Working together: Collaborative strategies for developing effective professional relationships in the practicum.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper derives from research which examined the development of the professional relationship between associate teachers and student teachers during the final block practicum. Through my professional experiences as an associate teacher in primary schools and more recently as a school liaison lecturer in the School of Education, University of Waikato, I developed an interest in the way professional relationships developed between associate teachers and student teachers.

The main purpose of the study was to firstly identify principles which appeared to be important to the development of the professional relationship, and secondly to identify specific strategies associate teachers employed to support and enhance the professional development of their student teachers.

As the study developed four main themes emerged. The first theme, personal connectedness, highlighted how important it was to make connections on both a personal and professional level. The second theme, collaboration, emphasised the

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1 teaching practicum may also be referred to as teaching practice, section or placement
2 a liaison lecturer is responsible for a group of schools in which student teachers are placed for their teaching practicum. The liaison lecturer visits schools each time student teachers are placed there, to ensure that both associate teachers and student teachers know what the practicum requirements are. The liaison lecturer is the first point of contact
value that all participants placed on teamwork and collaborative strategies. The third theme, which arguably was integrated throughout all themes, was role interpretation. This theme addressed the understandings and expectations associate teachers and student teachers had of their roles. The fourth theme was style of supervision which drew attention to how associate teachers and student teachers identified and implemented various styles of supervision.

This paper focuses on the theme of collaboration and more specifically on the collaborative strategies that were identified in the study as being most conducive to the development of an effective professional relationship between associate teachers and student teachers.

**Background**

Research supports the notion that the development of an effective professional relationship between associate teachers and student teachers in the practicum is important (McGee, Ferrier-Kerr & Miller, 2001; Haigh, 2001; Johnston, Duvernoy, McGill and Will, 1996; Elliott, 1995). As associate teachers play a vital role in the practicum, providing supervision, the relationship between the associate teacher and the student teacher is therefore crucial.

Studies have been initiated about the roles of associate teachers and student teachers and identified the factors that contribute to developing an effective professional relationship. The key features include collaborative partnerships, styles of supervision and ways in which personal-professional relationships may be developed (Haigh, 2001; McGee et al., 2001; Fairbanks, Freedman & Kahn, 2000; Hawkey, 1998; Ball & Pomeroy, 1997; Dobbins, 1996; Johnston et al., 1996; McGee, 1996; Peterat & Smith, 1996). The importance of effective associate teacher and
student teacher relationships has been identified by these authors as an element of the practicum which requires a professional approach. They acknowledge the importance of the professional relationship and its effect on both associate teachers and student teachers.

Both associate teachers and student teachers require time, space and facilitation in some form, to reflect on the professional relationship and enhance personal professional growth. By identifying their beliefs, understandings and specific strategies from an informed perspective both parties can become involved in the implementation of a focused approach to the development of the professional relationship.

For the associate teacher and student teacher to develop a ‘rich’ professional relationship, the associate teacher must be active in the relationship (Elliott, 1995). For example associate teachers’ supervisory styles need to be linked to, and guided by their own clear understandings of teacher development and should take place in a professional climate that supports a collaborative approach (Fairbanks et al., 2000; Johnston et al., 1996; Peterat & Smith, 1996). Associate teachers should acknowledge themselves and the student teachers as learners as well as promoting the confident practice of student teachers (Edwards & Collison, 1996; Elliott, 1995).
Broadbent (1998) has suggested that a model, which supports student teachers in seeing “themselves as proactive in their learning environments” (p. 27) would enable them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. This points clearly to the importance of implementing strategies which not only have the purpose of developing sound pedagogy in relation to teaching and learning but also in developing effective professional relationships. This in turn is likely to contribute to the student teacher’s professional development.

Key factors and strategies that contribute to the development of effective professional relationships have been identified in studies which highlight the importance of collaborative strategies as being most conducive to successful professional relationships (McGee et al., 2001; Fairbanks et al., 2000; Johnston, 1996; Peterat & Smith, 1996). In these studies collaboration is described as associate teachers and student teachers working together as a team, building on each other’s learning, reflecting on learning and as Elliott (1995) suggests, identifying future learning needs by closing the gap between practice and conceptual development. Teacher facilitated strategies which require conversation, team teaching, modelling, reflection and purposeful interpretation of roles appear to be most effective.

Austin and Baldwin (1992) claim that collaboration increases productivity, maintains motivation, and stimulates creativity and risk taking. To be successful they argue, collaborators must know the dynamics of the collaboration process and be prepared to cope with its challenges as well as reap its rewards. Peterat and Smith (1996) point out that while collaboration between universities and schools is acknowledged and emphasised in the teaching practicum “the experience and meanings of collaboration among participants” (p. 15) in teacher education programmes is less well established. Peterat’s (1993, cited in Peterat & Smith, 1996)
earlier research also shows that collaboration can have multiple meanings depending on who is interpreting it. For example, student teachers identified that working in the same school or classroom with a peer who could offer support was an effective form of collaboration for them. Associate teachers indicated that collaboration “encouraged joint planning of courses with student teachers, permitted them to learn from student teachers” and resulted in “being less judgemental in evaluation” and “more working together for improvements” (Peterat & Smith, 1996, p. 16). The associate teachers also stated that collaboration motivated them to engage in reflection. As a result they believed there was greater flexibility and openness in “deciding on appropriate practices” (p. 16). It appears that collaboration can not only create an environment that encourages a professional relationship and partnership between the associate teacher and the student teacher but also enhances the learning environment for children (Johnston et al., 1996; Peterat & Smith, 1996).

Fairbanks et al. (2000) found that associate teachers and student teachers collaborated by sharing issues with which they had both struggled as new and experienced teachers. For example, they traded professional resources that influenced their practice, watched videotaped lessons and considered how to provide effective feedback. Furthermore they discussed the value of observation. An interesting strategy employed by some participants in Fairbanks’ et al.(2000) study was the use of partnership maps that enabled them to visually represent unique aspects of their professional relationship.

Through the development of a collaborative teaching model Warren and Maloney (2001) found that it was valuable to incorporate specific strategies while students were placed in schools to “encourage personal growth, reflection, interaction and scaffolding” (p. 2). In this study student teachers were paired in classrooms. The
intention was to emphasise collegial partnerships, to facilitate the sharing of expertise about teaching and to further enhance collaborative practices. In establishing this three-way interchange of shared experience and expertise Warren and Maloney (2001) aimed to extinguish the one-way feedback they had found to be generally prevalent during the practicum. Students in this study believed that there was less emphasis on technical skills. Rather the process-orientated focus necessitated the development of effective professional relationships.

Johnston et al. (1996) showed that collaboration enabled experienced associate teachers to share the knowledge they had about teaching and learning with student teachers. Collaboration enabled associate teachers to facilitate student teachers’ learning because it provided a non-threatening context in which they developed a more collegial professional relationship.

While Peterat and Smith (1996) have argued that inherent in collaboration are different perspectives and beliefs which may lead to dissonance, they point out that dissonance may be necessary for learning to take place. In their study they deliberately probed “the ‘underside’ of collaboration; the tensions, frustrations, discomfort and dissonance, to reach a deeper understanding of collaborative practice in a teacher education setting” (p. 16). They state that collaboration between associate teachers and student teachers will not occur naturally. Therefore, it is important to clarify how each interprets and intends to implement collaborative practices.

To make collaboration possible and effective, Inger (1993) argues that interdependence and opportunity are vital and are likely to make a difference when they are an integral, part of day-to-day work. Other studies of collaboration in the teaching practicum provide clear evidence that collaboration does optimise student
teachers’ and associate teachers’ practicum experiences and contribute to the professional development of both (Hawkey, 1998; Sachs, 1997; Johnston et al., 1996; Peterat & Smith, 1996; Elliott, 1995). Further research strongly indicates that shared work must have a clear purpose and be both ‘said’ and demonstrated so that the accomplishments of individuals and groups are recognized and celebrated (Warren & Maloney, 2001; Fairbanks et al., 2000; Johnston et al., 1996).

Many of these studies suggest that if reciprocal models were implemented, then the professional development of both associate teachers and student teachers would be effectively supported (Fairbanks et al., 2000; Hawkey, 1998; Elliott, 1995; Day, 1993) thus moving teacher education from an apprenticeship and competency model to a more reflective model.

**Collaborative strategies that strengthen professional relationships**

Both associate teachers and student teachers in the study employed strategies to enhance and sustain the professional relationship although they did not always appear to be consciously planned. Several of the studies already mentioned have identified specific strategies that can be consciously and thoughtfully implemented to nurture the professional relationship (Fairbanks et al., 2000; Hawkey, 1998; Johnston, 1996).

In this study about the development of professional relationships the main collaborative strategies that the participants employed included team planning, teaching and modelling by the associate teacher, conversation, the use of reflective journals and the associate teacher acting as a critical friend. While these strategies aimed to deliberately support the development of teaching practice, an outcome of their use was the enhancement of the professional relationship.
The study showed that when the associate teacher took on the role of a *critical friend* the student teacher was more able to develop greater understanding of effective teaching and learning (Edwards and Collison, 1996). They were also able to develop the ability to look more critically at their own teaching and evaluate its effectiveness. In the role of ‘critical friend’ the associate teacher challenged the student teacher while still providing professional support and encouragement. But developing the role in a way that ensures the professional relationship can be positively sustained was challenging for associate teacher and student teacher. It required the associate teacher and student teacher to have already made a connection with each other both personally and professionally. It was clear that practice could not be enhanced or changed without an ongoing, reflective relationship between the two people directly involved and closest to the action. They were the experts in that they determined the terms, owned the process and reached the conclusions. While it was not easy to be both critical and friendly when working collaboratively, associate teachers and student teachers needed to determine and agree on the ‘rules’ when implementing the ‘critical friend’ strategy as a way of nurturing their professional relationship (Edwards & Collison, 1996). Most associate teachers in the study viewed themselves as having adopted the role of a critical friend (Tomlinson, 1996; Brookfield, 1995) although they did not actually use the term. Certainly they believed their role was to encourage and engage their student in critical reflection and that they were doing so. The data sources suggest however, that reflection from a more technical perspective dominated. Critical reflection in which student teachers were challenged to think by their associate teachers and make meaningful change was less evident.
Keeping a **reflective journal** has been identified as effective in not only developing reflective practice but for enhancing the professional relationship, particularly interpersonal aspects. Holly (1984) points out that there are no rules for journal keeping. Rather, each person should develop his or her own style. While journals may initially involve solitary reflection there is evidence that shows they do eventually lead to further discussion and reflection with critical friends or colleagues, thereby promoting further reflection and dialogue. Reflective journals may be personal, collaborative or both (Holly, 1984).

Reflective journals provided each participant in the study with opportunities to articulate their thinking about how the professional relationship was developing. Because the journal was as private or public as each participant wished it to be this aspect enabled both associate teachers and student teachers to monitor and self evaluate their practices.

In Fairbanks’ et al. (2000) study about the associate teacher-student teacher relationship participants used collaborative reflective journals. Through sharing their thinking and experiences both associate teachers and student teachers gained insights and guidance for further development. The shared dialogue journal not only provided data but also enhanced collaboration. One pair in this study shared their journal. Initially it did not appear to have any more noticeable impact on their relationship. However, about mid-way through the practicum this pair had developed a strong rapport, were team teaching comfortably together and communicating openly and honestly. Hawkey (1997) and McGee (1996) also found that more positive and open professional relationships developed through the use of reflective journals because the
participants felt they could more easily write what they wanted to say than verbalise it.

The journals in this study showed that the student teachers believed that they had a voice and were given opportunities to share in decision-making about implementing the classroom programme.

*Conversation* has been specifically highlighted as important in the development of the professional relationship in the study. Edwards & Collison (1996) believe that conversation, as a form of reflection, can be an effective strategy providing ongoing opportunities for inquiry. Palmer (1998) states that when conversation results in productive dialogue about beliefs and practice, it helps to establish a climate of inquiry which values diversity and encourages reflection. Conversation therefore, can explore what is meaningful and valuable for the associate teacher and student teacher in relation to their beliefs about learning and teaching as well as the practical aspects of classroom life. Conversation was clearly a key strategy employed by associate teachers and student teachers in the study. Conversations contributed to the development of successful professional relationships. One of the student teacher participants commented:

*A and I have constantly talked throughout the practicum – reviewing my teaching, reviewing her teaching, reviewing the children’s learning. This has been the biggest thing I think that has developed our relationship. It has been a constant analysis of our teaching practices and our relationship…..* (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003)

The same student teacher believed that the ability to talk with her associate teacher enabled her to manage the more challenging aspects of the professional relationship:
Early last week A commented that I needed to loosen up a little with my class management – this is something that I always make sure to establish firmly and was thinking that it was time for me to back down a little. I was a little taken aback by A’s comment at the time but took it on and tried to adapt accordingly. I did not show A that this comment had (to a small degree) offended me but at the end of the week I talked to A and explained my reaction to her and thanked her for her feedback on this matter. This was important for the development of our relationship as we were both able to better understand how the other was reacting/feeling in this situation. I think that this openness and acceptance is merely building on the initial openness that was established right at the start… (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003)

Conversation appeared to support the development of a culture of collaboration among the research participants (Feldman, 1999). As Edwards and Collison (1996) suggest, collaborative conversations appeared to be a key part of the process for each pair in developing a professional relationship. Initially conversations were mainly related to associate teachers assisting student teachers with their planning but they eventually became more collaborative and self evaluative. Student teachers moved beyond being what Edwards and Collison (1996) term the “polite guest” (p. 38) in the conversations to more collegial involvement involving mentoring-style conversations.

The study showed that seminars can be regarded as an extension of ‘mentoring’ or professional conversations (Edwards & Collison, 1996). When timetabled into the teaching practice programme seminars can have clearly defined purposes and provide opportunities for individual associate teachers and student teachers to share their experiences with each other in a collaborative group. A seminar was scheduled during the study to provide an opportunity for participants to reflect collaboratively, share strategies, have access to literature and informally interact with each other. It was intended to be an extension of the informal and formal conversations participants were already having within their pairs and with me.
as research facilitator. The seminar served multiple purposes in that participants were able to ask further questions about the research, and share experiences first as a whole group, followed by two smaller groups (associate teachers and student teachers).

**Team teaching** clearly supported student teachers’ learning, provided access to teachers’ knowledge and a non-threatening situational context in which student teachers could teach throughout the practicum. ‘Jumping in,’ a strategy identified by Stanulis and Russell (2000), was sometimes used by associate teachers to convey to student teachers that they were expected to actively participate in classroom life. The ‘jumping in’ strategy implied that permission from the associate teacher was not needed for the student teacher to participate in the associate teacher’s lessons. The way this occurred depended on the nature of the associate teacher-student teacher relationship. For example, in the study two pairs appeared to comfortably ‘jump in’ (and out) of each other’s teaching. However on closer examination it was clear that the associate teachers would jump in to defuse situations whereas the student teachers nearly always ‘jumped in’ to contribute to teaching. ‘Jumping in’ was not the only team teaching strategy employed by associate teachers and student teachers. A student teacher’s comments illustrate the value placed on modelling as a type of team teaching strategy:

*B has been doing one teaming class and then handing me the resources and letting me do the same lesson with the second group of kids. This has been a good way for me to ‘jump-in-the-deep-end.’ However, as B remains nearby, I have enough support that I will not sink.* (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003)

Student teachers especially valued being included in planning meetings which then led to team teaching. Discussion, planning and reflecting together and working as a team were identified as key aspects for the development of the professional relationship in the study. As a student teacher pointed out:
*E* and I frequently discuss her plans for the class programme daily so that I know what is going on and where the class is going. She includes me in all aspects of planning—we plan and discusses the class programme collaboratively—which is great! (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003)

Another student teacher felt she was working collaboratively with her associate teacher:

*I think that due to the fact that we are both quite open and willing to work together we have established a team rather than two teachers teaching in the same room.* (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003)

Her associate teacher later emphasised the value of teamwork:

*Team teaching is so good. We slip into the areas that we are confident with or the areas that she wants me to model for her.* (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003)

**CONCLUSION**

Research indicates that collaborative strategies are particularly effective tools for the development of professional relationships between associate teachers and student teachers. Potentially they are tools which provide ongoing feedback to help associate teachers and student teachers target specific issues in relation to teaching, learning and the professional relationship.

The benefits of collaborative strategies appear to be many and diverse and clearly enrich professional relationships. Associate teachers and student teachers can create a professional relationship based on mutual respect and understanding for each other’s expertise, perspectives, and roles through the implementation of these strategies. With an associate teacher acting as a critical friend (Edwards & Collison, 1996; Tomlinson, 1995; Frost, 1993) associate teachers and student teachers can ensure that they:

- collaborate to set common goals;
- hold conversations for a range of purposes;
• make time to critically reflect during and after teaching and
• think about actions and outcomes through formulating and asking questions.

As Dobbins (1996) and Richardson-Koehler (1988) suggest, there needs to be an “empowering model of supervision that values student teachers as learners and utilises strategies which facilitate their learning” (Dobbins, 1996, p. 69) and therefore nurtures the development of an effective professional relationship.

References


