
Effective mentoring of student teachers: Beliefs, attitudes and practices of successful New Zealand associate teachers.

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Abstract

This article is based on a research study (McDonald, 2001) which identified and described the beliefs, attitudes and practices of associate (mentor) teachers within a New Zealand context. The purpose of the research was to investigate associate teachers' supervision styles and to identify what makes them successful. Data was collected from associates, visiting lecturers and student teachers. Analysis of the data indicated that an effective associate teacher needs to motivate student teachers, find out about their learning needs, discuss their perceptions about teaching, and model effective teaching practice. Associate teachers should also provide regular feedback, and ensure that their classroom climate supports the supervision of students. Student teachers should have the opportunity to engage in critical reflection. The study concluded that associate teachers' own personal pedagogy should be effective, that they should have up-to-date curriculum and professional knowledge and should also be clear communicators with the ability to talk and listen to students. The findings of this research confirmed the importance of successful practicum experiences for student teachers in the development of becoming an effective practitioner.

Introduction

Associate teachers who work with student teachers play a critical role in pre-service teacher education (Glickman and Bey, 1990; Guyton, 1989). Much of the research and literature on effective practicum supervision merely reports supervision practices said to be effective in one way or another by participants. From this perspective, learning to be an associate teacher involves learning particular supervision practices (Mayer and Austin, 1999), and being an effective associate teacher means being well versed in them.

The associate teacher has a responsibility to facilitate the effective learning of the student teacher in the practicum classroom. Mayer and Austin (1999) believe that helping student teachers to negotiate their own professional identities within a reflective and goal directed framework is central to supervision practice. Therefore there is a need for positive, personal and professional relationships between the associates and the student teachers, involving open and frank communication.

A recently completed research case study (McDonald 2001) identified and described the beliefs, attitudes and practices of associate (mentor) teachers within a New Zealand context. The specific objectives of the study were:

- to identify and describe practices of successful associate teachers.
- to identify the beliefs and attitudes that contribute to this success.
- to determine what makes associate teachers successful in supervision from the viewpoint of visiting lecturers and student teachers.

This article focuses on aspects of the first and third objectives.

Review of literature

A crucial component for teacher education is assisting student teachers to make their beliefs and philosophies explicit, to examine the underlying assumptions of those beliefs, and then to reflect on the consequences of putting such beliefs into practice in schools. Such a process helps student teachers understand and negotiate the socialisation process inherent in becoming a teacher (Ziechner and Gore, 1990). Within the context of preservice teacher education, the importance of the practicum component for prospective teachers is well documented (Guyton and McIntyre, 1990; Mayer and Austin, 1999; Dobbins, 1996). The quality and success of practicum experiences are largely dependent on the supervising teacher (Koerner, 1992). Whiting and Cusworth (1995) identified the key factor for success of the practicum as encouragement of student teachers. Supervising teachers were seen as effective when they respected the student and offered help, but also gave them the opportunity for independent development, positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. The literature that addresses styles of supervision

suggests that approaches that are consultative and collaborative are the most effective (Cameron and Wilson, 1993).

An important part of the student teacher's practicum is the opportunity to reflect on learning. Dobbins (1996) commented that one of the unanticipated outcomes of such a practice was that it had an impact on supervising teachers also. Supervising teachers started to focus on student teachers' learning and began to investigate their own role in the light of what they needed to do to facilitate such learning. A model that requires supervisors to relinquish the role of critic and to assume the role of facilitator is advocated by Mayer and Austin (1999). However, Nolan and Francis (1992) state that student teachers must be prepared to assume some responsibility for the learning process, and for the outcomes of the practicum. They must be taught how to reflect critically on their progress, and be prepared to listen to suggestions and to acknowledge the importance of content and pedagogy in teaching and in learning how to teach (Ball, 2000).

Associate teachers have to be able to teach all student teachers the core task of linking subject matter, knowledge and pedagogy. Ball (2000) suggests that being able to complete this linking is fundamental to teaching. Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Bailey (2000) state that teacher educators should strive to provide preservice teachers not only with course work that provides them with a solid foundation for their thinking, but with the opportunities to make essential connections between practical experiences and their base of theoretical knowledge. Ball (2000, p. 241) argues that "... subject matter and pedagogy have been peculiarly divided in the conceptualization and curriculum of teacher education and learning to teach." This has meant that teachers have often been left to their own devices when linking subject matter, knowledge and pedagogy.

In order for the practicum to realise the potential it has as a significant learning experience for future teachers, changes need to be made. These changes should be based on notions of empowerment, collaboration and reflection. This argument fits with the move over recent years from a teacher dominated approach of associate teachers in student supervision, to a more learner dominated approach of enquiry and investigation (Dobbins, 1996). It has also led to a change from the associate being the problem solver, decision maker, and goal setter, to the

student teacher and associate teacher working in a collaborative problem solving way, with joint decision making and goal setting.

Methodology

This case study focused on the beliefs, attitudes and practices of associate teachers. Four effective associate teachers in the Auckland area who work in preservice education, in partnership with Auckland College of Education, were invited to participate. The teachers were identified as being 'effective' in feedback from student teachers, visiting lecturers and the staff in practicum centre. Four visiting lecturers from the College of Education, identified from feedback received from students and associate teachers, were also invited to participate in the study. Three groups of six third-year students were asked to take part in semi structured group interviews. Data was gathered from associate teachers, student teachers and visiting lecturers by means of semi-structured face-to-face audio-taped interviews. Responses were analysed and grouped into common sets of themes, for example – teacher content knowledge, role modelling, personal pedagogy, reflection, feedback, communication, personal professional qualities, and professionalism.

Practicum involves an interpersonal and interactional process between student teacher and associate teacher. Teaching and learning are therefore complementary concepts, and the activities of the student teacher and the associate are linked (Cooper, 1999). In the study, visiting lecturers, associate teachers and student teachers all indicated that the beliefs, attitudes and practices of excellent associate teachers included an ability to motivate student teachers and in most cases be motivated by them. This involved the teachers finding out about students' needs and interests and discussing their own perceptions about teaching practice. All three groups in the study mentioned that effective associate teachers are able to give regular feedback to student teachers, be supportive, reflective and have a passion and enthusiasm for teaching. According to student teachers this passion needs to be reflected in 'clear interpersonal skills of communication, being approachable and a good listener.' Four of the student teachers commented that the manner in which associate teachers teach is clearly reflected in the fun and inventiveness expressed by them in learning activities, and the teaching and learning strategies

used. It was also noted by all of the visiting lecturers and student teachers that strong pedagogical practice and curriculum knowledge were essential.

1. Importance of teachers' content knowledge

Associate teachers should aim towards providing student teachers not only with a solid foundation for student thinking, but with opportunities to make a connection between practical experiences and theoretical knowledge (Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). These links were evident in the research findings. Student teachers indicated that associate teachers with a sound knowledge base were able to explain their pedagogy to them clearly. The following comment illustrated the importance student teachers placed on associate teacher's knowledge base:

Associate teachers have to have content knowledge, because you're trying to understand teaching and kids, and if associates don't have the skills or experience to tell you what is happening, it makes a really huge gap (Student teacher).

These comments were mirrored by associate teachers:

To be a successful associate you have to have good curriculum knowledge, you have to have a variety of learning styles you use effectively, and can model them for student teachers... (Associate teacher).

Associate teachers must have not only sound subject knowledge; they must be able to apply this effectively in the classroom. All of the associate teachers commented that this combination enhances the quality of the learning for the children and provides important modelling for student teachers. Shulman (1987) and Reagan (1993) highlight the importance of teachers possessing a sound knowledge base. It is important that this knowledge base is seen by student teachers:

For teachers to be able to identify children's levels of understanding, to know the steps which are necessary to take to improve achievement, to ask appropriate questions to guide children towards deeper understandings, to help children identify for themselves how to construct the way forward and to offer effective quality feedback, teachers need an immense amount of content knowledge (Visiting lecturer).

Most participants believed that as student teachers gain experience they might begin to think differently about subject matter, and classroom practice may reshape pedagogical content knowledge. Knowledge and experience are closely intertwined characteristics of good teachers, therefore:

Teachers must have sound understandings of learning theories to inform their practice and must also have insightful understandings of the children they work with (Visiting lecturer).

This is of particular importance when student teachers observe associate teachers as the associates can explain why they use different theories at particular times. Teacher education is characterised by a focus on quality and professionalism. In order to achieve quality education there is a need for high quality teachers who have sound subject content and curriculum knowledge. In this study the associate teachers, student teachers, and visiting lecturers all confirmed that teachers need to be able to explain their practice while at the same time being critical and reflective. Without these skills teaching practices may suffer, the pupils suffer, and the student teachers who observe and model become very narrow in their practice:

Teaching cannot be considered a profession unless its practitioners have acquired an extensive body of theoretical knowledge that helps them to understand, explain, defend, justify and, where necessary, modify their pedagogy (Dixon, Rata, and Carpenter, 2001, p.11).

2. Importance of teachers as role models

It was clear from comments made by both visiting lecturers and student teachers that the ability of associate teachers to model teaching practice and behaviour is extremely important:

I think it's so important for our student teachers to expect excellent teaching and excellent role models because there's a flow on effect. It inspires them, and the idea of having high standards and high expectations of children and achieving excellent outcomes, is essential. A highly proficient practitioner as a role model is vital (Visiting lecturer).

All three groups indicated that the associate teacher must want to guide the student teacher professionally.

You've got to be a good role model; you've got to know what you're about (Associate teacher).

Associate teachers should be talking about their personal beliefs and thinking processes, while at the same time encouraging student teachers to think more deeply about their own practice. Transparency and honesty plays an essential part in any role modelling that student teachers observe:

I enjoy being with associates who are clear in what they say, there are no hidden messages, they are straightforward in what they expect - it is much easier then to do it. They are not telling you what to do, but making suggestions about how you can improve your teaching style within a safe environment (Student teacher).

Therefore a crucial role for associate teachers is assisting student teachers to develop their own beliefs and philosophies about teaching, and making these explicit in their practice. Student teachers should be able to examine underlying assumptions and reflect on the consequences of putting such theories into practice in schools. Such a process, with the assistance of associate

teachers, helps student teachers understand and negotiate the process of socialisation that is inherent in becoming a teacher (Zeichner and Gore, 1990). The qualities of transparency and honesty were identified by the majority of associate teachers, student teachers, and visiting lecturers as being vital in effective associate teacher practice.

3. Importance of reflection

It was generally recognised by these associate teachers and visiting lecturers that it is important for students to develop a critical awareness of their own practice, and that practicum plays an essential role in this process. The associate teachers were aware that they needed to ensure that student teachers have opportunities to develop reflective practice. This, as Klenowski (1998) suggests, will encourage them to be innovative and developmental in their teaching and learning. Reflection practised within a supportive environment encourages student teachers to take risks and to articulate and reflect on their actions. As one student teacher stated:

I think that collaboration with your associates gives you empowerment, as does reflecting, but also if your associate reflects too. If they come back the next day and say, "Hey I thought about what if"? This gives you something to look at, think about or consider how you might deal with it. Those things are empowering but it's associates going through the same process and collaborating with you, reflecting with you, that gives it impact (Student teacher).

Gibbs (1996) believes that by reflecting critically on events in teaching, and by their own actions and cognition, student teachers are able to take informed rather than reflexive actions. In this study reflection was perceived by all three groups to have an especially important role in the professional development of student teachers. What is important in education is the quality of teachers' thinking and reflections. Most student teachers can and do reflect on their own teaching during practicum. The idea of an associate teacher modelling the reflective process and acting on its outcomes is powerful for student teachers.

When you see an associate teacher reflecting on a lesson, that is when it has impact. You can see the value of it (Student teacher).

The experienced practitioner can help student teachers to focus on particular dimensions of teaching, guiding and encouraging them to discuss and articulate what they know. This process, with its focus on reflection, has been shown to have a positive influence on how much student teachers learn from practicum. The focus on learning within the classroom environment was identified by associate teachers and visiting lecturers as being significant. Learning was a two way process:

I really like learning from the students, and finding out what's going on at college. It really keeps me up to date with new theories and beliefs. It is also not only the student reflecting but it makes us reflect on our own practice too (Associate teacher).

Student teachers should be encouraged and prepared by associate teachers and lecturers in pre-service training to be critical thinkers and reflectors because critical reflection is a tool for thinking and problem solving (Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). This point was strongly made by one visiting lecturer:

Student teachers need to be taught to engage in practice, reflect on practice and articulate practice, which in turn will better help them understand and improve their practice (Visiting lecturer).

Many of the associate teachers and visiting lecturers commented that both teacher educators and associate teachers need to ensure that student teachers have the opportunity to reflect on what it is that enables them to be innovative and developmental in their teaching and learning practice.

It is the students who listen and take on board your ideas, and try things out and are not scared of trying things out, and reflecting and thinking and saying "Next time I'll do it this way," that make progress (Associate teacher).

In the way described above the associate teacher and student teacher together reflect on their own knowledge and experience, and formulate and reformulate their practice, in order to illuminate a situation. Schon (1983) described the role of the reflective practitioner in this way. The importance of reflection is not for associate teachers to demonstrate and explain how practice should be carried out, but for student teachers to be given the opportunity for self-analysis and reflection in connection with their teaching.

4. Benefits for student teachers of successful practicums.

The practicum is an essential and important part of preservice teacher education and its success is dependent to a large extent on the associate teacher and his/her supervision practices (Mayer and Austin, 1999). Student teachers indicated that they model and follow the lead of their associate teachers.

Effective associates are ones who model their practice, are supportive of student teachers, and attempt to reduce any anxieties we have about teaching and learning, and they are encouraging in their approach (Student teacher).

There were important benefits for the student teachers in having supportive, well prepared associate teachers. They made the students feel wanted, and encouraged them with positive reinforcement. Some students pointed out that because of this support that they didn't feel upset by constructive criticism and were more willing to take risks. This form of guidance, involving mutual learning and friendship, allows both the associate teacher and the student teacher to engage in "*expanding the boundaries of their own knowledge about teaching and professional growth*" (Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn, 2000, p.102). One important purpose of being an associate, commented a student teacher, was to assist students in the development of their professional identities:

The best associate I've had asked me to come in early on the first day and we had a discussion. She said to me, " This is a partnership that we are undertaking for a month. Watch how I interact with the children, how they respond to me, ask questions." This was

brilliant - really positive. It was like saying – “We’re open and I’m going to share my class with you.” (Student teacher).

Associate teachers ideally should be talking about their personal beliefs and thinking processes, while at the same time encouraging student teachers to think more deeply about their own practice.

Clifford and Green (1996) claim that learning to teach is an activity that depends upon social interactions such as those mentioned above.

My associate teacher was always willing to help. We always talked about how I felt, what else could I do, what could I do next. This was really good, because in that way these are questions you use when you reflect yourself and she just gave me a guide (Student teacher).

The realisation and understanding that teaching is a profession is important for student teachers. However the complexities of teaching are not always easily seen or recognised by others. Associate teachers, by assisting student teachers to deal with complexity and a range of responsibilities, have an important role in helping student teachers understand the roles of the teacher as a professional. Some responsibilities that were mentioned by associate teachers were: curriculum meetings, staff and syndicate meetings, dealing with parents and families, sports and cultural duties. As well as advice about learning and teaching, associates need to discuss the balancing of teaching and administrative duties:

I realised just how much teaching involved, by watching my associate teacher deal with children, parents, meetings, outside agencies like SES, while at the same time trying to plan lessons, assess children, give feedback, take netball and organise a school trip. I was exhausted just watching. I now realise this is not a 9-3 job (Student teacher).

For both associate teachers and student teachers, the process of supervision is a complex one. In a similar way to teaching itself, learning to teach is neither simple nor explicit (Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn, 2000). The importance of completing a successful practicum is an essential

part of the development of becoming a professional and a teacher. Kagan (1992, p.162) argues that *“The practice of teaching remains forever rooted in personality and experience and that learning to teach requires a journey into the deepest recesses of one’s self-awareness.”*

Conclusion

The results of this study provide evidence of the importance of strong professional links between associate teachers and student teachers in practicum experiences. The evidence highlights the importance of positive practicum experiences for student teachers and the need for excellence in supervision from associate teachers. Supervision is a one-to-one relationship where the associate teacher and student teacher work together (Cooper, 1999). The findings of this study support the belief of Koerner (1992) that the quality and success of the practicum is dependent on the effectiveness of the supervising teacher. Observation of successful associate teachers will help student teachers to be innovative, and better able to strengthen their personal teaching practice.

Teaching and learning are complementary processes. Becoming aware of one’s personal teaching practice through reflection is a central part of becoming an effective practitioner. This belief was reported by many of the participating students and associate teachers. As Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Bailey (2000) state, reflection on personal experiences in the classroom is essential for improving teaching. Student teachers need to take responsibility for their own learning. They need to be open to suggestions, to participate in discussions with associate teachers, and to reflect critically on their own progress (Ball, 2000). The findings of this study suggest that through a reflective process student teachers can be guided and encouraged in their teaching practice, and assisted to articulate their progress towards the development of requisite professional skills and knowledge.

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