

THE TEACHING PRACTICUM: MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

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ABSTRACT: In New Zealand the teaching practicum is an important aspect of pre-service teacher education programmes.

The relationship between the associate teacher and the student teacher for the practicum is therefore crucial. For the associate teacher and student teacher to develop a 'rich' (Elliott, 1995) professional relationship both must be active in the relationship.

In a study which investigated professional relationships the notion of personal connectedness developed as one of the themes and also became a key principle that appeared to underpin all aspects of the development of effective professional relationships between associate teachers and student teachers.

This paper discusses the factors identified in the study as being essential to the development of personal connectedness in the professional relationship.

The teaching practicum aims to support student teachers as they continue their development towards becoming "confident, independent and effective teachers" (Centre for Teacher Education, 2002, p. 2). It "offers student teachers the experience to gain knowledge of how teachers go about the many and complex tasks involved in actual classroom practice" (McGee, Ferrier-Kerr & Miller, 2001, p. 1). For many student teachers however, the practicum experience is the most challenging aspect of their teacher education programme (Broadbent, 1998).

Studies have been initiated about the roles of associate teachers and student teachers, and the factors that contribute to developing an effective professional relationship during the practicum. The key features include collaborative partnerships, style of supervision and ways in which personal-professional relationships may be developed (Fairbanks, Freedman & Kahn, 2000; Haigh, 2001; Hawkey, 1997; Johnston, Duvernoy, McGill & Will, 1996; McGee et al., 2001; McGee, McGee, Penlington & Oliver, 2000; Peterat & Smith, 1996). The development of effective associate teacher and student teacher relationships has been identified in these studies as an element of the practicum which requires a professional approach.

However, further evidence suggests that there is a haphazard approach to the development of the professional relationship between the associate teacher and student teacher indicating this is an area that might be considered problematic (Elliott, 1995; Hawkey, 1998; Wang, 2001). As Groundwater-Smith (1993) has pointed out, "the practicum experience is one fraught with difficulties, dilemmas and challenges as the student attempts to negotiate his or her way along a hazardous path of competing professional policies and practices" (p. 137). Therefore, if developing the "rich relationship" that Elliott (1995) claims is vital to the success of the practicum for both the associate teacher and student teacher, then it is important to find out what comprises a successful professional relationship.

Through my experiences as an associate teacher in primary schools and more recently as a school liaison lecturer¹ in the School of Education, University of Waikato, I developed an interest in the way professional relationships develop between associate teachers and student teachers. I also believed there tended to be what could be described as a haphazard approach to the development of the relationship, which highlighted the importance of taking a more focused approach to the development of the professional relationship. This belief was explored in a study which aimed to investigate the professional relationship between associate teachers and student teachers. The main purpose was to explore the seemingly haphazard nature of its development and identify principles which appear to be important to the development of the professional relationship, and secondly to identify specific strategies associate teachers employed to support and enhance the professional development of their student teachers.

The study focused on the relationships that developed between four associate teachers and their student teachers during the students' final block practicum. Data collected through questionnaires, journals, seminars and semi-structured interviews identified four themes as being central to the quality of the relationship: *personal connectedness, collaboration, role interpretation and styles of supervision.*

The theme of *personal connectedness* highlighted how important it was to make connections on both a personal and professional level and was arguably integrated throughout all themes. *Collaboration*, the second theme, emphasised the value that all participants placed on teamwork and collaborative strategies. The third theme, was *role interpretation* which addressed the understandings and expectations associate teachers and student teachers had of their roles. Finally, the fourth theme was *style of supervision*. This drew attention to how associate teachers and student teachers identified and implemented various styles of supervision.

As the study progressed, two key principles emerged. The findings demonstrated that while *personal connectedness* developed as a theme early in the study, it also became a key principle that underpinned all aspects of the development of effective professional relationships between associate teachers and student teachers.

The second principle, *reflection*, emphasised the value that all participants placed on the critical examination of their practice, including the ways their professional relationships developed. As a result of participating in this study, my belief is that reflection supports and enhances effective professional relationships. However, it was apparent during the study that the wider requirements of the practicum and the busyness of classroom life affected the level and quality of reflection of student teachers and associate teachers. Moreover the level at which associate teachers engaged in reflection also appeared to be affected by what Day (1993) calls the "culture of the individual teacher" (p. 140). I believe this was linked to the limited time, and the little opportunity most associate teachers and student teachers had to engage in learning more about reflection and how to critically examine their practice. Yet, though the consistency and quality of reflection was variable, the essence of a successful relationship between associate teachers and student teachers was found in some of the reflective statements made by the participants. 'Y' provided an example of when he raised the importance of being supported in reflective practice, "B has helped me to reflect on my own teaching and to learn from this. Where I have had difficulty reflecting, B has either prompted me or offered her own thoughts for me to reflect from". It seemed that by engaging in action research, and through conducting their own inquiries both associate teachers and student teachers were able to develop their ability to inquire systematically, yet sensitively into the nature of their professional relationship.

However, there appeared little doubt that without *personal connectedness* the professional relationships that developed would not have been as successful. While each relationship developed in a unique way because each pair placed a slightly different emphasis on what was important for them, there was no doubt that "open, warm, supportive relationships" were valued (Callaghan & Cranston, 1998, p. 3).

The notion of personal connectedness featured strongly in the study's findings. The words "connecting" and "clicking", frequently mentioned by associate teachers and student teachers, indicated that both associate teachers and student teachers needed to make a personal connection. A student teacher commented, "The interpersonal relationship is important for me – for making the connection" and her associate teacher agreed with the need to connect saying, "there must be a connection between associate teacher and student teacher." Another associate teacher noted, "'L'[student teacher] visited after school. Stayed until 4.30. Asked heaps of questions...Talked about our families and backgrounds. Got to know each other and felt a mutual connection...."

These comments point to the importance of honest *communication*, which was identified as one of the essential factors for developing personal connectedness, and therefore an effective professional relationship. Each associate teacher-student

teacher pair was able to discuss and debate by constantly sharing their opinions and ideas in a way that was beneficial to their professional relationships. It was clear, as Elliott (1995) and Edwards and Collison (1996) suggest, that associate teachers and student teachers were able to create an environment of honesty and reliability. A student teacher commented,

'E' [associate teacher] and I frequently discuss her plans for the class programme so that I know what is going on and where the class is going. She includes me in all aspects of planning—we plan and discuss the class programme collaboratively – which is great!

Another student teacher stated,

'A' [associate teacher] and I have talked constantly throughout the practicum – reviewing my teaching, reviewing her teaching, reviewing the children's learning. This has been the biggest thing I think that has developed our relationship. It has been a constant analysis of our teaching practice and our relationship....

Respect was a second common factor. Heap (2003) identifies respect as the core of all effective relationships and this was evident in each relationship. Both associate teachers and student teachers recognised that it was important to listen, understand and develop respect for each other's position but that they did not have to agree with the other's perspective. Several of the student teachers commented informally that while they respected their associate teachers' experience and

expert support they would probably not be the kind of teacher their associate teacher was. Teaching style was debated at different times during the practicum as each pair worked hard at accommodating individual styles in classroom practices and inter-personal interaction. However, most of the relationships were exemplified in this statement, "I think one of the reasons we are developing a positive professional relationship is because we like and respect each other...my student teacher is interested in me rather than a label – 'the associate'."



Dealing positively with difference showed that *diversity* was valued as a third essential factor in developing the professional relationship. For example, associate teachers and student teachers often integrated two opposing perspectives. They found that confronting and attempting to understand their diversity was healthy although there were times of extended discomfort. As an associate teacher commented, "...we had a commonality of purpose and it didn't matter what our differences were. We could transcend any egos or personalities."

The diversity of student teachers in their personal and professional characteristics was sometimes problematic for the associate teachers, at times creating tense situations. While Groundwater-Smith (1993) points out this is not uncommon in the practicum context, one pair in the study recognised that the potential for conflict lay in their similar, strong personalities and as a result were proactive in developing an open and genuine professional relationship. This will not always be the case. According to Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn (2000) 'sameness' can stifle the professional relationship because neither teacher nor student challenges the other. However, the strength of the personal relationships in the study provided a solid foundation from which problems or potential conflict could be effectively addressed and confirmed.

A fourth factor, *rapport* was established between each pair. Rapport was exemplified in the way the individuals in each pair took a sincere interest in the other and their needs. An associate teacher stated, "we have such a good rapport that we are totally at ease with each other." Each pair regularly shared information about their personal lives and made the other a priority during conversation.

We discovered we were middle children and found we were the peace-makers... During duty we began talking about ourselves at a more personal level. Where we had lived, what we had done before teaching. This was enjoyable because it meant our relationship was moving beyond professionalism. It is helpful to be able to see someone with whom I work as more than just a role (model), but as a person also.

It appeared that the deeper the rapport, the more significant the contribution each person was able to make to the other (Ronning, 2002). In those relationships where rapport was quickly developed the associate teachers and student teachers were more able to assist each other to

achieve their goals. For example, associate teachers in the study aimed to guide and support their student teachers towards achieving their professional goals. Once a rapport had been developed the student teachers, while committed to their goals, were also prepared to go the "extra mile" for their associate teachers.

All pairs indicated that the fifth factor of *trust* was important for them in establishing a professional relationship. On a professional level, student teachers in this study needed to trust their associate teachers to help them make wise and appropriate decisions as learners and developing teachers. Associate teachers for their part needed to trust their student teachers with their classes, and as collaborative team members. One pair felt that they were working collaboratively in an environment of trust. "I think that due to the fact that we are both quite open and willing to work together we have established a team rather than two teachers teaching in the same room." It seemed that for both associate teachers and student teachers trust could break down barriers in professional relationships and contribute to the creation of compatibility (Ronning, 2002).

The study's findings supported Elliott's (1995) claim that "inherent in the relationship between supervisor and student are interpersonal issues..." (p. 261). Throughout the practicum associate teachers continued to hone their skills at developing effective, collegial and collaborative relationships. Associate teachers and student teachers collaborated to get 'the little things right'. However the "little things" were also the "important things" – those factors identified as *communication, rapport, trust, honesty* and *valuing diversity*. All of these factors contributed to a sense of personal connectedness.

Making personal connections appeared to empower both associate teachers and student teachers. Important in the study was each pair's ability to see stressful days and unexpected issues as opportunities for growth towards sound relationships. It was clear that student teachers valued these personal connections which provided the foundations from which they could develop an understanding of their associate teachers' practices and beliefs. As a result student teachers were more likely to identify and develop their own styles and philosophies of teaching.

Although the consistency and quality of each relationship was variable, the study showed that the essence of a successful relationship between associate teachers and student teachers could be found in the personal connections that were established. As Ronning (2002) points out, people who have been, or are significant in someone's professional career, are often those with whom a personal connection is experienced.

The development of a successful professional relationship has important implications for both associate teachers and student teachers. Ronning (2002) suggests that when people in any workplace exhibit a positive manner they develop friendships, achieve more professionally and generally have happy, healthy and successful relationships. Through associate teachers and student teachers seeking and creating opportunities to connect personally, they can reflect on the ways professional relationships develop, become more fully aware of the relationship itself and of the possibilities for successful change.

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NOTES

¹ A liaison lecturer is responsible for a group of schools in which student teachers are placed for their teaching practicum. The liaison lecturer visits schools each time student teachers are placed there, to ensure that both associate teachers and student teachers know what the practicum requirements are. The liaison lecturer is the student teacher and associate teacher's first point of contact with the School of Education.