

Components of a Good Practicum Placement: Student Teacher Perceptions

By Clive Beck & Clare Kosnik

In the second practicum I had instant rapport with my associate teacher; she made me feel very comfortable. One of the first things she said to me was, "I understand how important this report is, and I don't want you to worry because I'm not going to give you a bad report." She also said, "You know, you're here to learn, you're here to make mistakes; we all make mistakes when we're starting." So she gave me the freedom to experiment that I didn't have during the first practicum. (Liz, student teacher)

Introduction

There is general agreement that the practicum is a key aspect of a teacher education program (Glickman & Bey, 1990; McIntyre, Byrd, & Fox, 1996). Student teachers, associate teachers (also called cooperating or mentor teachers), and university faculty all recognize its crucial role. While universities often neglect the practicum, university researchers see this as a regrettable state of affairs rather than something to be accepted (Goodlad, 1990; Zeichner, 1996). Some university commentators have said that a poor practicum experience may be of little or no value (Britzman, 1991; McIntyre, Byrd, & Fox, 1996). But their point is not that there should be less emphasis on the practicum, only that it should be improved.

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In keeping with the perceived importance of the practicum, there has been much discussion in the literature of what form it should take. It has been emphasized that the practicum should be integrated with the campus program, within an overarching conception of teacher education (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995; Fosnot, 1996; Goodlad, 1990; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). It should take place in innovative schools, perhaps ones partnered with the university in a joint program of research and teacher development (Goodlad, 1994; Teitel, 1997; Whitford & Metcalf-Turner, 1999). Associate teachers should not be coerced into their role (Cole & Sorrill, 1992), should be given adequate preparation (Knowles, Cole, & Presswood, 1994; Zeichner, 1996), and should have a critical stance toward their own teaching and that of their student teachers (Maynard, 1996; Zeichner, 1990). They should support the student teachers (Williams, 1994), give a considerable amount of feedback (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Maynard, 1996), and collaborate with the student teachers even to the point of team teaching with them (Feiman-Nemser & Beasley, 1997; Fosnot, 1996). University supervisors should work closely with associate teachers, support the student teachers, and visit the school sites often (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Bullough & Gitlin, 1995; Casey & Howson, 1993). Student teachers should experience a whole school rather than just an individual classroom (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990) and have practicums in a diversity of sites (Butt, 1994; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1995). And they should do their practicums in pairs or clusters rather than isolated from their peers (Samaras & Gismondi, 1998; Tom, 1997; Winitzky, Stoddart, & O'Keefe, 1992).

With so much research on the practicum, what was the objective of the present study? In the first place, while some studies have consulted student teachers, we felt more input was needed from this group. We thought that as the “consumers,” so to speak, of practicum arrangements they would be able to help resolve some of the puzzles of the practicum. And secondly, we wished to gain more detail on the practicum experience: precisely what kind of “support” and “feedback” do student teachers require; just how are these best provided; exactly what kind of “collaboration” is appropriate; and so on. We sought a clearer picture, not only to contribute to knowledge in the area, but also as a basis for developing further the practicum aspect of our own teacher education program.

We were not going to accept the student teachers' views uncritically, of course, any more than we would the views of university faculty or associate teachers. Each group has its distinctive interests and biases. We were aware of the literature which says student teachers are blinkered by their need to get along with their associate teacher, survive in the classroom, and obtain a positive report (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). However, we believed our students would not be completely swayed by these considerations, and would have useful ideas on what type of practicum experience would enhance their growth as professionals.

Context and Method of the Study

Our one-year, post-baccalaureate teacher education program prepares teachers for the elementary level, either for primary/junior (Kindergarten to Grade 6) or junior/intermediate (Grades 4 to 8). Our practicum schools are in the multiracial urban core of Toronto and have primarily a lower SES student body. However, by contrast with the situation in some other major cities, central Toronto schools are relatively well funded and are seen as desirable locations for practice teaching and subsequent employment. Our student teachers may be described as being either middle or lower-middle class, with only about 15 percent racial minority representation. Many are the children of working-class immigrants and so have knowledge of the “immigrant experience,” but they have clearly done well at school and university. Virtually all have had other vocational or study experiences since completing their bachelor’s degree. Their average age is 28 years. Research is needed into how the background of our student teachers affects their capacity to teach in a multiracial, low SES urban setting.

Each year we have a cohort of about 65 student teachers and a team of two full-time and five part-time faculty. Because of the cohort and faculty-team structure, we have the opportunity to develop an integrated program with a distinctive approach. One aspect of our approach is a close connection between the practicum and the campus program; another is a sustained effort to build community within the cohort by, for example, having frequent social events, mixing the primary/junior and junior/intermediate students in most classes and in the practicum, and clustering the student teachers together in a small number of partner schools during the practicum.

In each of the two semesters of the program, our students first do their student teacher experience program (STEP) for one day a week, and then have a four- or five-week practice teaching session or “block” in the same school and classroom as STEP. STEP and the practice teaching block combined are what we call “the practicum.” We integrate the practicum with the campus program by emphasizing a critical, inquiring approach in both settings, addressing issues from the practicum in campus courses, and having a major action research project, carried out during the second practicum, as the central academic requirement of the program.

All members of the faculty team, including subject specialists, serve as practicum supervisors. Each of us is responsible for from one to four schools, depending on the extent of our appointment in the program; we visit our schools often to support both the student teachers and the associate teachers. As a team we select the associate teachers and make decisions about who will continue in the role. The associate teachers are responsible for assessing the students’ teaching in both the interim (mid-block) evaluation and the final evaluation. Because of the clustering of student teachers in a few schools and our frequent visits, we get to know our schools and associate teachers well. While the student teachers move to a new

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school and cluster for their second practicum, faculty stay with the same schools from one semester to the next and over successive years.

Since the establishment of our cohort program several years ago, we have engaged in research on the program. As previously noted, the present study of student teacher views on the practicum was intended both to add to knowledge in the field and to help us improve the practicum aspect of our program. The primary data source for the study was a set of semi-structured interviews of eleven of our student teachers conducted in Spring 2000. The students were randomly selected, with provision to ensure representation of females and males and primary/junior and junior/intermediate candidates. The interviews were about an hour in length; they were tape-recorded and the tapes transcribed. As promised to the interviewees, pseudonyms have been substituted for their names and the names of their associate teachers. In addition to the interviews a questionnaire on the practicum was administered to the whole cohort, also in Spring 2000. While the questionnaire was not primarily concerned with issues of what constitutes a good practicum placement, some of the responses were relevant to this study.

Questions asked in the interviews included the following: Tell me about your second practice teaching block. How did you approach this block differently from the first one? How often and for how long did you and your associate teacher debrief? How do you think your associate teacher viewed her/his role? How useful was your interim/final evaluation? How was it decided what you were going to teach? How much flexibility did you have? When you were teaching, what did your associate do? What challenges did you face in your teaching during the practicum? To what degree did your associate help you with these challenges? On average, how much preparation did you do in the evenings and on weekends? What advice would you give a student teacher just starting in your practicum placement?

In analyzing the transcripts we began by reading them several times to identify recurring issues and key sections; we kept a record of items and transcript page numbers both for each issue and each interviewee. We then found that the roughly 25 issues identified in this way could be consolidated into a smaller number of themes, of which only nine seemed relevant to the central topic emerging at this stage, namely, what constitutes a good practicum placement. For each of the nine themes we developed concepts or “codes” which seemed to capture what the student teachers were talking about: “friendliness,” “respect,” “collaboration,” “communication,” and so on. We placed a list of these concepts beside columns for each of the interviewees and, going through the transcripts again, recorded the pages on which reference was made to each concept; in this way we began to compile the frequencies for each theme noted in the report.

As we continued to examine the transcripts, some of our themes had to be modified to fit the data better, some could be combined, others had to be split into two, and some had to be deleted because they were not sufficiently represented in the transcripts. As we began to write, we gathered key quotations under each theme.

We later abridged many of the quotations, eliminated some as not sufficiently relevant, and transferred some to different themes; we often went back to the transcripts to make sure we were not taking the quotations out of context. Almost to the final stage of the writing process, we continued to modify the wording (for example, “friendliness” became “emotional support” and “communication” became “feedback”) and collapse or eliminate categories to better represent the transcripts. In the end we had just seven themes, the ones that appear in this report.

The methodology employed in this study was qualitative, as defined by Punch (1998). For example, we were participant observers, we had a small sample (primarily the eleven interviewees), our interviews were fairly open-ended, we did not test a pre-established hypothesis, our data were often not expressed numerically, and we made extensive use of examples and quotations in reporting. Our “codes” for analyzing the data were modified as the analysis continued, and even our central research question emerged during the study. There was a quantitative component to our reporting: we often indicated the number or proportion of interviewees who held a particular view or responded in a particular way. Following Hammersley (1992), Merriam (1998), and Punch (1998), we believe such information can be relevant even in a qualitative study. However, our inquiry was still primarily interpretive in nature. For example, the coding of responses was obviously partly a matter of judgment, and the quantities noted did not compel us to arrive at certain conclusions but rather influenced us within a whole set of interpretations. In making these judgments and interpretations we were undoubtedly influenced to some extent by our experience in teacher education and interactions with student teachers over the years.

Components of a Good Practicum Placement, As Identified by Student Teachers

Based on our interview transcripts and, to a lesser extent, the questionnaire data, we have concluded that student teachers see the components outlined below as important for a practicum placement. In describing the components, we cite the student teachers’ responses at some length in order to give the finer nuances sometimes lacking in the research literature and that we sought in this study; the quotations also help clarify the *reasons* behind the student teachers’ point of view. While these interviews focused mainly on the student teachers’ second practicum, which they had just completed at the time of the interview, there were also many references to their first practicum.

1. Emotional Support from the Associate Teacher

University researchers sometimes mention the need for associate teachers to give student teachers support in the practicum (Williams, 1994); but it is not always clear what kind of support they mean, and some suggest that associate teachers are

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too supportive, not “challenging” the student teachers enough (Maynard, 1996). Associate teachers, by contrast, typically emphasize the need to be *friendly* and provide *emotional* support of a kind they sometimes did not receive in their own practicum experiences as student teachers (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Maynard, 1996). In practice, however, even associate teachers are often more distant with their student teachers than they realize, not in fact setting them at ease (Beck & Kosnik, 2000).

What did our student teachers think? To them friendliness or support of an emotional kind was a key component of a good practicum placement. Nine of the eleven interviewees stressed the significance of this component, even though it was not mentioned by the interviewer. Further, several gave reasons why they thought it was important, namely, that it helped them do a better job as a teacher and grow as a teacher, reasons similar to those noted by associate teachers in the literature (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Williams, 1994).

The student teachers stressed the importance of emotional support in both their positive and negative comments about their associate teachers. For example, Liz did not have an emotionally supportive associate teacher in her first practicum placement, and she clearly saw this as inappropriate. She commented as follows:

My mom was very sick and my associate was not even a little accommodating about that. I just killed myself over that practice teaching block, and the reports I got were so tepid; they were not even a little indicative of the person I was... I just wanted some acknowledgement of what I was doing, the amount of work I was doing, anything like that. I felt my work was not being acknowledged at all.

In her second practicum, by contrast, Liz had a supportive associate who “made me feel very comfortable”; in this way “she gave me the freedom to experiment that I didn’t have during the first practicum.”

Linda spoke at length about why it is important for associate teachers to be friendly and supportive toward student teachers:

You don’t go to teachers college because you need a swift kick in the behind; you know what you should be doing. You might be a little lost at first, but you need someone to say, “You know what, you’re doing fine.” The experience I had with a warm, welcoming, collegial approach made it so much easier for me to step into the classroom with confidence. You don’t want an associate who just says, “The bar has to be this high; now jump!”

She added that she sees this kind of support as especially important for female student teachers. “We women second guess ourselves 99.9 percent of the time. We don’t need somebody else second guessing us... I don’t think women need somebody to be beating them over the head. They need more building up.”

Andrew expressed appreciation of how comfortable his associate teacher made him feel; and he described how she accomplished this. One thing she did was talk to him about the experience of student teachers in her class in previous years, “not

with excessive comparison, but just to give me an idea that things were comfortable and that things had worked out very well with these student teachers.” Further, her general demeanour made him feel at ease: “She’s very fun-loving, she sees the humour in absolutely everything, and I think that’s such an important quality in a teacher. She makes you feel comfortable very quickly.”

2. Peer Relationship With The Associate Teacher

Beyond being supported emotionally, the student teachers saw being respected and treated *as a teacher* as an important aspect of a good practicum placement. All eleven of the interviewees made this point, without prompting on our part; and we have noticed on other occasions the tendency of student teachers to refer to themselves simply as teachers. Why do student teachers have this outlook? Partly, we feel, because they do not realize how much they have yet to learn and how demanding their first few years of teaching will be. But partly, also, because they are aware of how much they already know, their life-time of preparation for teaching (Knowles, Cole, & Presswood, 1994; Thomas, 1995), and their natural talents as teachers. In some aspects of teaching many of our students are quickly able to equal or even surpass their associate teachers, and they rightly want this to be appreciated.

The students were aware that they were not *the* teacher, that they were in many ways in a protected situation. For example, David commented: “Like me, my associate used humour, but not as much as me because she had to exercise more control, she was the teacher.” Brian observed: “My associate was tough but fair; and (the students) had been so well conditioned by her that I really didn’t have to do that much. So her skills made my life easier.” And Andrew said: “She would be sterner than me. I didn’t have to deal with really serious non-compliance by the students... [T]he way I look at it you’re almost like in a nice uncle role in the classroom, you’re not the serious guy... Really I’m like a guest in the classroom, it’s not up to me to start throwing my weight around.” Despite this, however, they maintained they had to be viewed as teachers in an important sense if they were to have a successful practicum.

Some teacher educators argue that student teachers should be given some other designation such as “preservice teacher” or “teacher candidate” to avoid the suggestion of lower status implicit in the word “student.” Our interviewees did not seem to mind the term student teacher; this was the term used even by the associate teachers they praised for their collegial approach. However, they felt one could be a student teacher and still be treated as a colleague. Amy, for example, took exception to her associate’s hierarchical approach: “My associate took her role (as associate teacher) too seriously, in a sense. Not that it’s not a serious position, but she approached it as putting her in—I hate to say it—a power role; it was like, ‘Well, this is my role and I’m the associate teacher and you’re the student teacher.’ And with the daily planning it wasn’t ‘Amy will do,’ but rather ‘Student Teacher Martin will do’...”

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Why exactly did they want to be regarded and treated as teachers? Partly so they could gain the students' cooperation and get on with their teaching. Sandra, for example, objected to the fact that "he was Mr. Russell and I was Sandra." This made things difficult for her because, since it was a high-needs school, "there were a number of non-teachers in the classroom, teaching assistants and so on... And the kids at that school were pretty rambunctious, high energy; some of them were quite defiant... So part of my challenge was to come up with lessons they could place themselves into, in addition to normal classroom management in a classroom in which I had not been set up in a position of power." Similarly, Liz felt peer status was important for normal functioning in the classroom. She reported that her associate introduced her to the class as follows: "This is Ms. Willcox, she is going to be your practice teaching teacher, and I expect you to give her the same respect you give me. Ms. Willcox comes from the University of Toronto, the same school that I came from, and lives in this neighbourhood." Liz commented: "All the student teachers at this school worked more as peers than as subordinates. And I think the children sensed that, because I certainly didn't have to work to earn their respect the way I had to in my first block; in the first block the children sensed the hierarchy immediately. In this block I felt like a teacher."

Secondly, three of the interviewees explained that it was important to be in the role of a real teacher so they could develop professionally. For example, Rita said that she learned most when she had full charge of the class because "the more responsibility you have, the more opportunity you have to figure things out." And Linda observed that, as a result of being "an equal with the teacher," being "considered to be a teacher by the class," she had the freedom to put her own stamp on the class, to develop her own style. The associate sent the message that she had this freedom partly through her words, but largely through her actions:

The first day I was there she had assigned a writing-in-role assignment for the children to wrap up the Medieval Studies unit. She said to me: "*We* are going to have to model this for them." So she wrote her letter and I wrote mine, we photocopied them and gave them to the students. It seems really simple but it spoke volumes, absolute volumes. I started seeing that I was in an entirely different role (from in my previous practicum).

3. Collaboration With The Associate Teacher

Treating student teachers as fellow teachers does not necessarily result in collaborative teaching; it is compatible with a "hands-off" approach to the practicum. As noted earlier, some associate teachers have a rather tough "sink or swim" attitude while others favour a friendly but also non-interventionist approach. By contrast, university researchers often maintain that student teachers need strong direction, including intervention during a lesson, and some advocate extensive team teaching.

What did the student teachers think? All eleven of our interviewees, without prompting, talked about the importance of a collaborative relationship with their

associate teacher. However, their emphasis was on collaboration in planning, finding resources, and so on, rather than in the actual conduct of a lesson; and they felt intervention by the associate teacher during a lesson, if it happens at all, should be rather limited. Linda described how she and her associate taught different aspects of the same unit, while not teaching lessons together:

My associate and I were very much partners, we worked on all sorts of stuff together to get us through a unit on Ancient Greece... Her model was not so much feedback, feedback, feedback, which is what I got in my first placement, but rather, okay, we're going to work collaboratively... She gave me some of the resources she had – her husband is a history teacher and he sent some things to her. And I was interested in taking the class outside to areas where they could sketch some Greek columns; where they could eat Greek food cheaply; and to a lab in the Museum. So there were things I wanted to do right away, and we sort of worked around that.

Similarly, David noted how he and his associate helped each other in terms of content knowledge, styles, and teaching strategies without actually teaching together: “My associate teacher likes to stick to the book, and she kept me on track. . . Her background is in math and science, and she completely schooled me in teaching math, which I was weak in. And I showed her things in poetry and the fun things I did for English, a lot of which she would never have thought of. So in a way, it was a wonderful fit.”

While keen on collaboration of the above kinds, however, the student teachers were concerned at the prospect of excessive interruption by the associate teacher. Brian said:

(When I was teaching) she didn't interfere, she just let me do what I had to do and if she had something to say to me she'd say it after class, just between the two of us. So she was good, she never actually put me on the spot in front of the students. . . Occasionally she had a comment, she would say, “Oh by the way, blah blah, whatever”; but it was always a positive thing, not something like, “Oh no, you forgot to say this.”

Amy, while professing to be ambivalent on the issue of intervention by the associate teacher during a lesson, was clearly not happy with the way it was done in her second practicum placement. On the whole she endured it because she had to, under the circumstances.

At the beginning of the last week of the block my associate said, “Oh, I really miss teaching and I miss my classes,” and she started to interject a lot more than she had before. She would say, “Oh, can I just add in X?” and she would, and that would be half my lesson and I would have to re-shuffle it and pick up where she had left me. It wasn't undermining, or I didn't take it that way; I was like, “Come on in; do whatever you need to.” But that was her, and I think it was more to my benefit to just roll with that instead of saying, “I would really like it if you didn't interrupt every lesson I do.” That didn't seem worth the battle for me. I just think she's a very organized, controlled person, and not having control over her class for an extended period of time was just too much for her.

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An interesting issue is the extent to which these student teachers would have appreciated team teaching under ideal circumstances. We feel that perhaps most of them had not experienced team teaching in the best sense, and so did not talk about that possibility. Also, we think they saw themselves as having to acquire skills for the typical rather isolated teaching situation and having to prove their ability to do succeed in that type of context; so conducting classes *with* their associate teacher did not seem relevant to them. This points to the need to explore team teaching more in our program.

4. Flexibility In Teaching Content And Method

Many university researchers maintain that student teachers must be encouraged to strike out in new directions (Maynard, 1996; Proctor, 1993; Zeichner, 1990), while many associate teachers and some student teachers feel the main object is to learn about the “realities” of teaching and how to cope with them (Boyko & Mayfield, 1995; Maynard, 1996). We asked our interviewees directly about the flexibility allowed to them during the practicum; for example, the degree to which they were required to cover a set curriculum and adopt the associate teacher’s style and approach. In particular, we asked to what extent the program modifications involved in their action research project, carried out during their second practicum, were permitted and supported by their associate teacher. The comments elicited by these questions gave an indication of how important the interviewees thought flexibility was in a practicum placement.

All interviewees felt there should be a significant degree of flexibility during the practicum: they wanted to be able to teach, and develop as teachers, in their own way. We noticed a tendency to accept the school or government curriculum as a “given,” as something which just had to be covered, at least in broad outline. But we attributed this in part to their lack of awareness of the opportunities for selection and initiative within the official curriculum, and in part to the pressures of the practicum setting. (These again are areas in which we need to develop our program further.) On the whole, we felt the student teachers showed a serious interest in innovation, especially with respect to method. With regard to the action research project, just one of the interviewees defended restrictions placed on her program modifications, feeling there was not really time for such modifications within a teacher education program.

The student teachers’ interest in flexibility was revealed in reports of negative experiences as well as positive ones. Tina felt excessively controlled, in both content and method, throughout most of her second practicum. “There was really no flexibility. She told me which science unit to do, which social studies unit to do; and with grammar and spelling it was straight from the textbook.” Only toward the end was she permitted to do something substantial of her own, and she found that exhilarating: “In the last week I did get to do my Nunavut story with the students for action research, and take it where it was going, which was great. I mean I was so

excited to be able to do that and make the decision on my own.” Rita’s associate also attempted to control both content and method.

In one of the math lessons I wanted to do something on area, and I wanted the kids to trace their shoe on graph paper and then figure out the area using yarn, counting the squares, and so on. I was starting to teach the class and she said to me, “So you’re going to do it exactly by the textbook?” and I said, “No I’m going to do it a little differently; why, what do you think?” She said, “Well maybe you should do what the textbook says”; but when I pressed her on it she said, “You do what you want to do.” So I did it the way I wanted to, and the next day she did the lesson over again.

In other cases the student teachers noted that, while their associate teachers prescribed the topics to be covered, they were quite flexible about method. Sandra said: “It was pre-decided which chapters I would deal with, but it was up to me how I wanted to teach and what I wanted to focus on. . . I did a lot of activities with them, a lot of hands-on stuff; in some ways my associate was far more structured than I was.” Amy reported that while her associate told her at the outset, “You will be doing angles in geometry, motion in science, and early explorers in social studies,” nevertheless “how I did it she left open, and I ran with it. For example, in social studies I did a cross-curricular thing, they pretended they were explorers keeping a log of what they were exploring...and they had to develop a map with angles, describe their route using angles, and make a flag with angles in it.” However, Amy still felt very constrained in this placement; while her associate told her to take risks, she “just wasn’t comfortable enough to really take her up on it.”

Others found their associates fairly open with respect to both content and approach, so long as what they did was broadly in keeping with curriculum requirements. For example David, who was teaching in a Grade 8 class, commented: “I wouldn’t say I had complete flexibility, because there are the guidelines put out by the Ministry that we have to meet; but I had a wide range to play with. There was just one time when I was going to show a Rap video, and I told her ahead of time, ‘There’s no profanity, there’s no rude language, there’s no nudity.’ She seemed a bit apprehensive, but once I assured her and gave her the scenario she said, ‘Okay, fine.’ In fact, she never said ‘no’ to me.” Similarly, Brian said: “My associate had a good balance. Some associate teachers, from what I’ve heard, are very demanding. . . Whereas she was in the middle, not one extreme or the other. I thought it was the best thing. She gave support and a bit of structure and then gave me the freedom I needed to do things like action research and the geography unit I was working on for my specialist teaching subject.”

5. Feedback From The Associate Teacher

In the research literature there is some disagreement on the matter of associate teacher feedback. While university researchers stress the importance of feedback (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1995; Maynard, 1996) and most student

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teachers say they want it (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Williams, 1994), some associate teachers are reluctant to give much feedback. These associate teachers say the main thing student teachers need is experience; we learn to teach by teaching; and anyway, the student teachers should develop in their own way (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997).

Most of our associate teachers, however, gave a lot of feedback and of a fairly high quality. We attribute this in part to our selection and training process for associate teachers, and to the fact that our associate teachers do the teaching evaluation and so feel greater responsibility to guide the student teachers. In response to the questionnaire, 48 of 56 student teachers said the amount of feedback received from their associate teachers was adequate, satisfactory, or just what they needed. As to quality, 44 of 57 said the feedback given was either somewhat useful (17) or very useful (27).

In the interviews, the student teachers gave considerable evidence of desire for feedback. Some evidence came in the form of complaints about lack of feedback. For example, Sandra talked of the absence of feedback in her interim evaluation. "I felt the interim evaluation should have given me more direction than it did. What I really wanted to hear was: This is what I think you are doing; this is where you can work to improve; this I think is outstanding. So I would know where I was going. But that didn't happen." And James said: "I honestly didn't get much feedback this last block; it was really informal, and just once or twice a week. I would have liked to sit down at the end of the day and go over the strengths or weaknesses of the day, going through things in a systematic way. And my formal evaluation was all positive, there were no areas identified for growth; so it was hard to take it seriously, it really had no impact."

David spoke to the importance of feedback by describing the great value of the constructive criticism he received.

Andrea is a perfect person to have as an associate teacher because she gives valid feedback, a lot of feedback that is very useful. I quickly amended how I approached things and it made a big difference right away. She would sit at the back of the class observing and taking down notes to review with me later, about what needed improvement. For example, she told me that when you have a group assignment every student in the group should have a role. And after that my group assignments worked very well. She was very helpful.

David noted that Andrea was at first somewhat reluctant to give feedback, and he had to convince her that he was open to receiving it:

She was a bit apprehensive initially because this was her first time as an associate teacher and only her second year as a teacher. Also, she's a very nice person and doesn't want to offend anyone. With the interim evaluation she was a bit shaky initially, though she had some wonderful criticisms. So after about the second point I said, "You know what, Andrea? I've been writing poetry for many years and sending my poems out and getting

all these rejection letters. I'm used to criticism, feel free." Because beyond what she had written down there were subtexts, that perhaps I could do this, and perhaps that. And once she opened up and realized that I was not going to be offended, things were fine. And she had all these extra points, valid points. It was wonderful.

Others made the important observation that not just any feedback will do; it must be presented in a collegial spirit, with opportunity for genuine dialogue about the matters in question. This is a point made also in the research literature (Britzman, 1991; Glickman & Bey, 1990). Linda commented: "In my first placement I received lots of feedback, but it came so fast and there was so little discussion it wasn't useful. I have Kindergarten experience; I knew what I was doing. She would have done it differently but it wasn't how I would do it." Similarly, Liz received feedback that was "top-down" and hence not of much value. She said:

In my first placement I had a lot of feedback, but it was all very top-down. My associate would give me points to improve on, but when I asked her, "Well, how do you suggest I could do that?" she would say, "Well you know, when you're doing practice teaching you kind of have to reinvent the wheel." So she left me to sink or swim; and every day while I was teaching she would write and write and write and then hand me the sheet of paper and say, "Why don't you photocopy that and keep it for your files." There was no discussion of what she had written down.

Finally, it is possible to have just too much feedback. Amy said: "My associate and I debriefed daily, for long periods of time, which I think could be a concern. Regularly I would be there for an hour or an hour and a half after school; I was also there before school for about 40 minutes, talking about what would be happening during the day; and we also had the preps." Obviously, if Amy had valued the feedback highly she would not have minded the time so much. But the sheer amount of feedback she identified as a concern.

6. Sound Approach to Teaching and Learning on the Part of the Associate Teacher

Associate teachers can be supportive, collaborative, flexible, and willing to give feedback; but this is of limited value if they do not have a sound approach to teaching and learning. On the questionnaire, 49 of 58 said their associate teacher in the second practicum modeled the practices of a highly effective teacher either somewhat (19) or a great deal (30). However, in the interviews seven of the eleven said one of their associates, either in the first or second practicum, had deficiencies as a teacher which resulted in significant problems for their practicum.

One difficulty created by having an associate with poor teaching practice is that, if the student teacher tries to teach in a more appropriate manner, problems arise simply because of the difference in style. James described how the fact that the students in his class were used to a transmission approach led to adjustment problems when he was teaching.

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My associate teacher was pretty traditional, just stand up and talk. So I tried to avoid that, tried to involve the students in activities. It did not always go well because they weren't used to it and would go crazy. It was like, whoo hoo, free for all; they were pretty excited. They were quite into it. Sometimes I had to crack down on them and rein them in a bit. They were enthusiastic.

Tina and Rita spoke about how the associate's poor practice often placed them in a difficult professional or even moral position. Tina reported an incident where her associate insisted that she "yell" at a troublesome child in front of the class. She commented: "I'm not the type of person who yells at students; I don't think it's appropriate, especially in front of the class, and I have a difficult time doing it." Rita related another incident having to do with teacher-student interaction:

One student in the class was having difficulties, and we weren't sure if she was slow or if it was a problem with her eyesight. Her mom wasn't prepared to take her to an eye doctor, and Gail wanted me to do an experiment and get this little girl to try to read something on the board, in front of the whole class. But I didn't want to do that to her. I mean, we knew she couldn't see, we didn't have to do the experiment.

Beyond the professional and moral tensions, Rita talked about how teaching with an associate whose practice was poor took a psychological toll on her: "I did it and it worked, they learned whatever they had to learn, but it was draining for me. I'm the type of person who is not good at faking it; and it was very tough, because I knew how she wanted her class to be run and I had to do that...the students didn't say a word. Obviously, she's entitled to run the class the way she wants. It's just that my heart went out to the kids. It was like they were in a little bubble."

Both Rita and Sandra noted how, in their view, the lack of fit hindered their professional development. Rita commented: "Because we had such different philosophies and styles it was difficult for me; I felt I was held back. I had to mould myself into her way." And Sandra said:

The language program in my placement class was really limited. But I figure it's their classroom; I really respect what they want to teach. So I felt I needed to check with my associate to see what he wanted done. To a certain extent you have to emulate them because that's what they want to see. You take their ideas, you integrate a few of your own, maybe you vaguely try to experiment, but to a certain extent you have to stay inside their constraints: they're writing your report card.

7. Heavy But Not Excessive Workload during the Practicum

We raised the issue of workload with the interviewees. In previous years we had the problem that many associates wanted the student teachers to work harder during the practicum than we thought appropriate. By developing guidelines and conducting inservice sessions and informal discussions with the associate teachers, we managed to get the percentage of formal teaching down to roughly 25 percent in the first week of the block, 50 percent in the second week, 75 percent

in the third, and 100 percent for the remainder of the practicum. Did we do the right thing? What did the student teachers think?

In the questionnaire responses, only 6 of 57 said the amount of time spent preparing lessons was “overly burdensome”; 24 said it was “at times taxing”; and 27 that it was either moderate or just right. This was a significant change from earlier years. In the interviews, several of the student teachers expressed appreciation of the fact that we had the guidelines. For example, James said:

The work was difficult because I'm in a different situation. I have two little boys, 2 and 4 years old; I really couldn't do any work until they were in bed. So I'd crack a book at nine or ten o'clock and already be exhausted. It was really tough sometimes. I was just exhausted toward the end. My associate teacher followed the workload guidelines—25 percent, 50 percent, and so on. She had to be reminded about them. She was a bit miffed at first that there were such strict guidelines, but she was willing to follow them. And I think it was just right, actually. It was a good gradual transition to follow for teaching.

Those who found the workload heavy nevertheless felt it was appropriate. For example, Andrew commented:

What surprised me more than anything else about teaching was the fatigue level. And I don't know what to say about that because that's the reality of teaching. So on the one hand I'm thinking, wow, couldn't things change somehow (in the practicum) to lessen the fatigue, but on the other hand . . . what am I going to do in September if I'm not prepared to make that type of commitment?

Just one of the eleven felt the practicum should have been more intensive. Brian said:

I went into the second placement with a lot more enthusiasm. I didn't want to spend much time observing, I just wanted to get right into it. I thought that this time there were probably too many STEP days. I could actually have used fewer step days and a few more days in teaching, so we could get into it sooner and get started, especially since we had action research to do. In my first week I was actually doing quite a lot, and I preferred that. And the action research really gave me something to focus on, like a goal.

Divergence in viewpoint is inevitable in the matter of workload, given the diversity of life circumstances. Brian, for example, living on his own and quite close to his practicum school, was in a different situation from James. We attempt with the associate teachers to emphasize flexibility, but in doing so we have to be careful not to undermine the guidelines. Some of our associates, while complying with the guidelines, still feel we are too easy on the student teachers, that we shield them from the “realities” of teaching. We believe excessive stress can get in the way of learning in teacher education, as in education generally; it can discourage student teachers from experimenting and developing a critical, progressive philosophy of teaching and learning. Also, we want the student teachers to realize that teachers should “have

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a life” beyond their profession; that being well-rounded people will make them better teachers. While we admit, as noted earlier, that many student teachers are not sufficiently aware of the rigours of teaching and how tough it will be in their first years, we do not think the solution lies in “throwing them in the deep end” during the practicum. The question of the intensity of the practicum is a matter for ongoing discussion and reflection.

Conclusion

Our conclusion from this study was that student teachers value the following elements in a practicum placement: emotional support from their associate teacher; a peer relationship with their associate teacher; a degree of collaboration with their associate teacher; a degree of flexibility in teaching content and method; feedback on performance, provided it is given in an appropriate spirit and manner; a sound approach to teaching and learning in the placement classroom; and a heavy but not excessive workload.

Some of these findings were perhaps to be expected, although confirming them was important; others went beyond what we had anticipated. For example, we had not previously recognized *how* important emotional support on the part of the associate teacher was to student teachers, nor is this component typically mentioned in the research literature. Similarly, the extent of the student teachers’ desire to be viewed *as* teachers, and the reasons given for this, provided us with valuable new insights. The student teachers’ lack of orientation toward team teaching with their associate teacher, as distinct from collaborative planning, opened up new avenues of inquiry. The *degree* of the student teachers’ desire for feedback—both positive and negative—was also revealing, as was their specification of how feedback should be given. And the stresses the student teachers experienced in classrooms where teaching practices were poor were in some cases more extreme than we had realized. All these findings have significant implications for the theory and practice of teacher education, and for the development of our program in particular.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the student teacher perspective on the practicum. To a considerable extent their focus is on learning classroom skills, surviving in the practicum, and receiving a good practice teaching evaluation. It is significant that virtually all the practicum components they mentioned had to do with their relationship with their associate teacher. They appeared to have only moderate awareness of, for example, the general school culture and its impact on the classroom, and the role of university supervisors in maintaining a good relationship with the partner schools and informally supporting and educating the associate teachers over the years.

Nevertheless, we were quite impressed with the idealism of the student teachers and their genuine interest in issues of teaching and learning. While they felt they had to conform to a significant degree to the expectations and practices of the

associate teachers, they often did so reluctantly. They struggled with situations where they thought their development as teachers was being hindered or their pupils' learning and welfare were being adversely affected. These were not people just concerned with getting a teaching certificate. Their professionalism was evident, underscoring the legitimacy of their desire to be viewed *as* teachers, and also the appropriateness of seeking their opinions on what constitutes a good practicum placement.

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