of Wollongong and to engage these teachers in action research on their supervisory practice. This profile will be achieved by examining the backgrounds and supervisory practices of primary classroom teachers who work with pre-service teachers in the practicum setting and by involving primary classroom teachers in the process of action research to explore and further develop their understanding of their role in practicum.

Specific Literature Relevant To The Current Study

Pre-service teachers regard classroom practitioners as the most critical element in their training. (Beck et al, 1999; Loudon, 1993; Clarke, 2000a; Cooper & Jasman, 2002; Sachs & Groundwater-Smith, 1999; Thomson, 2000). Current collaborative partnership projects (Sutherland 1997; Beck, Howard&Long, 1999; Kiggins, 2001; Peters, 2002) acknowledge this crucial role of the classroom teacher and training programs associated with these projects are planned to facilitate the needs of the classroom practitioner in their role as teacher educator. These training programs designed to improve advisory practice are major contributors to current reform.

However, outside of these training programs associated with collaborative partnership projects, classroom teachers (not involved in these projects) receive little input about their role in working with pre-service teachers.

Munby and Russell (1994) in Loughran and Russell (1997) suggest that:

‘Teachers have reservations about the nature and quality of their own knowledge, experience and capacity to shape educational improvement. Teacher education may make its greatest contribution by enhancing the way teachers value their own knowledge generation and dissemination.

(p. 48)

This concept of encouraging teachers to see themselves as ongoing learners, to recognise their own depth of knowledge, skill and understanding of teaching and learning and to be reflective practitioners is paramount to successful reformation of teacher training. In order to achieve this, teacher educators need to gain insightful understanding into the myriad ways in which classroom practitioners plan and execute their advisory role with pre-service teachers. By doing this, it may be possible to determine ‘really useful’ inquiry based professional development opportunities which will assist practice and enhance teacher training.

Clarke (2002b) suggests that to determine ‘really useful’ professional development opportunities for and with classroom teachers, ‘it is important to establish an understanding of student teacher supervision from their perspective. (p.2, underline in original) Clarke (2002b) indicates that the role of the classroom practitioner as teacher educator has been ‘poorly defined, often ambiguous and extremely diverse’. Added to this, most studies have been conducted *on* cooperating teachers rather than studies *with* or *by* cooperating teachers (Clarke, 2002b). If practicum is the critical element central to the training of pre-service teachers, then central to that experience is the role played by the school advisor. Yet, preparation for this crucial role is at best haphazard, non-reflective and centred on pre-service teacher achievement. Professional development programs offered to classroom teachers regarding practicum experiences usually concentrate on observation, recording and evaluation of the student teacher’s progress. This lack of voice from classroom practitioners about their role as teacher educators creates a gap in the faculty’s understanding of the practicum process.

In most situations when university based teacher educators visit schools they glean small amounts of knowledge about school-based peers from brief interactions during practicum or training based professional development programs. This situation is inadequate. Clarke, in Loughran and Russell (1997) acknowledges that:

While the role of the practicum advisor is critical in complementing and extending the professional development opportunities for beginning teachers in practicum settings, unfortunately, it is a role that is too often overlooked and undervalued in conversation about pedagogical practices in teacher education.

(p.179)

In agreement with Clarke’s observations, Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon (1998) suggest that ‘more attention needs to be directed at an in depth study of how other players affect the landscape and process of learning to teach...supervising teachers are frequently missed in the research’ (p.169). Clarke (2002a) further suggests that:

This ‘lack of knowledge’ severely constrains system wide decisions about our work with these teachers, the professional development opportunities we provide for them, and our collective attempts (school and university) to integrate on-campus instruction with fieldwork for our student teachers’.
(p.8)

Over the past decade, according to Clarke (2000) university based teacher educators, realising the implications of this oversight, have begun to call for increased research and more extensive literature which delves into the backgrounds and beliefs which influence the role of the classroom practitioner in the practicum. While this trend to know more about the backgrounds and pedagogical practices of our school based peers is gaining momentum, of the research conducted to date, Clarke (2000) reflects:

A surprising omission from virtually all of these studies is any substantive consideration of the *background of the participants*, how they see their *contexts influencing their work* as advisors, and their *underlying assumptions about “learning to teach”* Exceptions to this trend are few and far between.
(p.132. italics in original)

However, the exceptions do exist and currently a few research programs ‘that seek a more substantive understanding of how practicum advisors construct, make sense of, and practice their pedagogy as school-based teacher educators.’ (Clarke, 2000, p. 132) have begun to emerge.

Current Research Initiatives

Research initiatives that contribute to our understanding of the work of school based practicum supervisors have been conducted in North America. These include:

1. The Professional Development School (PDS) movement (Darling-Hammond, 1994; 2000). The PDS addresses the work of classroom teachers from *their* perspective rather than from the practicum/student perspective. (Clarke, 2002, p.133) While the PDS movement has added significantly to what we now know about school based teacher educators, the cost involved in setting up such a program or similar models, makes it an impractical and unlikely model in Australia.
2. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Research about Teacher Education Project (RATE). While RATE examines many aspects of teacher education and activity, its fourth study (RATE IV), provides the first ever profile of American teachers who supervise pre-service teachers in practicum setting. (Clarke, 2002, p.133)
3. The ‘Voice of School Advisors’ study (VOSA) which investigates the backgrounds and assumptions that British Columbian teachers bring to their work with student teachers. (Clarke & Reicken, 2000; Clarke, 2002a; Clarke, 2002b)

All three studies have a similar agenda in that for the first time, research conducted on practicum related issues in teacher education, have focused on the role of the classroom teacher during the immediacy of the practicum experience rather than centering on the progress of the student teacher. Both the RATE IV and Phase I of the VOSA study have provided a descriptive profile of school based practicum advisors. Analysis of RATE IV surveys (Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996 in Clarke, 2002a) provided the following descriptors of cooperating teachers in America:

- female (67%);
- white (96%);
- mid-40’s;
- average 16 years teaching experience;

- Master's degrees (10%); and
- the majority believe that “observing teaching, receiving feedback, and practicing teaching strategies” are the key elements in learning to teach. (p.7)

Phase I of the VOSA British Columbian study revealed that profile results were similar to these general trends reported in the RATE IV American studies (Clarke, 2002a).

All three studies highlight the importance of constructing profiles that inform local and anecdotal information about teachers who work with student teachers in the practicum setting and these studies also indicate that ‘our advisor population has a depth of experience that is rarely recognized.’ (Clarke, 2002a, p.17)

The RATE IV and VOSA results raise questions for our own institution in regard to the conception we have of the work done by local classroom teachers in their roles as teacher educators. Many long held beliefs about their work, unchecked over time, outdated and potentially misinformed, have led to a general lack of knowledge about their work with student teachers. In turn, this lack of knowledge has led to generic professional development programs which, if they exist at all, ‘exist as one-off workshops that focus solely on the activities of beginning teachers and fail to engage advisors in critically examining their own work with student teachers’ (Clarke & Reicken, 2000, p.347).

While the information gained from these research programs provides some insight into the backgrounds and beliefs of supervisory teachers in general, the fact remains that individual faculties of education need to construct continuously developing profiles of their *own* school based teacher educators as a contextual basis on which to re-energise and re-create meaningful teacher training programs within their own institutions.

My study attempts to develop this profile for the University of Wollongong.

MY STUDY: THE INITIAL PHASE

The initial phase of my study has been addressed with a broad sweep survey consisting of both closed questions, to determine such background information as age, gender, qualifications and teaching experience and open-ended questions, which ask more probing questions concerning the beliefs and assumptions, which the participants bring to their work with pre-service teachers. (Appendix A)

This initial phase consisted of classroom teachers (166) who chose to respond to the questionnaire sent to 71 primary schools, both state and independent in the Illawarra region of NSW, Australia. The participants were given both the option of including their name on the survey and participating in later stages of the research. The survey was circulated with a return envelope.

Questionnaire data is in the process of being analysed using coded headings with an EXCEL spreadsheet with the view to establishing trends. The add-on tools within the program are being used to provide statistics on general background information and trends.

Results to date (30/11/03)

1. Distribution

Ethics approval was obtained from The University of Wollongong, DET and CEO to conduct the survey. A total of 497 questionnaires were sent out to 71 primary schools in the Wollongong District of the Illawarra Region of NSW, Australia.

This included:

- 53 State schools

- 18 Catholic systemic schools

One copy of the questionnaire was posted to the Principal of each school containing ethics approval and outlining the reason for the survey. Simultaneously, six copies were posted to the school Practicum Coordinator asking them to seek up to six volunteers within their school to complete the questionnaire. The option of making more copies was also included. Schools were offered a four week turn around period and a reply paid envelope.

2. Response rate

29 schools (40.8%) responded to the survey as follows:

- 16 State schools (30.1%)
- 9 Catholic systemic schools (50%)

Returns numbered **166** individual questionnaires (**33.4%**). The questionnaires were coded (the school was numbered and each questionnaire was given a number between 1 and 6. The Principal's copy was coded /7), enabling the following breakdown.

- Principal's responding: **16**
10 State schools
6 Catholic systemic
- School response (all six questionnaires completed): **126**
12 State schools (total 72)
9 Catholic systemic schools (total 54)
- School response (less than six questionnaires completed): **12**
2 State school completed two questionnaires each (total 4)
2 State school completed four questionnaires each (total 8)
- School response (more than six questionnaires completed): **12**
1 State school completed 12 questionnaires (total 12)

The final section of my questionnaire included the following invitation.

Are you interested in taking part in further research, workshops and discussions aimed at improving the practicum experience and redefining the role of the classroom teacher in pre-service teacher education? If so, please complete the following:

Name: _____

School: _____

Contact Phone No: _____ **Email:** _____

Please note: Commitment during 2004

During 2004, teachers undertaking this research will be asked to participate in after school group meetings (4), whole day workshops (2 funded days) and supervise three Grad Dip Ed students, one in each of the following practicums:

1x3 wk prac: March/April 1x3 wk prac: June 1x5 wk prac: October/November

18 Classroom teachers responded to this invitation:

- State schoolteachers: 11
- Catholic schoolteachers: 7

Teachers responding to the second phase of this study will commence in February 2004.

3. Demographic results

The following are demographic descriptors of those participating in the survey.

- female (90%); male 10%
- the majority (60%) live between 5-10kms from their current school;
- aged 46-50 (32%); 41-45 (26%); 36-40 (18%); 31-35 (12%); 51-55 (7%); 26-30 (3%); under 25 (2%); over 56 (0%)
- Bachelor Degree (52%); Diploma in Teaching (31%); Graduate Diploma in Education (11%); Master's Degree (6%);
- Average 16-25 years teaching experience;
- Average number of years at their current school: 13

- Classroom teachers without executive responsibility (50%); executive teachers 28%; Principals 22%;
- Full time career outside teaching: NO 98%; YES 2%

Supervision of student teachers

- Regularly (1,2 or more times a year) 84%; Sometimes 16%;
- First began to take student teachers; 4-10years (93%); 1-3years (6%); 11-15years (1%);
- The majority of participants chose to supervise student teachers because they saw it as their professional responsibility to help beginning teachers.

These results to date, while similar to the RATE IV and VOSA data, do begin to give us a picture with which to construct a profile of our *own* school based teacher educators as a basis on which to create meaningful teacher training programs *with* and *for* our school based colleagues within our local institution.

This study is incomplete and it is expected that more insightful data will evolve as the study develops with some categories developing inductively from informants. This will be characterised by the emerging design of collaborative action research in the second phase of this study.

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