

Restructuring and reculturing: practicum supervision as professional development for teachers.

Wendy Hastings, Don Squires: School of Teacher Education-Charles Sturt University

ABSTRACT

This paper reports a small case study in which selected experienced co-operating teachers were appointed as school-based teacher educators (SBTE) undertaking a supervisory/mentoring role for the three week period of the first practicum for students in the Graduate Diploma of Education (Sec) course. The study attempts to identify any changes in the role perception of the stakeholders when their position in the traditional triadic arrangement is altered. The findings illuminate the opportunities for a more collaborative model of support for preservice teachers in which the traditional stakeholders can play mutually beneficial roles.

Introduction

In human organisations, structures are vital in shaping outcomes. In any educational enterprise, there is a need to ensure that the core objectives of its programs are in harmony with, and supported by enabling structures, processes and mechanisms. Structures provide the framework around which rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships are built and maintained. To a large extent, structures shape the culture of the organisation. But changes to an organisation's structures - restructuring - is a complex task. This is because cultures, almost by definition, tend to be conservative and self-preserving. Cultural forces encourage us to cling to familiar, established structures, so that structural reform can only proceed and achieve its potential when it is accompanied by cultural change.

In a discussion of structural and cultural change in educational settings, Akin defines the culture of a school as the 'social organisation of the school staff which represents shared beliefs, customs, attitudes and expectations'. Dobbins argues that the traditional culture in schools (and by implication in tertiary schools of teacher education) is an individualistic culture, characterised by classroom isolation and few opportunities for collaboration and professional interaction. Dobbins asserts that a 'reculturing' is required to support a change to more collaborative cultures, based on shared responsibility for decision-making and student learning. Successful *practicum* reform is therefore dependent on a simultaneous process of restructuring and reculturing.

Restructuring the *practicum* involves making changes to the roles and responsibilities of the various participants. A key example would be the withdrawal of the role of 'supervisor' and its replacement with a 'mentor' role. Reculturing the *practicum* involves changing the shared beliefs, customs, attitudes and expectations of participants. In a way, reculturing is about shifting the 'hearts and minds' of the participants so that they not only fit into, but are committed to the changed structures. The processes, Dobbins (1997) argues, are reciprocal. At times it may be necessary to pull back from a change in structure until some professional development work is conducted with all staff involved, exploring people's views and assumptions. At other times, a change in structure may be needed to accommodate people's beliefs (Dobbins 1997, p. 8). Essential to the process is the existence of a broadly

agreed goal or 'vision' amongst the participants. This provides the destination: the task is then one of designing 'maps of change' to take individuals from where they are to that destination .

Issues Associated with the Reculturing of the *Practicum*

1. *The nature of the practicum*

The international literature makes a strong case for reform of the *practicum* curriculum in a way that moves the focus away from skills acquisition towards a more explicit understanding of the processes of learning to teach. Following Zeichner (1986), the trend has been to look at the *practicum* experience in terms of what is learned and how it is learned, taking the context, the student teacher and the program's philosophical base into account. The approach is said to have advantages for all of the participants in the *practicum* - student teachers, associates in the field, pupils being taught and university teacher educators.

2. *Relationships between the university and professionals in the field*

At present, the relationship between the university and the rest of the profession is shaped by traditional attitudes and expectations, based on the largely unquestioned assumption that power over the design and execution of the *practicum* rightly resides with the university. The strong message from the international and Australian literature on the *practicum* is that this arrangement can and does seriously inhibit student learning. Experience elsewhere strongly urges development of models based on notions of partnership and collaboration with professionals in the field. In a recent report to the NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on the Quality of Teaching the authors strongly advocate a reconceptualisation of teacher education as a 'career-long' endeavour, achieved collaboratively by university-based, school-based and system-based teacher educators interacting in structural partnerships with practising teachers across their pre-service and in-service careers. What this means is that there will be challenges to the 'ownership' of the pre-service professional development curriculum. Structures and mechanisms need to be in place to facilitate collaboration and to manage the shifts of power that are required.

Communication and collaboration between the stakeholders appears to be a possible key to overcoming some of the problems associated with the *practicum* and is an issue which, it appears, can not be taken for granted . The lack of effective communication, genuine partnership and common frame of reference are reasons cited for the persistent dichotomy between theory and practice . Enz and Cook believe that establishing mutual goals and shared understandings through dialogue has the potential for clearing up misconceptions that may impede quality mentoring . Koop and Koop believe 'consistent shared perceptions and understandings about the role and potential contribution of the school experience among key stakeholders ... [would] ... enhance the effectiveness of school experience' (p1) as co-operating teachers currently have different perceptions of how the *practicum* fits into the whole preservice curriculum of the university. Certainly, different stakeholders have strong opinions on what the *practicum* is and what it should be about . Guyton and McIntyre suggest that co-operating teachers need opportunities to discuss amongst themselves and with the *practicum* co-ordinator, the personal meanings that are attached to their role expectation in the same manner.

Aspects of the preservice program need to be written down and enunciated more clearly before they can be implemented. Koerner discovered that co-operating teachers expected a clear and explicit outline of the role but what they received was unclear directives and unstated and unspecified goals. Koop & Koop described the dissatisfaction that arises when the co-operating teacher is not fully briefed about program expectations by the tertiary

institution and the adversarial feelings toward the university that may result. Co-operating teachers were under the impression that the university was 'indifferent to their needs, schedules and priorities...[they] were not listened to and often felt demeaned' (Koerner 1992:52). Co-operating teachers wanted to be equally heard in a two-way dialogue and need to be partners in the venture not victims of it. Accordingly, Cliff argues that structures to ensure open communication must be developed and supported with tangible resources to enable collaborative dialogue to be not only established but also maintained. Hargreaves' studies identify the intensification of teachers' work in general and suggests that teachers need the opportunity to undertake genuine collaboration in the school context as a means of coming to terms with this issue.

Poor communication is seen to impact on the students as well as the teacher educators. Gaffey and Porter suggest that if the three stakeholders don't effectively communicate then success for the student is at risk. Open communication between the student and the co-operating teacher must be established and maintained to ensure the provision of a trusting and supportive climate. Cameron and Wilson found that the use of university handbook to disseminate information on the supervisory role was not an effective solution to the issue of poor communication. Morehead and Waters believe seminars are a good opportunity for partners to establish two-way communication so goals, expectations and problems could be dealt with.

3. The Practicum as a platform for professional development

According to Tatel, the role of the co-operating teacher holds great potential for professional development of practising teachers. Polachek suggests that if institutions recognise the skills of the co-operating teacher and use them to assist with the design of a professional development course, they will be empowered as equal participants in the teacher education process. He believes that reforms in teacher education are doomed because teachers have little sense of ownership over the reform agenda. By making teachers active participants in the process there is the possibility of great improvement. The co-operating teachers see the opportunity to contribute as recognition of their experience and active role in the process.

Shaver and Wise report there is no uniformity of training requirements for the co-operating teacher in what many deem to be the most important experience in preservice teacher education. While the teachers, universities and students might recognise the need to enhance the skills of the co-operating teacher to ensure the *practicum* is a successful experience, the reality is that the process is haphazard. In fact, Blocker and Swetnam (1995) remind us that 'although there is a growing trend to better prepare the co-operating teacher, the reality remains that relatively few institutions require courses or inservice training for the co-operating teacher' (p26).

However, the research does report that the co-operating teachers want to have a more active role in the teacher education process, be considered as a co-educator and are aware of the merits of preparation for the task. Zimpher suggests that teachers need to be encouraged to see professional development in an integrated and collaborative way to ensure leadership opportunities are enhanced. Her research outlines the recognised value of training programs for mentors of beginning teachers. The development of such courses has resulted in the production of post-graduate courses under the designation of programs for the Professional Development of Teachers. For example, Wilson examined the Clinical Master Teacher program at the University of Alabama, where selection criteria identified high quality personnel to be trained to work in the program. The research found the project effectively empowered school-based teacher educators to lead teams of co-operating teachers in schools. These teachers experienced increased self confidence, enhanced supervisory ability, elevated status amongst their peers, professional growth and a reduced

sense of teacher isolation . Certainly, research generally indicates professional development programs for co-operating teachers can enhance field experience programs by assisting them to develop the skills they require .

The co-operating teachers are not the only beneficiaries of the professional development opportunities. While co-operating teachers showed positive changes in cognitive development and listening skills, used a variety of teaching strategies and demonstrated enhanced self esteem, sense of autonomy and self knowledge from the participation in focused professional development , students were found to be less conservative when the teacher had undertaken professional development related to the *practicum*. Similarly, Hulshof and Verloop found student teachers were able to develop theoretical concepts of teaching more readily if the co-operating teacher had learnt these same concepts through some form of professional development.

4. Contextual imperatives

Time, or the lack of it and the corresponding intensification of work is an issue that arises when discussing ways of enhancing the success of school-based teacher education. Faire reports more time is essential if the objectives of the *practicum* are to be met. Time to share expectations, planning, content, teaching methodologies and the degree of responsibility expected of the student (Koerner 1992; Clift 1988). Morehead and Waters maintain that the lack of time and/or overwork of the co-operating teacher is seen as an impediment to the success of fieldwork. Sparks and Brodeur assert that the inclusion of an orientation program for co-operating teachers in the process of preservice teacher education might provide an opportunity for the co-operating teacher to gain, amongst other things, a more realistic idea of the demands on their time to undertake the role.

The Program and the Context of the Study

The program that was the focus of this study is a one-year postgraduate teacher education course in which traditionally the in-school support is provided by an experienced teacher and the supervisory role is undertaken by an academic member of the faculty. It was decided by the Course Co-ordinator and *Practicum* Co-ordinator to undertake a small pilot study in which the 'supervisory' role would be undertaken by school-based teacher educators. The pilot was part of an ongoing attempt by the GDE course committee to improve the quality of the field experience by implementing manageable changes and conducting evaluations of various components. For example, the *practicum* component of the course had previously been remodelled in order to provide students and teachers with more opportunity to examine contextual as well as cognitive aspects of teachers' work . It was the intention of the *practicum* co-ordinators that the role for the school-based personnel was to be negotiated by them and responsive to their needs and expertise.

Research Method

This is a small qualitative action research case study aimed at improving the outcomes from the *practicum* for the school-based teacher educators as well as the preservice teachers. A case study is particularly useful for a unique and bounded environment such as this project where the focus is on secondary school teachers who are involved in a specific program. Cohen and Manion (1994) assert that one strength of the case study lies in the attention to the complex nature and subtlety of the specific case in its own right. It is 'classically' action research because it is examining the impact of specific changes that were undertaken in a specified context with a particular purpose in mind. Wolcott and other researchers agree that a qualitative approach is a most suitable methodology for educational research as it

'recreates for the reader the shared beliefs, practices ... and behaviours of some group of people'.

Research Question

Our primary focus was to determine if a teacher's position in the traditional triad is altered does this shift impact on their teacher's perception of their role and that of other stakeholders in the triad. Essentially the study examines the effect of restructuring in the context of a new culture.

Participants, Procedure and Data Collection.

The project was not initially a 'study' but rather an opportunity for university personnel, who had all previously demonstrated a strong commitment to the *practicum*, to attempt to change the structure and culture of the *practicum*. When the School of Teacher Education administrators agreed to proceed with the idea it was decided to 'study' the process and results via systematic data collection and analysis.

Nine teachers who had previously been involved in GDE *practicum*, who were from secondary schools (government and non-government) in close proximity to Charles Sturt University, and who had been identified by students and university personnel as quality co-operating teachers were invited to participate in the project. All the participants had on prior occasions been involved in direct dialogue with university staff about professional development issues related to the *practicum* so were fully aware of the nature and focus of the preservice program - both the university component and the in-school experiences.

The task for each school-based teacher educator was to take on the role of mentor/supervisor and provide 'support' (in whatever shape or form it might take) to preservice teachers who were working in another school. Essentially, the *practicum* co-ordinators decided to dispense with the traditional university-based supervisor at a selection of schools and replace him/her with a quality SBTE who would adopt a 'new' role that was appropriate to the needs of the preservice teacher and their co-operating teacher. Each mentor/supervisor was allocated at least four students who were located in at least two different schools. It was thought that the SBTE would increase their professional learning opportunities if they had access to a number of different contexts. Each mentor/supervisor was allocated to schools in which there were staff members with whom they had some personal or professional dealings. It was assumed that this would facilitate a greater sense of ease for the SBTE on entering an unfamiliar context. After the project details had been outlined to each teacher, all indicated great enthusiasm and willingness to participate.

The co-ordinators of the study then requested permission from the respective school principals and District Superintendents to include each teacher in the project. Permission was also obtained from teachers' union, which was mindful of teacher exploitation. It was explained to all necessary personnel that the university would provide funding for sufficient relief days and travel expenses to allow the SBTE to visit each student twice in the three week period. The financial support and subsequent release from face to face teaching satisfied many of the concerns of the administrators and union representatives - all of whom felt that the project had the potential for significant professional development outcomes for the participants. There was some reticence on the part of one principal, and consequently, the teacher was not able to join the project. One other principal did not respond to the invitation so his staff member was not included. While these two principals did not sponsor their own staff member to participate, they were willing to allow other teachers access to their setting to support the preservice teachers who had been placed there for the *practicum*.

Prior to the commencement of the mentor/supervisor role, each teacher was provided with all essential information about the placement of the student, the corresponding co-operating teacher, contact details and further reading material on the mentoring process.

Data was collected from the student teachers via questionnaire, mentor/supervisors by small group interview and co-operating teachers via questionnaire. The data were examined for themes using a grounded approach that involved direct interaction between the researcher and the data. Bogdan and Bilken describe it as a form of inductive analysis such that the investigator attempts to 'construct a picture (from the data) that takes shape as you collect and examine parts' (p32). The approach was not precisely 'grounded theory' as prescribed by Strauss and Corbin. However, the decision to modify the approach is well supported in the literature. In this situation, researchers chose to vary the method because of the data that was being examined and partly because of the limited time frame to analyse the data and provide evaluative information to the participants.

Accordingly, we commenced the analysis with the students' data, where we identified major areas for attention. These data gave direction for the analysis of mentor material and then finally we structured the questionnaire for the co-operating teachers in an effort to provide depth and validity to the emerging themes.

Results and discussion

Some interesting themes are embedded within the data related to the school-based teacher educators. The themes are related generally to the concept of *practicum* supervision, but provide some useful perspectives.

First, there is some helpful analysis of the role of the university supervisor. For the SBTE there was some initial nervousness about entering classrooms in the role of supervisor. The role they were asked to assume was not identical to that played by their university-based predecessors. Perceptions held of them by others, and their own perceptions of themselves ensured this. As one participant put it, he 'knew the perspective needed to be different, but was not sure how it would be'. This was a role which 'emerged' (Van Horne, 1976). It was necessary to play the role in order to understand it. In the words of one SBTE 'the role is somewhat defined for you by the student teachers. When you visit the students they swamp you with questions, concerns, want to show you their lesson plans, or want you to negotiate issues for them with their [co-operating] teachers'.

In practice (perhaps because of the 'emergence' process), there was high congruence between the way the role was played and the expectations of the student teachers. The major tasks were seen as providing the student teacher with considered critique, offering advice and suggestions for teaching and mediating between the student teacher and the co-operating teacher. When student teachers were asked to outline what they thought were the roles and responsibilities of their supervisor, these same tasks were prominent amongst their responses. Typical responses were: 'give feedback, especially on theories of teaching'; 'share his experience and expertise'; 'offer strategies for improvement'; 'assess student's teaching and management techniques'. In the mediating role, student teachers looked to the supervisor to: 'liaise with the co-operating teacher (CT); 'monitor CT attitude towards me'; 'share problems that I couldn't discuss with my CT; and 'discuss my progress with my CT'.

There was further confirmation of the SBTEs perception of their role amongst the responses from the co-operating teachers. The co-operating teachers believed that the support given to the students was more 'appropriate' and 'worthwhile' because they were practising teachers whose knowledge of the school context was 'real' and 'current'.

Aspects of the role that the SBTE found surprising or interesting surrounded the sharpening of their own professional insights. They reported an increased 'understanding of school cultures' leading to a 'more realistic view of (my) own school' and an 'improved ability to review and analyse teaching situations' as they were 'challenged to be the objective observer and identify the salient features of the teaching'. For the SBTE, the rewards came from 'seeing a student teacher implementing your ideas'. Being 'reinvigorated' by the opportunities to have their own practices validated 'renewed (our) enthusiasm for (our) role as teacher educators'.

The second major theme concerns the implications of participation in the program for the professional development of the SBTE. There was strong endorsement of the benefits of just being able to spend some time visiting other schools and faculties and observing the resourcing and organisation of the SBTE subject area in another school. There was also the opportunity to discuss issues of teaching and to exchange strategies and approaches. There was the chance to reassess one's own teaching ideas and achievements against those being discussed or demonstrated elsewhere and to have one's teaching ideas trialled and successfully implemented by another teacher. For one participant there was the opportunity to observe, understand and critique teaching outside his own subject area (his 'comfort zone' as he put it) and to recognise the transferability of 'generic' aspects of the teaching craft.

The third theme related to the question of developing a viable model of *practicum* supervision. Being a colleague of the co-operating teacher raised some difficulties for the SBTEs, but also influenced (in positive ways) their vision of the ideal supervision model. At times, the SBTEs found it difficult to 'confront' well-known colleagues, especially if they felt the colleague was failing to meet their obligations in supporting the student appropriately. One SBTE's thoughtful approach to this problem was to coach the student teacher in strategies that might work to change the behaviour of the particular co-operating teacher. Alternately one SBTE reported that it was possible as a colleague, to 'jolly' along a co-operating teacher who was under-performing in her/his role, in ways that would be much more difficult for a university staff member to attempt, without upsetting the teacher. Accordingly, the diminution of status differences between the players is one part of the ideal model.

Another component identified was 'collaborative observations and critiquing' of the student teacher's work. By observing and discussing the lesson together, both supervisor and co-operating teacher could validate their observations and the feedback would take into account some understanding of contextual issues such as what is 'normal' for the class and what special factors (if any) may be affecting the classroom during the lesson. Feedback from the associate teachers also indicated that collaborative observations were very valuable. Through this process the co-operating teacher and SBTE could explicate their shared beliefs and understandings about what was being observed and about ideal models of teacher performance.

Other components identified as necessary were:

- opportunities for preservice teachers, school-based and university-based supervisors to meet as a group before the *practicum*, to discuss objectives and expectations of their roles and to jointly arrive at a set of *practicum* expectations- 'reflection to action';

- the chance for SBTEs to be made aware of current course material to which student teachers have been exposed before the *practicum* and the theoretical underpinnings of the university's *practicum* expectations. This is particularly important, as the SBTEs need to feel comfortable representing the university perspective on the role of theory in practice;
- opportunities for the SBTEs to participate in the development of university course material incorporating their practical professional knowledge;
- opportunities for supervisors to work with associates in negotiating the 'fine-tuning' of *practicum* expectations and their respective roles;
- recognition of the potential for significant professional development of associate teachers and development of mechanisms to maximise this potential.
- opportunities for all of the participants in the *practicum* (associate, student and supervisor) to engage in 'reflection on action' in order to set goals for the student's further professional development.

An unfinished project

It is not possible to round off this paper with a section labeled '*Conclusions*' because the processes set up by this small piece of action research are far from concluded. The reculturing process has certainly begun, but it will take some time for its effects to be manifested through the whole complex set of university-school relationships. One major outcome at this point is the emerging model of collaborative involvement in the development, supervision and assessment of a *practicum* curriculum for students in the Graduate Diploma of Education course. It will now be the responsibility of the 'restructured' members of the triad to ensure that the reculturing process continues until it is no longer necessary to refer to it as 'a restructured and recultured model' but as 'the model' for preservice teacher education – one that is genuinely collaborative, inclusive of and mutually beneficial to all participants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY