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Visiting Lecturers: Perceptions of their Role in Supervising Student Teachers on Practicum

Lyn McDonald
Faculty of Education
University of Auckland
PB 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand
l.mcdonald@auckland.ac.nz
09 6238899 extension 48710

Abstract

One of the key players in student teacher learning on practicum is the visiting lecturer. The purpose of this paper is to document five visiting lecturers' perceptions of their specific role and contribution to student teacher learning during practicum. The visiting lecturers described their role as one of networking, creating important professional partnerships and relationships between the university and schools. They portrayed their role as a crucial part of the accreditation of a student teacher learning to be a teacher and one which, in their opinion, was a privilege. The data for this qualitative study were gathered using semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis of practicum reports. It will be argued in this paper that the role of the visiting lecturer is an important one and the support for student teachers while on practicum comes through practices such as triadic assessment discussions, professional conversations and feedback based on observations of teaching.

Keywords: practicum, visiting lecturer, associate teacher, student teacher, triadic discussion, initial teacher education

1.Introduction

The role of the university in initial teacher education is an interesting and important one with a specific and significant role for the visiting lecturer to play. Visiting lecturers are “uniquely positioned to help student teachers bridge the university-based content of their teacher preparation programs and the practical knowledge of teaching” (Cuenca et al., 2011, p. 1068). Fayne (2007), suggested visiting lecturers serve a distinct and important function both as supervisors and as a link between the university and school but “the professional literature provides little information on whether or not student teachers value college/university supervisors” (p. 54). Wilson (2006) argued, even though student teacher learning on practicum is a crucial part of initial teacher education, supervision remains an underutilized resource.

In a study of twenty one student teachers, seven university based supervisors and twenty one associate teachers Koerner, Rust, and Baumgartner (2002) concluded there were missed opportunities by visiting lecturers in the supervision process. Some of these missed opportunities were caused by observation visits that were too short, with little follow up and discussion and a lack of constructive feedback at the time of the visit. Even though the study indicated that visiting lecturers played a critical role in the triad of support, their roles were given the least recognition by the student teachers in the study.

There is another viewpoint. An American study of two hundred and twenty two student teachers, noted that their visiting lecturers took the time to listen, talk and give appropriate feedback (Fayne, 2007). The findings endorsed the fact that the visiting lecturers gave the student teachers time on a regular basis, and provided them with much useful, informative feedback. The visiting lecturers were therefore able to assess the student teachers based on “well-accepted principles of professional practice” (Fayne, p.60). It would seem from the results of this study, that from the student teachers’ perspective the visiting lecturers played an important role in the learning progress of the student teachers and their practicum experiences.

1.1 Practicum supervision

Approaches to practicum visiting vary significantly from one country to another and in some countries there is a move away from the role of the visiting lecturer. Le Cornu (2010) observed there is a worrying trend around the world to decrease the involvement of tenured university staff in practicum visiting. Further, Zeichner (2005) commented that, in the United States, visiting student teachers on practicum is frequently ‘farmed out’ to adjunct staff who have little connection or knowledge of teacher education. While Clandinin (2008) noted that initial teacher education in Canada is largely taught by sessional and postgraduate students who go into the schools for practicum visiting. Darling-Hammond (2006) concluded, the most powerful teacher education programs are where faculty who teach courses also supervise and advise student teachers in schools, bringing together “these disparate program elements through an integration of roles” (2006, p. 306).

As previously mentioned, the supervision of student teachers on practicum is sometimes carried out by only some of the lecturing staff. According to Beck and Kosnik (2002) this can result in lost opportunities. Concerned by this weak school–university partnership, they carried out a four-year study in which all the faculty staff became involved in practicum supervision. When the authors were evaluating the study they found the change had strengthened the partnership. This change had enhanced both the university and schools and assisted the university and visiting lecturers grow in understanding and knowledge about the school programs (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). This was a positive result as there is not always a coherent philosophy of teaching and learning that guides both the university and the practicum (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

1.2 Linking of learning

A key to success for student teachers on practicum is to find more effective ways of connecting the knowledge of the university with the knowledge of the school (Darling-Hammond, 2006). One reason presented in literature for the dichotomy between theory and practice in learning experiences, is the lack of communication and partnership between the university and schools. This includes lack of knowledge about each other’s

programs and no common frame of reference for learning and teaching (Bloomfield, 1996). It can also include poor clarity of practicum expectations for student teachers and required documentation. These issues can be exacerbated when there is only a tenuous link between the two sites with limited movement of the university based educators into schools and *vice-versa* (Bloomfield, 1996).

This linking of learning at both sites is where the visiting lecturer plays an important role. Goodlad and McMannon (2005) argued that the links between universities and schools should improve so that substantive conversations about teaching and learning that bridge research and practice can take place. The more that the learning experiences of student teacher, associate teacher and visiting lecturer can become integrated, the more powerful the influence on each other's practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006). These integrated experiences establish the opportunity for visiting lecturers to become familiar with the contexts in which student teachers are working and the challenges they face (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). Through this alignment and linking, there is more likely to be a shared ownership of and responsibility for initial teacher education, with more clearly defined roles for all participants, and professional discourse between universities and schools will increase (Sinclair, 2008).

Visiting lecturers might not always be aware of the important role they can play and the impact they can have. They might not consider what they can bring to the supervision process that others cannot or alternatively, visiting lecturers might not consider there needs to be a definitive contribution from both associate teacher and visiting lecturer. Zeichner (2005) would argue that visiting lecturers should think consciously about their role as teacher educators and "engage in the same sort of self-study and critique of their practice as they ask their student teachers to do" (p.123). Visiting lecturers will develop more awareness of the complexities in the teaching and learning progress for student teachers, through more direct and frequent involvement in schools (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). It is difficult for academics to develop sound educational theory in isolation from the field, and it is apparent by sustaining links between the school and the university an essential aspect of the university lecturer's role is promoted (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

International literature has shown that student teacher learning during practicum is an essential component of learning to be a teacher and can be complex (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004; Le Cornu, 2000). Britzman (2003) commented, learning to teach is not only about dealing with the present, it is also about negotiating the past and “throughout student teaching, the tensions between biography, practice and structure create a cacophony of conflicting demands” (2003, p. 443). However, critical to the learning process are the learning opportunities provided (Bullough, Young, & Draper, 2004) and the guidance and support through supervision given by the key players in this process. One of the key players is the visiting lecturer. Their role and relevance as supervisors and liaison people committed to the role will be described through the voices of five visiting lecturers.

2. Background and context

This paper is based on a small study completed at a Faculty of Education with five visiting lecturers who work within the Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Primary) program. These visiting lecturers both teach within the program and supervise student teachers on practicum. The diploma is an intensive program with a qualification equivalent of 1.3 academic years delivered in one calendar year. There are three block practicum placements and the study took place on completion of the second. The practicum is delivered in a consortium of schools which are partnership schools within the program. Each partnership school has a school coordinator and a number of associate teachers who have built up strong relationships and communication with the visiting lecturers.

In the faculty, lecturers have in their workload (which varies for different lecturers) the teaching of students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, involvement and participation in research and a component of practicum supervision. This means they are responsible for supervising student teachers on practicum in schools, and in conjunction with associate teachers observing student teachers and evaluating their progress. The visiting lecturer completes two to three visits to the schools. The first is a group visit to

establish contact and clarify practicum expectations. The second and third visits include an observation visit and a triadic (three-way) discussion. The three participants (visiting lecturer, associate teacher and student teacher) complete the triadic giving verbal feedback, feed-forward of goals for the future and a pass/fail on completion of the practicum. A practicum report is then written up by both the visiting lecturer and associate teacher including comments on all the learning outcomes of the practicum.

3. Methodology

The research for this paper was located within the interpretive paradigm and used a qualitative case study approach. An interpretive paradigm enabled the complexities and practices associated with the visiting lecturer role to be explored and investigated in depth. One goal of the qualitative approach is to elicit understanding and meaning from the participants with the researcher being the primary instrument of data collection. Inductive strategies and analysis are also features of the qualitative approach with primarily field work involved and the resulting data being richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998). The epistemological assumption of a qualitative approach is based on minimizing the distance between the researcher and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As the researcher, I was involved in the research process gaining rich description through understanding and interpreting the perceptions and viewpoints of all participants.

A case study approach was considered appropriate for the following reasons. The proposed study was exploratory and explanatory (Yin, 1993) in that it focussed on exploring and explaining (from the five visiting lecturers' viewpoints) the specific role and relevance of the visiting lecturer in relation to supervising student teachers on practicum. With regard to the descriptive measure, the participants provided a 'thick' description of the phenomena under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998) through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In the study the role of the visiting lecturer was explored in the actual context in which their role is embedded, that is within both the university and schools.

Each visiting lecturer was interviewed for 45 minutes in a semi-structured interview to gather their perceptions and to document practices which from their perspective contributed to student teacher learning during practicum. The interviews were then transcribed. All interviewees were volunteers identified as Visiting Lecturers (V.L.s) 1 to 5 who had taught and visited within the Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Primary) program. V.L.1 had been working in the program for six years and had built up a strong relationship with a group of schools. V.L.s 3, 4 and 5 had all been working within the program for between two to six years, each working with, and building up relationships with four different schools. V.L. 2 had been working within the program for 10 years in a leadership role and was responsible for visiting five schools. Their voices are presented through direct quotes in italics.

The interviews were followed by an analysis of the five visiting lecturers' written practicum reports. There were 10 reports (2 reports per lecturer presented here as A to J) to determine how, through the written comments, they specifically contributed to student teacher learning. These visiting lecturer reports were chosen at random by the practicum office. The use of visiting lecturers' reports was an additional source of 'rich data' utilised to triangulate the data generated from the semi-structured interviews. Triangulation of sources (as was evident in this research) is often cited as one of the central ways of 'validating' qualitative research evidence (Ritchie, 2003). Appropriate ethical processes, approved by the ethics committee, were followed which ensured that all participants in the study gave informed consent.

The data analysis for the semi-structured interviews was carried out through a thematic approach with data analysed for emerging themes and patterns using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The thematic approach was chosen over other methods, because, as the researcher, I wanted to make sense of the data as it was collected, read, re-read and coded into manageable themes in relation to the research question(s). Transcripts were first read a number of times to interpret overall patterns of meaning then coded to identify repeating ideas and themes. Transcript themes were then compared with the documents to identify differences and patterns of similarity. For the purposes of analysing the documents (i.e. the practicum reports) content analysis was

used. This process of evaluating one source of evidence against another kind is utilised to locate any distortions, such as bias or false premises (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

The research questions which guided the analysis of the data were: Why is the visiting lecturer role important? What do visiting lecturers perceive to be their role and relevance in supervising student teachers on practicum? What are some of the practices (from the visiting lecturer's perspective) which specifically contribute to student teachers' learning on practicum? Three key themes emerged from the study. These were: the importance of the professional role of partnership and networking; supporting student teacher learning while on practicum; and specific practices which make the role of the visiting lecturer more effective in student teacher learning.

4. Findings

4.1 The importance of the professional role of partnership and networking

In the five interviews the themes of partnership and networking were acknowledged and reiterated by all five visiting lecturers multiple times. They stated that their important and specific role in their opinions is linked to the notion of partnership between the university and the schools, and is about working together to support the learning of student teachers on practicum. One visiting lecturer commented that the partnership between the university and schools is an iterative process that requires the lecturers know the students well and are prepared to spend quality time with them when needed on both sites. She talked about it being *an integrative approach that uses visiting lecturers who know the program, curriculum and school sites well, so that there are authentic, professional partnerships* (V.L.1). It is important that student teachers, associate teachers and visiting lecturers see as a notion of partnership all parties working together towards the crucial role of accreditation of student teachers. It was summed up by one visiting lecturer *...if we are in teacher education and we do not know what is happening in schools then we should not actually be engaged in teacher education full stop.it's one of the most fundamental parts of my job...if you took that role away then you would become isolated from what's happening in schools* (V.L.2).

The networking and building up of relationships with principals, coordinators and associate teachers is a valuable and important role of the visiting lecturer. But this does not always happen. There can be a lack of knowledge from both the university and schools about what happens at the other site, so the partnership which springs from networking is invaluable. A case in point was indicated by one visiting lecturer ...*You go into classrooms and you see great practice and I have been able to invite teachers back into the university as expert teachers* (V.L.3). In these instances, there is the importance of learning from one another. Consequently, all five visiting lecturers commented on the importance of this three-way contact and about keeping current with what is happening in schools. This cannot be done in isolation from what is occurring in the classrooms. One visiting lecturer offered an interesting insight by commenting that she considered her work in school ... *as a vital professional role that is a privilege. It is also important that the university value our role as visiting lecturers* (V.L.4).

There was, from all the visiting lecturers, an inherent sense of being able to work together with the associate teachers and student teachers in partnership. The visiting lecturers believed their role to be both different from and similar to the associate teachers who were responsible for the day-to-day supervision of the student teacher in relation to planning, classroom management, modeling teaching practices and developing supportive, professional relationships. A visiting lecturer explained her role as one which *encompassed all of those things in conjunction with the associate teacher* (V.L.5). Consequently, it is important that the visiting lecturers are practitioners themselves, in order to have the conversations about learning with the student teacher and associate teacher.

4.2 Supporting student teacher learning while on practicum

All five visiting lecturers saw the role of supporting student teachers' learning on practicum as an important part of their professional responsibility. They also saw their role as one of mediator for the student teacher if there was any conflict between them and their associate teacher or the school. *When there is a dispute or a relationship breakdown between the associate teacher and the student teacher there needs to be a*

middle man and that is me (V.L.1). The same lecturer stated that, at times, she thought *the students have minimal power and that therefore the role of the visiting lecturer in assisting the students is crucial*. In this situation the visiting lecturers saw themselves as both support and liaison people for student teachers between the university and the school.

Part of the visiting lecturer role is meeting with student teachers and clarifying with them expectations and practicum requirements. The visiting lecturers saw the purpose of their first visit as establishing a relationship with the student teacher, associate teacher and the school. *It is about building on the professional relationship and checking the student teachers are confident about what they are supposed to be doing, and what expectations are in terms of learning outcomes* (V.L.3). One visiting lecturer commented: *I think sometimes the students feel a bit rudderless in some classrooms and the associate teacher might not have a good grasp of expectations, so that is where my support and guidance is necessary* (V.L.2).

In the observation visit the visiting lecturers focused on a number of factors. One explained about looking for explicit ways the student teacher *engaged the children in lessons and how they are managing the class* (V.L.2) while another observed *student teachers' planning, ability to communicate with children, and ability to differentiate learning styles between the children and assess where the children are at* (V.L.5). This visiting lecturer wrote to a student teacher, *great to see careful attention to planning, you are making sure you are giving formative feedback as you teach* (C). Another lecturer indicated that she felt it was her role to discuss with the associate teacher their assessment of the student teacher and their learning, and have a professional discussion between the three of them. Sometimes the visiting lecturer and associate teacher might not agree on the student teacher's progress, and that is where the visiting lecturers' knowledge and partnership with the schools and associate teachers is essential in reaching an agreement. *It is the dialogue that is going on between the three of us that is important* (V.L.5).

It was clear that these five visiting lecturers (who taught the student teachers at university) felt that their role was strongly related to making the links between what was taught at university, and how that learning transferred to the teaching practice in the classroom. One stated that she saw her role as talking to the student teachers *about socio-cultural theory, motivation and engagement often referring back to Piaget and the developmental differences between children* (V.L.1). She continued that unless student teachers saw the alignment between theory and practice, *we run the risk that the theory and the research stay as theory*. She wrote in a practicum report: *I was pleased to see the use of rich tasks which we had discussed in class at university* (I). It was about the meshing together of ideas from the university and school.

The triadic discussion (which occurs after the observation) was seen as a professional, reflective, learning conversation between the visiting lecturer, associate teacher and student teacher. One lecturer mentioned that the triadic discussion was *a chance to focus on the student's learning journey and level of thinking* (V.L.3). Another stated she really wanted the student teacher to articulate and reflect to her and to the associate teacher, the things that were going well in their teaching and where there could be changes. For this lecturer it was the student teacher taking responsibility for the discussion, and documenting evidence in relation to their ability to meet the learning outcomes. The visiting lecturer commented it was about the student teacher self-regulating their own learning process. This lecturer wrote in the report *you were continually reflecting on your goals throughout the triadic discussion* (D). She saw her role as the *bringing together of the three parties in a meaningful learning dialogue* (V.L.3). The triadic discussion in this study was seen by the visiting lecturers as a positive, learning experience for all participants.

4.3 Specific practices which make the role of the visiting lecturer more effective

There were specific practices referred to by the visiting lecturers in their interviews which they felt made their role more effective. The first practice was establishing a relationship with the student teacher. It was important for all the lecturers to reinforce with the student teachers that they were there to support them in their learning. It was, as

one lecturer identified, *drawing from them where they would like specific help...how they would like their feedback framed* (V.L.1). Establishing a relationship prior to the practicum through teaching the student at university was also considered important as (V.L.3) commented *...we've got a really clear understanding of what they need to do for university and of how it links to the school learning*.

The five visiting lecturers saw as essential the feedback given to student teachers through triadic discussions, notes and written practicum reports. One suggested that *the quality of the feedback is so important ... that it is constructive, critiquing not criticizing student teachers ... and is about getting them to think about how they can improve their own teaching practice* (V.L.5). It was, in her opinion, about giving clear expectations and constructive feedback through encouragement, support and reflection. Through the written practicum reports specific feedback was evident to the student teachers from this visiting lecturer. Comments were expressed such as *...clear evidence of thorough planning and organization in advance of all teaching and learning sessions ... you have been able to rise to the challenge of meeting the needs of students working at an advanced level in Math* (I).

While practicum reports tend to be summative in nature there were indications of visiting lecturers feeding forward in their comments for example... *In future practicums you will need to be more engaged with the wider school community developing strategies that will help you to be proactive* (F). Another wrote... *your goal for next practicum is to refine your lesson timing and pacing and stay on top of the documentation* (B). And ... *In your next practicum there is scope for you to develop more rigorously planned assessment tasks* (I). One visiting lecturer however, thought the written report was useful only in terms of the feeding forward of comments to other visiting lecturers for a failing student. She stated... *I don't see them as particularly useful only where I've failed a student-what I find more useful is the formative feedback midpoint* (V.L.1).

In written comments, V.L.3 was quite specific with two student teachers... *you need to adapt lessons as you are teaching, and also change subsequent lessons readily—know*

your 'next steps' in teaching (B) and ... the lesson went very well with effective use of materials, children worked interactively and you used questioning to elicit prior knowledge and develop understanding. These are strong areas (E). When the visiting lecturer was giving feedback in relation to a struggling student teacher (not meeting all the learning outcomes) the feedback was very specific... On 28/6 it was noted that you were not sharing the learning intentions with the students consistently and on 29/6 the A.T. feedback noted you were still not using positive behavior management strategies as a natural part of your teaching (J).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of the visiting lecturer in relation to supervising student teachers on practicum. One of the most positive aspects resulting from the study was the strong belief from the visiting lecturers, that the specific role of partnership and networking between the university and schools was crucial for student teachers. As one of the visiting lecturers commented, it is so important to have visiting lecturers who know the program, the schools and student teachers so that the partnerships are authentic and professional. A report in Australia by Kruger et al., (2009) concluded that university–school relationships characterized by trust, mutuality and reciprocity were more effective and sustainable. The specific partnership (referred to in the paper) within the Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Primary) program, meant the visiting lecturers worked with the same schools and associate teachers and had built up strong working and professional relationships. In many cases the visiting lecturers also taught the student teachers at university. This factor confirms what Darling-Hammond (2006) stressed was evident in the most powerful teacher education programs, where the links between visiting lecturers' teaching and supervising were essential to coherence and integration.

Around the world there are different models of supervision in teacher education. For example McCarthy and Quinn (2010), noted that the role of the visiting lecturer is one of ensuring institutional requirements are completed. I would argue the role is much wider. With few exceptions the visiting lecturers in this study saw their relationships and

association with schools as a privilege and important to their own professional development and learning. The fact that the visiting lecturers completed only two to three visits—one to further establish relationships and check requirements and the second and third to complete the observation and triadic discussion—could be seen as a weakness. But the visiting lecturers explicitly stated in their interviews this was not the case. They taught the student teachers at university and had visited the schools on a regular basis for many years for observations and triadic discussions, so had already established relationships. Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) referred to the learning communities' view of professional experience as underpinned by a constructivist view of learning. They argued it is where visiting lecturers, associate teachers and student teachers are in relationships characterized by “trust and reciprocity with a strong appreciation of the critical nature of professional conversations for ongoing professional learning” (2008, p. 1803).

The triadic discussion is one area in the study where the visiting lecturers indicated they felt they were supporting student teacher learning while on practicum. Ortlipp (2003) stated in her research that the triadic assessment was problematic, particularly from the perspective of the student teacher and visiting lecturer and questioned whether there was an equitable role in the assessment process. The visiting lecturers in the current study were clear about their role in the triadic discussion, and saw it as the bringing together of the three parties in meaningful dialogue about the student teacher's learning and progress while on practicum.

In order for practicum experiences for student teachers to be more meaningful there needs to be a greater alignment and links between the learning at the university and the schools. Significantly, all the visiting lecturers in the study were clear about their role in facilitating the links between theory and practice, which they indicated had to be discussed and reflected upon in triadic discussions and written reports. One visiting lecturer referred to this as “*the meshing together of the ideas from the university and schools*”. It is in this instance that both visiting lecturers and associate teachers should play a collaborative role, working together with the student teachers in their learning

experiences and supporting them. Darling-Hammond (2006) noted that, in order for teacher education to become more powerful there need to be strong links between theory and practice in ways that “theorize practice and make formal learning practical” (p. 307). Likewise, Hughes (2009) aptly argued, it is incumbent on teacher educators to expose student teachers to both theoretical development and reflective on-going practicum experiences. He continued that student teachers should be able to reflect on and analyze their practicum teaching experiences and integrate this new knowledge into existing knowledge (Hughes, 2009).

What was commented on by all five visiting lecturers in the study was their commitment to student teachers on practicum. The lecturers were adamant that strong professional links and networking with the schools was essential. The visiting lecturers referred to the importance of the university valuing their role and having a place and connection to schools within the community. Le Cornu (2010) in her research reiterated the need for universities to commit to and value the work of teacher educators in developing and sustaining school–university partnerships. She commented that “the role of the academic in professional experience has never been more important within the current context” (2010, p. 204) as the role of the visiting lecturer in many countries is changing and in some cases disappearing. As Beck and Kosnik (2002) concluded, academics need to be familiar with the contexts that student teachers work in, in order to have meaningful, focused conversations about teaching and learning, which cannot be accomplished in isolation from the schools.

In this small-scale case study there was a richness of data which highlighted the importance of the professional role of partnership and networking between the university and schools. Although this study was primarily descriptive in nature and limited to five visiting lecturers the findings revealed some challenges. Three of the five visiting lecturers commented that it is important to be engaged in professional relationships with student teachers prior to the practicum experience. In this instance visiting lecturers stated they benefited from frequent ongoing meetings and dialogue with student teachers, associate teachers and schools. The point that came through in the study from all the

visiting lecturers was that they believed the importance of their role in supervising student teachers on practicum was confirmed through a variety of practices which included: the building of professional relationships with student teachers prior to (and during) practicum, and support for their learning through classroom observations and triadic discussions. While this study was from only one stakeholder's perspective (the visiting lecturer) further research is required with much larger participant groups to show the results found are typical.

Learning for student teachers is contextual and occurs in both the social environment of the university and schools. Therefore the role of the visiting lecturer is important and significant. The findings from the current study have the potential to inform the ways in which universities work with visiting lecturers to optimize and support their ongoing relationships with student teachers, associate teachers and schools. This awareness and valuing of the learning at both sites can be achieved through dialogue, professional discussions and continued communication between the university and schools. Visiting lecturers are in unique position to play an important role in this relationship because of their knowledge of learning at both the university and the schools.

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