Partnerships that Support the Professional Growth of Supervising Teachers

By Karen Hamlin

Introduction

Given the growing emphasis on the practicum experience in teacher preparation programs (Owings & Reitzammer, 1991), it is surprising that minimal effort is made by teacher preparation institutions to insure that their student teachers continue to be welcome in public schools. At a time when teachers are under severe pressure to meet increasingly diverse needs of students, when budget cuts are resulting in larger class sizes, and when teachers are expected to assume greater decision-making duties, administrators must wonder whether or not it is in the best interests of their schools to have their teachers additionally burdened with the responsibility of mentoring student teachers.

The following two studies indicate that university and school district collaboration in the preparation of new teachers has the potential to provide reciprocal benefit: the professional growth of supervising teachers along with the development of student teachers. The studies suggest ways that teacher preparation programs might build into partnerships with school districts the legitimate expectation of professional growth for all partners.

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Background

Research to date has provided mixed reviews regarding potential benefits for classroom teachers

who choose to serve as student teacher mentors. In 1971, William Trenfield indicated several ways by which student teachers might improve the teaching performance of their mentors: as a stimulating presence, as motivation for the supervising teachers to examine their own teaching strategies, as a valuable source of ideas about instructional techniques and materials, as teaching team members, and as a way to free up the classroom teachers and thereby enable them to observe students from a different perspective, have the time to consult with colleagues, and accumulate materials. Half of the respondents in Cheryll Duquette's study (1994) cited the opportunity for professional development as a benefit to working with a student teacher. Other benefits included having time to work with individual students and plan programs, the opportunity to meet new people who were entering the profession, and professional satisfaction. On the negative side, Duquette's respondents found the heavy time commitment stressful and the skill development of a few of the student teachers disappointing.

Mari E. Koerner (1992) examined the experiences of eight experienced cooperating teachers and found five significantly negative consequences of having a student teacher in the classroom: "(a) interruption of instruction, (b) displacement of the teacher from a central position in the classroom, (c) disruption of the classroom routine, (d) breaking the isolation of the classroom teacher, and (e) shifting of the teacher's time and energy to instruction of the student teacher." Teachers in her study were uncomfortable that student teachers took longer to teach curriculum, altered established classroom routines, invaded the privacy to which teachers had become accustomed, and, in some instances, competed for the attention and affection of the students. When teachers in her study were asked how this role affected their professional development, her participants acknowledged that they had re-examined their classroom organization, materials, and instruction.

Additional issues of potential concern to supervising teachers were presented by Pamela E. Balch and Patrick E. Balch, (1987) who describe the possibility of legal problems associated with supervising student teachers, problems of dealing with weak student teachers, disruptions in classroom discipline procedures, and the potential for criticism that is invited by offering to assume the role of resident specialist and role model.

The expectation of professional growth does not seem to be a primary factor in teachers' decisions to enter into the mentor role. Some research (Whaley & Wolfe, 1984) indicates that financial compensation rates highest as motivation. Candace J. Stout (1982) reported that 73 percent of the secondary teachers he surveyed identified an intrinsic professional obligation as their primary reason for accepting student teachers. Duquette, (1994) in her study of 41 teachers, found that the most frequently cited reason for becoming involved in supervision was a request from the principal. Other reasons included wanting to contribute to preservice education, wanting to further one's own professional development, and feeling that the teacher education program was worthwhile.

Given the value of student teaching, it seems important to protect this program component by creating partnerships that provide classroom teachers with substantial and beneficial compensation in exchange for their work. As teachers' school and classroom responsibilities increase, benefits greater than minimal stipends and teachers' sense of professional obligation will need to be offered. Teacher preparation institutions may need to be able to demonstrate to administrators how these partnerships will enrich and strengthen the teaching in their schools. These studies explored the legitimacy of the claim that supervising a student teacher provides meaningful professional development for supervising teachers.

The Studies

These studies were designed to discover whether or not changes occurred in the instructional practices and in the beliefs that underlie the practices of teachers who supervised student teachers in fifth year, master-of-arts-in-teaching programs. In the extended student teacher model used by the programs studied, the critical analysis and reflection component necessary for professional growth (Posner, 1993; Grimmett, Rostad, & Ford, 1992)\ is encouraged and is provided time to develop. Partnerships between supervising teachers, student teachers, and university supervisors are established at the beginning of the school year, which allows trusting relationships to be formed before the actual full-time teaching begins. During full-time student teaching, the partners have a significant span of time (15 to 20 weeks) to work together on critical analysis and refinement of teaching skills.

At the two research sites selected for this study, university supervisors are active partnership members. At the private university site, the university supervisors conference with the supervising teacher and student teacher a minimum of four times, visit the school site approximately every other week during the student teaching semester to observe the student teacher and provide feedback, and meet with their student teachers in a small group (8 to 10 students) setting every other week for reflection and problem-solving.

While making the case for the necessity of reflective thinking for teacher growth, George J. Posner (1993) acknowledges that lack of time is a formidable barrier preventing teachers from critically examining their own practices. In the full-time student teaching term, students in these two programs assume teaching responsibility for one-half of the supervisor's teaching load. This provides time for the supervisor to observe, collect data on teaching, analyze, reflect, discuss, and learn more about the teaching process.

Components of these programs foster student teacher/mentor relationships built on interdependent collegiality advocated by Peter P. Grimmett, Olaf P. Rostad, and Blake Ford (1992) and create a setting that lends itself to the transformation of classroom practice. Theoretically this is a context with the potential of professional growth for both the student teacher and the supervising teacher. The question asked

here is: from the supervising teachers' point of view, did this experience affect their teaching?

Methods

Research Sites

Two distinctly different universities with similar, fifth-year master-of-arts-in-teaching programs were chosen for this study. The first is a small, private, liberal arts college that graduates about 60 teacher candidates each year. For their student teaching experience, students are equally divided between elementary, middle, and high school levels. The second site is a large, state university that enrolled approximately 60 elementary, 36 secondary, and 16 kindergarten-12th grade specialty area students during the two years of this study. At both sites students may work with more than one supervising teacher. Both universities have extended student teacher programs where during the fall term students observe, explore, and familiarize themselves with the school sites where they will student teach. During this time, students orient themselves to the teaching setting, establish working relationships with their supervising teachers and university supervisors, and, in many cases, establish relationships with the students they will be teaching. Their actual "full-time" student teaching experience lasts from 15 to 20 weeks during the spring when they are at their school sites all day.

Under state regulations, both programs are required to provide "clinical supervision" training for their supervising teachers. In this process, supervising teachers are asked to conduct formal observations for instructional assistance which include: planning conferences to determine specific teaching skills to be addressed and what data collection tools will provide evidence of performance, observations for data collection, and post-conferences where the supervising teacher and student teacher discuss the data and brainstorm possible alternatives for improved teaching effectiveness. The private university requires that a minimum of seven observation cycles be completed. In addition, at both universities supervising teachers and university supervisors are expected to evaluate their student teachers' performance on a set of specified competencies in four areas: planning for instruction, establishing a classroom conducive to learning, implementing instruction, and assessing learning. Final evaluation decisions are made jointly by the supervising teacher and university supervisor.

Instruments

In year one of the research, near the end of the supervising experience, all supervising teachers were asked to write a response to the question, "Have you changed any aspect of your teaching as a result of having a student teacher and, if so, what has changed?" At the private university, this question was added as a last page to an anonymous program evaluation survey. The survey return rate was 78.8

percent, or 63 out of 80. At the state university this question was asked at the end of an anonymous survey asking supervising teachers to reflect on what training and contextual factors were important to their ability to provide instructional assistance for their student teachers. The return rate for state university participants was 69 percent or 98 out of 141 surveys sent. For the overall study, the response rate was 73 percent with 161 returned surveys. The types of responses from both universities were very similar.

In year two, four focus group interviews were conducted, two at each institution, to validate the survey results of the initial study and further explore how the professional growth aspect of the partnership might be strengthened. These groups were facilitated by a professional moderator, and data were compiled using videotape transcripts, field notes, and written statements completed by participants during the interview process. The initial research draft was sent to all participants for review, and was revised to include subsequent comments.

Year One: Survey Data Analysis

The following analysis compiles survey responses. Within categories of responses, each tallied response represents a separate individual. Some teachers included more than one response and are, therefore, represented in multiple categories. Initially, all survey responses were recorded and placed in ten tentative pre-determined categories. Through further examination of the data from both universities, categories were collapsed into four themes:

- new ideas and activities: lesson plans, resources, or teaching strategies with which the supervising teachers were unfamiliar;
- review/reinforcement of techniques: practices which had been previously learned or previously attempted and abandoned, were re-examined;
- reflection and analysis of current teaching practices; and
- renewed excitement/enthusiasm about teaching.

Seventeen comments fell outside of these categories. These outlying comments pertained to individual situations or reflected individual opinions about the quality of the programs.

Results

Nearly 75 percent (124) of the supervising teachers who returned surveys believed that their teaching had changed as a result of supervising a student teacher. Only ten supervising teachers replied that their teaching did not change; 27 did not respond to that question. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents self-reported that negative changes had occurred in their teaching behaviors.

New Activities

Twenty-three supervising teachers indicated that they learned new lesson ideas and activities from their student teachers which they intended to add to their curriculum. The variety of lesson ideas included fitness activities, daily five-minute art lessons, lessons using math manipulatives, and science labs. Supervising teachers appreciated the creativity that student teachers brought to their lesson planning and the new ideas they shared. Student teachers also brought with them knowledge about available print materials, video materials, and computer network information that added to teachers' resource files. One teacher commented:

> Yes, my MAT student greatly enriched my career. I took many of her creative ideas and blended them with existing units. Most of her ideas are ones that will permanently become part of my teaching.

One teacher noted that it was helpful to learn from her student teacher's lesson plans that didn't go well:

> She has some great ideas that I have implemented in my classroom. I have also been able to learn from her mistakes.

Refinement or Review of Teaching Methods

A larger number of supervising teachers (44) commented that having a student teacher helped them refine or review their knowledge of teaching methods. This experience reminded supervising teachers of practices they had discarded, or had forgotten about in the daily business of teaching. It also helped them make changes they had wanted to make, but needed further impetus, knowledge, or support. One teacher remarked, "The experience enhanced my effort to implement new teaching strategies: being more positive with students and allowing students to experience more in math class than just math." Another said, "I am excited about grading students' projects on a matrix, thanks to [my student teacher]." At least one teacher was motivated to break out of old patterns:

> It's always refreshing to watch a new person come in and try new things. After several years of teaching, I sometimes think I'm so smart that I know better than to try something. A student teacher convinces you to try those crazy things again. It's energizing.

Several teachers mentioned that they felt more confident about moving toward a student-centered classroom with less lecture and more student interaction and activity. One stated, "I am more willing to let go and have kids do their own research in and out of our room." Supervising teachers from both institutions remarked that they felt "up-dated" about new ways of evaluating student learning:

> I'm starting to do more in-class observations using a check sheet on a clipboard so I can make anecdotal remarks while students are working. [This] will make writing

> reports easier, [and provide] more information for conferences and future assignments.

Thirteen mentors commented on the value and joy of having the opportunity to team teach. They spoke not only of the synergy created by two minds working together, but also the value of having constructive feedback:

> I have taught alone for many years now and I don't ever get feedback about my teaching. I felt like we exchanged ideas and learned a little about what others think about what I'm going, the good and the bad. It has been a very positive experience.

Numerous mentors mentioned the pleasure of having someone to share with:

> It was refreshing to have someone to plan new things with, laugh with when things went a bit "other than planned" and someone to celebrate with when the students were successful. This experience will remind me that time for celebration makes better teachers.

Teachers also expressed their belief that having two adults in the classroom was good for their students:

> I also enjoy having someone to share the success as well as the goofs with. I love team teaching with my student teachers. Our students get the best of both of us that way.

A few mentors reported that their attitudes about certain teaching strategies had changed as a result of working with a student teacher: "I am more open to integration and to using themes and projects for groups." Several supervising teachers were convinced to expand their use of rubrics and portfolios after watching student teachers successfully implement these tools in their own classrooms.

Analysis of Practices

Thirty-two supervising teachers commented that the process of reflecting about teaching practices with their student teachers caused them to become more conscious of what they believe about teaching. One teacher explained:

> The best way to improve your own teaching is to teach someone else. Working with someone who questions is always helpful. Explaining what you are doing and why you are doing it can't help but be productive. My student teacher and I have had many philosophical discussions. Our points of view are different on many issues. I hope our discussions have made us both better teachers.

Supervising teachers mentioned examining what topics they chose to teach and why, their use of various teaching strategies, whether or not they were achieving set objectives, how they responded to students, how they managed their classes, and whether or not they were being consistent. Not only did having a student teacher provide time for reflection, it taught some supervisors how to reflect on their teaching:

> I am not aware of changes in my teaching so much, yet I am developing stronger skills in analyzing what I do. Through discussion of my teaching, my student

> teacher and I look at techniques used and their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in various situations. This has brought about an awareness for me which has certainly improved my overall teaching ability.

Assuming the stature of a role model prompted some of these teachers to push themselves a little harder:

> It has made me more conscious of how I use class time. I am aware that it is not always effective, especially when I am not as well planned as I should be. I am motivated now to improve that aspect of my teaching.

Acting as a mentor pushed some teachers to experiment more:

> My student teacher has excellent questions about why and why not. It has made me try new things and/or be really clear about the program.

At least one supervisor did research on her own to insure that her student teacher was well mentored:

> It caused me to be more reflective. It's also caused me to study and review materials I felt could be helpful for my student teacher. I've also worked hard to be sure we practiced important teaching strategies such as centers, cooperative learning, brain-based teaching and teaching math with manipulatives. I feel that I've learned, grown, and improved my skills right along with the student.

In support of D. Jean Clandinin, Annie Davies, Pat Hogan, and Barbara Kennard (1993), who encourage teachers to look at pedagogy as experiential knowledge that is built throughout a lifetime, both in and out of schools, a handful of supervising teachers spoke of the experience changing who they were as people, not just as teachers:

> It has made a window for me to look at what I do in more detail. Overall, it made me a better person and teacher.

Another added, "by having to so closely evaluate someone over a period of time, it caused me to delve into my own philosophy, practices, and manner of dealing with others."

Renewed Enthusiasm/Excitement

Supervising teachers appreciated their student teachers' energy and enthusiasm about teaching. Thirteen of these mentors found those positive attitudes to be a source of encouragement. One commented:

> I have taught for 18 years. Sometimes you lose sight of some very important aspects in dealing with children. My student teacher was so positive and so energetic and so enthusiastic that I found it contagious. My supervising experience was a great shot in the arm.

Another added, "In sharing my enjoyment and expertise of teaching with my student teacher, I was encouraged and confirmed in my profession."

Year Two: Analysis Of Focus Group Data

All of the 27 teachers involved in the focus group interviews indicated that supervising a student teacher improved their own teaching skills. Mentors felt the presence of "another body," another professional in the classroom, was of benefit. "Every person has different ideas." Even those teachers with extensive teaching experience discovered more to learn, "I have been a teacher for 21 years, and I find that I am continually learning new things." Another commented:

> Sometimes when we have done this too long, we get jaded and quit trying new things, so it is fun to have these people come in and want to try different things and see if they can make them work...and often they do work.

It also provided for some teachers another perspective into what was going on in the classroom with particular students.

Teachers commented that having a student teacher, "kept me on my toes." It made them be very clear about what they are doing and why:

> It shakes me out of my complacency to have someone ask me why do you do that. I appreciate that.

It pushed teachers to be at their best, "You have to make sure you are role modeling effectively, so it pushes you to a higher level."

Strengthening the Professional Development Component of Supervision

Because of the insights gained during the process of supervising a student teacher, all of the teachers agreed that mentoring should be considered a legitimate professional development activity. There was a high degree of concern, however, that if additional requirements were added to current responsibilities, it would discourage a number of teachers from being supervisors. The following issues were identified during the focus group discussions:

Time. Teachers lack sufficient time to attend to required responsibilities, and for most, there simply isn't room in their schedules to add additional activities. One supervising teacher put it simply as, "Anything that would add to the time commitment, I would be opposed to." Two focus groups suggested that release time should be provided for mentors to meet together.

Sharing with Colleagues. Most supervising teachers supported the opportunity to reflect/problem solve with other supervising teachers. Those who had participated in discussion groups about mentoring through university programs or departments had found the activity worthwhile. One teacher remarked:

> Old supervising teachers generally tend to like discussing experiences. New ones could perhaps gain from the discussion.

Most groups felt that this sharing would be most beneficial among grade level or subject specific groups. They also liked the idea of holding these sharing meetings on school sites. One teacher wondered, however, how the program could hold on-site reflective/problem-solving meetings and, at the same time, protect the confidentiality of student teachers and teachers in the building.

Adding a Professional Development Component as an Option or Choice. Some teachers approved of having the option to expand the supervision experience to include a professional development requirement, but warned that it should not be a required part of supervising a student teacher. Others wanted further choice among the various activities a supervisor could engage in to fulfill a potential professional development requirement. In other words, a supervising teacher should be able to choose not to participate in the professional development track, but still supervise a student teacher. If they did choose to do the professional development track, they could further choose among various activities, such as keeping a log, reading and sharing in discussion groups, or attending workshops on coaching skills. Teachers could choose to include activities they already do, such as "counting" the time that they meet with their student teacher and/or include activities they find personally meaningful.

Discussion

Numerous research studies have singled out the importance of actual classroom experience under the guidance of an effective mentor in the professional preparation of pre-service teachers. Research has not yet identified compelling reasons why classroom teachers should volunteer to participate as mentors or why school districts should choose to collaborate with teacher preparation institutions in the preparation of new teachers. Further research should be undertaken to learn what additional benefits the student teaching experience holds for classroom teachers and how that experience might be refined to enhance its potential. The two studies reported here suggest that the student teaching experience has considerable merit as a professional development opportunity, not only for the student teachers but for their supervising teachers as well.

Nearly 75 percent of the supervising teachers in the survey study and all of the supervising teachers in the focus group study reported specific positive changes in their teaching as a result of supervising a student teacher. More significantly, the majority of these changes represented a greater impact than the acquisition of a creative lesson plan or a few good ideas. Nearly half of the respondents commented that they had refined teaching techniques or had been prompted to re-examine some aspect of their teaching. None of the teachers reported that their teaching effectiveness was lessened, which challenges the notion that classroom teachers cannot add this task to their already overloaded schedule and remain effective in their teaching.

The best outcome of these results would be to encourage further exploration

into the potential reciprocal benefits that might result from school/university partnerships. This would require the involvement of public school teachers and public school administrators in the design of student teacher programs and extended partnership activities. Through collaborative planning, attempts should be made to discover ways to enhance the experience for all participants. Planners should specifically examine how the experience might be structured to maximize the growth potential for supervising teachers.

Support and training for supervising teachers is essential. Training workshops should include interactive discussions about the roles and responsibilities of the supervising teachers, focus on the development of effective communication skills, provide the supervising teachers with information about what the students have learned in university courses, provide practice in using conferencing techniques, observation tools, and giving effective feedback. In addition, training should be provided in how to orient the student teachers to the school settings and establish trusting relationships where both participants feel comfortable and supported.

Structures should be established that encourage reflection about teaching and learning by all partners in this experience. This might include journal writing or small group discussions. One of the universities in this study clustered students from two or three schools into guide groups of seven to ten students. These students met for two or three hours every Thursday afternoon throughout the year with their university supervisor to reflect, brainstorm, problem-solve together, and in general support each other through the program. These students became tightly bonded friends who readily shared ideas, insights, laughter, and tears. The same concept could easily be extended to include the formation of study groups for supervising teachers. These could be informal, school-based, discussion forums where supervising teachers could meet with their colleagues to share, reflect, and exchange expertise in the areas of both supervision and teaching.

Additionally, universities and school districts must acknowledge the commitment being made by these supervising teachers and recognize in a tangible way that supervision is a professional growth activity. Currently many programs provide supervisors with tuition vouchers that they can use to take university courses. This practice encourages further professional development, but ignores the growth inherent within the supervisory experience. As an alternative, education programs could enhance the training provided for supervisors, support their professional development during the student teaching experience, and validate that learning with the awarding of graduate credit.

Classroom teachers are a valuable resource for teacher education programs. Demands from students, administrators, and parents are competing for their time and energy. If teacher education programs expect to continue recruiting exemplary teachers to serve as supervisors, they will need to offer more than the altruistic fulfillment of an obligation to the profession. The experience can and should be an enlightening and rejuvenating asset to teachers' professional lives.

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