

Lecturer Attachment Scheme: Professional Development and Beyond

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I. INTRODUCTION

a) Back-to-School Experiences for Continuing Knowledge and Skills Renewal

The educational system in Hong Kong has been under intense review since the hand-over of sovereignty from Britain to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Reforms of a massive scale at all levels of schooling have been proposed, and are currently being debated. The aims of the reforms are to prepare pupils to deal with the challenges of a rapidly expanding and changing knowledge base. The notion of lifelong learning is extensively advocated to enable pupils to develop the orientation and an ever-improving capability to meet with such challenges. This concept of continuing knowledge upgrading and skills revitalization is especially essential to invigorating the education faculty in teacher preparation programmes, whose members have always been regarded as theorists operating in 'ivory towers' (Warshaw, 1986) or 'crystal palace' (Russell, 1992) and whose perceptions of current school environments are deemed idealized and remote. Oftentimes, teacher educators are repeatedly asked the same questions, 'When did you last teach in a school?', 'Have you taught in a band-5 school?', 'How much do you know about the adolescent culture of the 90's?'

To help education professors to validate their professional knowledge base, renew their skills and reinstate their credibility with professionals and beginning teachers (Hansgen, 1983, Stahl 1987, Corbitt, 1993, Hudson-Ross & McWhorter, 1995), back-to-school schemes to get teacher educators to climb down from the ivory tower to gain recent school experiences, have been taking shape in various forms over the years, some in the mode of institute-school staff development collaborative projects, and others through legislative mandate. For instance, the California state legislation passed an education reform bill that requires all professors who teach methods courses to return to the elementary or secondary classroom once every three years. (Warshaw, 1986).

Stahl (1987) proposed mandating a "Back to the Trenches" scheme with the purposes of giving teacher educators first-hand observation of the changes in

1. the demographics and abilities of the student population
2. the everyday activities and current attitudes of the teaching force; and
3. the school environment as a whole.

Through such a scheme, teacher educators are provided with an opportunity to develop practical insights into new pedagogical theories, to field test curricular projects and to conduct applied research. (Stahl, 1987)

Job exchange projects such as "A Clinical Professorship" programme tried out at Denison University (Hansgen, 1983), the "Synergy Project" (Hudson-Ross & McWhorter, 1995) and "Professor-In-Residence" programme (Simpson, 1997) enable both education professors and school teachers to benefit from a fresh perspective and a dose of reality to each through mutual sharing of ideas and experiences. Moving each day from teacher education institution to school and back, participating teacher educators become more keenly aware of the differences in the two cultural settings, which have quite different characteristics and basic values (Russell, 1992). Teacher education programmes are subsequently enriched and made more relevant for education students in light of the 'reality checks' that participating education faculty members conduct in the 'field'.

b) Lecturer Attachment Scheme (LAS)

The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) is a newly established teacher education institution, beginning its first year operation in 1995. Its staff consists of teacher educators from the former Colleges of Education and new recruits from all over the world, who came with a wide range of experience and expertise. Some may be expert teacher educators with an international background and perspective, but lacking in local teaching experience. There may be staff members who have either primary or secondary teaching experience but would be required to teach the programs of the other level in which they have no teaching experience. Thus it seems to be beneficial to all concerned to provide an avenue for the lecturing staff to get into the local schools, to gain first-hand teaching experience in local settings as part of an Institute-initiated staff development programme , which in our study also proved to be a viable opportunity for opening doors for future Institute-school partnerships. The Lecturer Attachment Scheme (LAS) was thus formulated and introduced in 1997. .

The LAS has since then been an on-going initiative to provide opportunities for academic staff of the Hong Kong Institute of Education to update their school teaching experience , especially in the local context. Moreover, through this scheme, it is anticipated that the Institute will build up collaborative relationships with schools for developing school-based staff development activities and research.

The LAS has been presented as a three-stage activity within the Institute and it is in its third year of implementation now. Before the attachment to chosen primary schools, seminars are arranged on different but relevant topics such as "the Hong Kong primary school context", "the primary school curriculum in Hong Kong" and conducting research in classrooms and primary schools". Experienced local primary teachers and principals are invited to participate in the seminars. The attachment lasts for a period of two weeks within the academic year in local primary schools, with participating lecturers teaching the subjects of their choice. During the attachment period, the lecturers may initiate any activities that enhance the professional development of both the lecturers and the school teachers, and also explore possible opportunities for future staff development and research collaborations

After the attachment period, lecturers are required to submit a brief report on their observations and reflection. Post-LAS seminars are organised for lecturers to share their experiences, through which it is hoped that other colleagues will gain insights from their peers' experience

II. THE PRIMARY SCHOOL ATTACHMENT

a) A Dual purpose – Professional Development and Beyond

Since the implementation of the LAS in 1997, the Institute lecturers especially those who are experienced in secondary teaching, like ourselves are very much aware of the need to join such a scheme for a couple of obvious reasons. On the one hand, it enables us to be qualified for teaching the newly accredited B.Ed. Primary programme which requires all its programme lecturing staff to have local primary teaching experience. On the other hand, as educators we strive for a wide range of teaching experiences, both local and recent , in order to broaden our knowledge base, revitalize our skills and inform our practices. All these in turn will help improve the content and delivery of our teacher preparation curriculum . In addition to our personal professional development we would also like to forge a longer-term partnership with the attachment school for future projects which may be mutually beneficial With the above purposes in mind, we embarked on our attachment in a primary school.

To capitalize on the Attachment Scheme as a good opportunity for initiating a collaborative project with a suitable school, we opted to approach a particular primary school rather than letting the Institute make the necessary placement arrangement.

b) Gaining Access

A school was identified to be our LAS school. The Principal of the school was fairly new to her school and she was starting her second year of service there. She was keen on establishing a strong link with the Institute which is the only teacher education institute in Hong Kong and is reputable for its primary teacher education. She also saw it as an avenue for staff development for the English Panel of her school.

Details of the attachment arrangement were agreed upon in the beginning of the academic year of 1998/99. Numerous phone contacts were made between the lecturer Co-ordinator and the school Principal. The English Panel teachers were consulted and they agreed to participate in it. We visited the school for the first time during the latter part of their first term and had an informal meeting with the Principal, the Vice-principal, the English subject Panel Chairperson, a senior teacher who was in charge of the reading scheme, and two teachers who agreed to work with the lecturers. We elaborated on the aims of our attachment and expressed the possibilities of longer term partnership in staff development activities such as providing workshops for their English teachers regarding the current ELT approach adopted in the newly launched English syllabus. We indicated our primary intention of learning more about primary level teaching and trying out what we believed to be 'good' teaching. The teachers expressed strong confidence in our ability to practise and demonstrate effective and exemplary instructional skills and strategies in our teaching that they requested video-taping all our lessons. We agreed to their request but reiterated that our taped lessons might be examples of what-not-to-do in class. We invited the two teachers whose classes we would take up to come and sit in our lessons as much as they could and the other English teachers were invited to come and observe our lessons.

c) Preparation

One of the outcomes of the meeting was that we scheduled to observe two lessons conducted by the two English teachers who agreed to participate work with us in the LAS.

The main reason for the lesson observation was that we wanted to know the pupils' standard and the patterns of communication between the English teachers and the pupils. We identified a day convenient to us all and we sat in a P.3 and a P.5 class, the classes we were to take over from the teachers.

The two teachers impressed us as very experienced and both lessons went very smoothly. One major difference was that the P.5 teacher Lilian used English as the only medium of instruction whereas the P.3 teacher Yvonne used a mixed code, with isolated English words and chunks of Cantonese substitutes and translations. We immediately asked ourselves whether the teachers' choice of the instructional medium was largely determined by the level of English proficiency of the pupils or by teacher beliefs. We were somehow convinced that it was the belief of the teachers that shaped their practice. Our conviction in "teaching English through English" 鴻 would be one of the challenges we faced in taking up the classes and perhaps addressing the issue of classroom English at primary levels.

Other challenges included adapting the textbook materials to make them coherent and well-connected. . This is one of the areas that teachers often complained about. Textbook materials are usually perceived as very fragmented, with many mechanical, unrelated and form-focused exercises. There were two other areas for us to work on during our attachment as a result of our discussions in the meeting. They were the use of 'Big Books' in teaching reading and the use of IT and computer in English Language teaching.

We went away with the textbooks, their teaching schedule and started planning for our 'teaching practice' in the primary classroom for the first time ever. We evaluated the P.3 and P.5 textbook units we were to teach and attempted to outline the theme and focus, using their textbook materials as much as we could. We believed that teachers in general are very textbook-based and we would not be seen as convincing to them if we used a lot of outside' material. "Big books" would be incorporated in our teaching as this had been seen as one of our expert areas which teachers liked to explore.

d) Reflecting on the Experience – Lecturers' Perspectives

Our experience with actual primary teaching is limited though our exposure to primary teaching is extensive. We have been teaching primary preservice and inservice teachers method modules and supervising their teaching practice. Moreover, we have been conducting research projects in primary schools. However, to observe other teachers teach as outsiders is very different from becoming insiders and participating in the planning and teaching process and we found our experience very illuminating.

The first thing that struck us as former secondary school teachers was the mindless and mechanical choral reading aloud in the Hong Kong primary classroom, which had become pervasive and uninspired, especially in a reading comprehension where the main focus was on the construction of meaning

Towards the end of the first lesson, when the while-reading activities were completed, we read the whole text once to the pupils, expecting them to listen quietly to our reading. Without exception, every little mouth opened and read after the teacher throughout though they had been asked only to listen to our reading aloud. Perhaps they just just would not believe what they had heard and that we could finish the lesson without asking them to read after us! Our observation in other lessons added to our belief that they had formed the habit of repeating after the teacher, mindlessly perhaps a lot of the times.

The next interesting observation relates to homework. As a rule, teachers assign written homework after every lesson. We were reminded by both P.3 and P.5 pupils who invariably whispered to our ears after each lesson pointing out that we had forgotten to give them homework! We had considered asking them to do some reading at home as homework; however neither the pupils nor the teachers perceive it in the same way. They seemed to consider only paper and pencil work as homework.

One issue regarding classroom language use is how much English should be used in class. English is a foreign language to the pupils and in general there is no need for them to use any English outside the classroom. Whether only English should be used in the English language classroom is something not all teachers agree on. They may not believe that their pupils have the ability to survive let alone learn through English in the classroom. What teachers find most indisputable is that it just seems to be too time consuming to use all English, the kind of English that can be understood by the pupils.

We however believe in supporting and helping the pupils to learn through English and were ready to demonstrate using all English in both classes. It was somewhat 鴻 quite threatening to the pupils in the first couple of lessons in both classes, especially the P.3's. As soon as we started talking and 鴻'teaching' all in English, there was low but disturbing 'ruffles' from the pupils, who made disconcerting remarks such as, 'Vow she used all English'; 'I don't 憂 understand what she said'; 'What did she say?'

The pupils seemed to be well-settled in with us after the first two lessons. They began to get used to the classroom routines we set but it was not until group activities were assigned that we observed, again, unease and uncertainty arose from among the pupils. It was highly probable that they were not used to the type of activities we introduced, and that our instructions which were solely in English was not understood by all, especially the P.3s. We did reflect on whether the use of the mother tongue at 'critical' time should help reduce the pupils' worries and economize time and extra effort. The debate on this issue of course is not as simple as it appears and we are still pondering .

We also found that we had 'prepared' more than enough for our lessons, in part due to our inexperience in adjusting our planning to the level of primary pupils and their pace of learning. One of the compounding factors was that routines such as getting into lines between breaks, before the school begins and ends, which are particularly important in primary schools as a form of discipline training took up much of the class time, leaving virtually very little time for follow-up activities to extend pupils' language use.

Moreover, regarding language use and the choice of instructional medium in the classroom, we observed that we tended to use vocabulary or expressions too difficult for the pupils, which again, was due to possibly our inexperience in primary teaching, and which necessitated a much longer attachment and practice period to get our orientation right.

e) Reflecting on the Experience: Teachers' perspective

It was helpful and useful for the two regular teachers, Lilian and Yvonne, to sit in our class most of time. They might help with some group activities and locating stuff from their classroom cabinets. Their presence was particularly important as they shared with us their observations and perspectives of our teaching and pupil response and performance. They were also very well informed of the approach we adopted and the process of our teaching.

A discussion took place towards the end of the two-week attachment involving the two lecturers from the Institute, the two English teachers of P.3 and P.5, and the school Principal. We had a very open discussion regarding the standards of the pupil, constraints within the school system, our own strength, and weaknesses. Both parties felt that the attachment was very useful in helping all of us understand more about the classroom situations.

The two teachers agreed to be interviewed by the RA regarding their perspectives and comments on our attachment. The following is a summary of their views on our attachment.

Our attachment was perceived as important in enabling us as teacher educators to gain primary teaching experience, which would in turn help us in our teaching and curriculum planning at the Institute. Two particular issues related to teaching were raised by the teachers. One was the medium of instruction and the other was our classroom teaching activities.

Lilian thought that the P.3 pupils were at times confused by our English-only instructions. Though the interactive activities we used were good, the pupils found them unfamiliar and thus could not benefit fully from them. She then concluded that our methods were beneficial only to pupils with good English standards.

Yvonne commented on the use of English as the medium of instruction in our teaching. Though she was told by her P.3 pupils that they did not understand all of what we said, she was very surprised to see many of her pupils actively volunteering and attempting to answer our questions in the lessons. She thought that the pupils were very happy in our class:

Sometimes I watched at the back and I remembered that they were not so attentive in my lessons. There were some children who sat in the front who were not very smart. In fact, they were quite weak. But they always raised their hands and were very attentive during the lecturers' lessons. They also laughed. I talked to them afterwards and asked why they were so happy. They were very attentive because it was new and refreshing. The lecturers' preparation was very good and the pupils' involvement and engagement were greater. Sometimes the kids might not really understand but they felt this teacher did not know them so there were no labeling effects and they raised their hands. It was felt OK to give the wrong answer. So they were very motivated to raise their hands. I found that many of them who raised their hands were the weaker ones. I think it is quite good."

The two teachers also commented favourably on the approach we adopted and were appreciative of the worksheets we designed, which were creative and interesting. However, the two teachers expressed doubts about their feasibility given the time constraint and the heavy workload they had in a school year. A quote from Yvonne best demonstrate the teachers' concern:

I remember in the first lesson they already had three or four worksheets. How can we do that? We have the 優 workload of the whole term What they did was very idealistic. If we would have more resources it would be very nice. For example, the worksheets are already made, or we can prepare them in advance in the summer and plan what to do in each class. Then it would be different. But we cannot do that in the summer."

The teachers however acknowledged that such activities did bring about lively atmosphere and arouse interest of the pupils. Lilian pointed out that the prescribed workbooks were not

directly related to the main coursebook, which implied teachers having to spend class time on teaching the workbook materials in addition to covering the coursebook. Our attempt at material adaptation and selection in order to make our teaching coherent was considered a 'problem' by the teachers who were concerned about challenges from parents regarding coursebook materials which were not dealt with.

The teachers were very appreciative of the enthusiasm and seriousness we brought to our teaching. While commending on the approaches we adopted, they were critical of our limited practical experience in the primary school setting which resulted in insufficient attention paid to areas which they deemed significant. Their overall comments on us were we had more time, more resources; however, we did not know the pupils well enough.

III. DISCUSSION

In the light of our attachment experience, we would like to analyse and review what we gained and learned from our teaching in the following areas.

1) Broadening knowledge base – increased understanding of primary educational practice

As teacher educators with a background in secondary English language education, we found working in the primary classroom both challenging and rewarding. We had worked with both preservice and inservice teachers trained in primary education, but the reality of working with P3 & 5 pupils was at first a bit daunting.

Through reflecting on our teaching while in action as well as afterwards, we came to realize the marked differences between elementary and high school pupils in terms of their learning needs and behaviour which correspond with the developmental stages they are in. While high school pupils especially those at senior levels are capable of handling abstract structural analysis of the language, elementary pupils learn best through concrete and contextualized use of the language. Besides, classroom routines and discipline training were attached much more importance in elementary schools. Much of the class time, especially for lower primary classes, was spent on going through routines such as checking on pupils' homework diary, and getting pupils in lines for recess, and thus reducing the amount of language work that could realistically be accomplished in a 35 minute lesson , and making our preparation appear excessive at times:

2) The tension between the two cultures of teacher education and primary school

As observed by Russell (1992) teachers are more concerned about finishing the prescribed curriculum. The pressure to cover the curriculum can be overwhelming for both beginning and experienced teachers alike. In our attachment school, we were constantly reminded by the teachers of the amount of work that had to be covered within a period of time. They were also insistent on the need for uniformity and standardization for assessment purposes, in that all pupils of the same level have to be taught and tested on the same items.

Having been operating within a relatively autonomous environment of the Institute, we as teacher educators have more freedom, to a certain extent, over the content and mode of delivery of the curriculum. We are more concerned about improving schools for tomorrow's world, through experimenting with a range of approaches and materials whereas school teachers are more concerned about covering the syllabus "now" so that they can report marks to pupils and parents at regular intervals. The root of the disparity lies in the tension between 'quality' and 'quantity' which was best illustrated by the concluding remark of the teachers, who hailed our approach as being creative, and interesting. They detected obvious qualities in the strategies we adopted but were still 'overpowered' by the 'culture' of 'cover and report' and the quantity context of the school (Russell, 1992)

3) Re-living the student teachers' teaching practice experience

We experienced the same kind of struggles, and frustration student teachers undergo during their teaching practice and the adjustments they have to make while developing a temporary relationship with the pupils, coping with a tight teaching schedule, maintaining a temporary relationship with the pupils, and handling teaching materials and homework which they neither regard as worthwhile nor have much control over. Student teachers operate in a borrowed place, at a borrowed time. Not only are they expected to be able to pitch their teaching at the level of pupils of which they have limited knowledge, they have to fit in with the culture of the school and perform in accordance with its requirements and practice . The Attachment Experience heightened our understanding of the learning that student teachers are expected to accomplish during their student teaching, and the process of socialization that they invariably go through as they learn the 'trade' of the profession.

4) Validating knowledge base through reality checks

We brought to the Attachment a set of beliefs about teaching and learning which guided our practices and which we had been advocating to our preservice and inservice teachers. Many a time we were challenged about their practicability in the realities of the school. However, through field testing what we perceived to be 'good' English language teaching at the attachment schools, the value of the approach we espoused were further confirmed by the teachers. We planned our lessons with the aim of promoting an integrated use of the language. With such a purpose in mind, we selected, resequenced and modified the prescribed materials to make them coherent and purposeful. This had been explained to the teachers whom we worked with, but not to the pupils, which understandably caused confusions and anxiety in them who were used to being taught the coursebook from cover to cover. Nonetheless, our attempt to enhance pupil learning through a creative but well-considered adaptation of coursebook materials, embracing a student-centred orientation, was given due recognition by both teachers.

Another 'new' element we brought into the classroom was the use of 'Big books' a part we perceive as an integral part of the English curriculum supporting pupils' second language development, which was also well received by the teachers.

5) Bridging the credibility gap

The success we achieved in trying out task-based learning during our attachment was a testimony to our fundamental beliefs in communicative language learning. It was also our attempt to bridge the gap between the realities of 'practice' and the ideals of 'theory'. With the insights we gained from the Attachment, we were able to inspire our education students at the Institute with anecdotes of our attachment experience , especially on issues relating to classroom language and integrated learning. We could easily cite examples to demonstrate how we were able to create an English speaking environment, and utilize resources creatively and purposefully to enhance language development It was no longer possible for them to criticize us as 'unrealistic and uniformed'.

IV. CONCLUSION

a. Professional development

The LAS was launched with the aim of enabling Institute lecturers to obtain up-to-date local school teaching experiences and as a kind of internal staff development programme. Through our Attachment experience, we felt that the aim has been achieved to a large extent. Our knowledge base has been broadened and theories validated. It seems professional development did not transpire exclusively to the Institute lecturers; it in fact was extended to the school teachers. This kind of learning together is beneficial to educational innovations, especially school-based activities. Through such kind of partnership, both parties can have a common ground to see issues within the school or classroom situations. As a result, practical insights can be developed into new pedagogical theories (Stahl 1987) and these theories can be verified on site.

b. Professional development and Beyond

Our Attachment carried a dual purpose, one for our own professional development and the other to establish a longer-term relationship with the attachment school and subsequently we developed a collaborative school-based curriculum project with the school.

By the end of the attachment period, we had an initial agreement with the school and English teachers, that we would go back and work with them near the end of the school year on a school-based curriculum project. The first phase would include offering workshops to the English Panel on task-based teaching / learning approach, a direction advocated in the new primary English syllabus. The second phase of this project would be a follow through of the implementation and evaluation of their school-based curriculum developed by the English Panel. We identified the focus of the workshops with the teachers during the first phase and tentatively agreed on the time we would go back to the school, with two other 'experts' to form a team of four to provide staff development workshops. Through the workshops, we would identify the area for curriculum development for English language teaching in their school.

c. The way forward

In the present climate of education reform in Hong Kong and elsewhere, life-long learning is given the strongest impetus. It seems the LAS is a viable alternative to equip teacher educators with practical insights derived from 'practising' at the front-line and partnerships with schools. This kind of partnerships contribute significantly to education innovations, especially those involving curriculum changes, without which there is bound to be a mismatch between curriculum intentions and classroom realities for any curriculum innovation (Clark, Scarino and Brownell 1994). Given curriculum reform is happening in Hong Kong on all levels, Institute-school partnership can be further promoted through the LAS mode. Such partnership can open up avenues for an interflow of expertise, skills and perspective which contributes directly to the success of education innovations in a practical and effective manner.

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