

What are the qualities needed to make an effective associate teacher?

Gretchen Callaghan and Christel Cranston

“From our reading and research it would seem that there are many parts to the teaching practicum, both from the students’ and associates’ points of view, that need updating or clarifying.”

Robinson (1996, p.3) claims “the teaching practice period is a powerful movement in student teachers’ training, whatever their particular experiences. For many it is a very positive and exciting time as they gain confidence in their ability to cope as beginning teachers”.

Feeling sure that this was correct statement, we searched a variety of literature and found that many authors agreed on the importance of the pre-service teaching practicum (Calder, 1994; Huffman & Leak, 1986; McGee, 1996; Oliver, 1992; Pinder, 1995; Robinson, 1996). Much research is available from overseas on the teaching practicum, but very little has been done in New Zealand. McGee (1996, p.1) states, “studies do not reveal a great deal about teaching practice from the student teacher’s point of view”. Associate teacher selection involves, as Harold (1994, p.4) states, principals listing “all teachers who are willing to be associate teachers and whose competency for this role is endorsed by the principal”.

From our reading and research it would seem that there are many parts to the teaching practicum, both from the students’ and associates’ points of view, that need updating or clarifying. It was our aim, to produce a brochure for associate teachers at Hamilton West School to aid a more successful teaching practicum for both School of Education student teachers and associate teachers.

Literature Review

It would seem from the data collected and recent literature that the following qualities are the most

frequently mentioned for an associate teacher to have:

- consistency and a positive teacher role model
- a sound knowledge of the curriculum
- taking time to plan and give regular feedback
- being aware of the ‘theory-practice gap’
- giving opportunities to the students to ‘try new things’
- a desire to be an associate
- willing to work co-operatively with university lecturers
- having effective communication skills
- being able to develop a collegial relationship
- familiarity with student teachers requirements

Procedure

Interviewing was chosen as the research method to best answer our research question. In such a small piece of research it was not feasible to use a variety of techniques to collect our data. We were able to get our interviewees to reflect and comment on events related to our research question. Using the interviewing method, allowed us to spend a greater length of time with each interviewee, during which rapport was easily established and maintained. Their perspective of events was sought and recorded in an environment where the interviewee and interviewer were of equal status. A number of open-ended questions were drawn up which allowed us (the interviewers) to probe if we wished to go into more depth with a particular



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question, or to clear up misunderstandings.

Selection of Group

We decided to interview four groups of people - two associate teachers, the principal and the in-

allow us to present our findings for comment. Finally we presented the findings to the whole staff at a staff meeting and invited any feedback. Further information was collected which strengthened the conclusions we were then able to make.

Results

1. What are the qualities needed to make an effective associate teacher?

The responses of the four groups are shown below:

These responses fall into five

Table 1
Qualities and Expectations of Associate Teachers

	<i>Student x2</i>	<i>Associate x2</i>	<i>Liaison Teacher</i>	<i>Principal</i>
fully conversant with section requirements	3	3	3	3
to attend regular meetings prior to and during section well planned	3	3	3	3
open, warm, friendly supportive relationships	3	3	3	3
professionalism	3	3	3	3
associates be experienced, successful classroom teachers	3	3	3	3
associates have sound curriculum knowledge	3	3	3	3
associates be role models	3	3	3	3
communication important especially giving feedback	3	3	3	3
time commitment	3	3	3	implied
management techniques	3	implied	implied	3
flexible / adaptable	3	3		3
sharing ideas	3	3	3	3
ensure section is a successful experience	3	3		3
commitment to being an associate	3	3		3
let students have freedom to try things	3			3
teachers taking part in corporate life of school				3
involved in other study				3

school liaison officer were all based in one school; a full primary; large inner city school. Two third year S.o.E. student teachers were chosen who had previously been on practicum at our school. We needed people who were currently involved in these roles so they could bring their recent experiences to the interview.

Interviews

A small number of open-ended questions were used (see Appendix 1). The bank of questions had to be altered slightly according to the role of the particular interviewee. As this was a joint research task we decided to conduct the interviews with both present - one would ask the questions and interact with the interviewees and the other one would record the responses. This enabled us to take accurate notes..

On completing the individual interviews, the information was collated and tentative findings drawn. We then organised for all six interviewees to meet together to

Interview Results

The interview questions were listed down the side of a large sheet of chart paper and the six interviewees, in their role groups of student teachers, associate teachers, in-school liaison teacher and principal, across the top. Agreement with the questions was indicated by a tick and any different view points were noted in the appropriate column. Some questions were relevant to specific people and their responses were recorded.

Once this data was recorded we looked for commonalities and differences. Recurring themes were then organised according to our three research questions:

1. What are the qualities needed to make an effective associate teacher?
2. What are the areas teachers want to know about to be more effective as associate teachers?
3. What are the qualities students perceive as being necessary for an associate teacher?

categories

- a) preparation seen as vital
- b) experience related to being an associate
- c) relationships
- d) associated abilities
- e) other

Preparation seen as vital

All interviewees expressed the importance of being fully conversant with the section requirements and expectations. A meeting between associates and student teachers prior to practicum was seen as vital. Here background knowledge about the school and the particular class students would be going into could be given. Other information could also be outlined such as timetables, class lists, long term plans, class descriptions and

“A meeting between associates and student teachers prior to practicum was seen as vital.”

where resources were kept. Talking together, also allowed student teachers to express what they hoped to achieve out of their practicum. At this stage these expectations could be linked with the requirements documented in the S.O.E. Handbook.

Experience related to being an associate:

A number of points were made by all interviewees about being associate teachers. Five out of six people stated that associates should be experienced, successful classroom teachers. The sixth person felt that because she had recently been a student teacher, she was closer to their needs. She stated "I know what I needed to know, so I can show what I didn't get", and "there's a lot I still need to learn about, I'm still developing, I don't profess to be an expert but that doesn't stop me from being an associate".

A sound knowledge of curriculum and successful management techniques were referred to, as was being well planned. As one associate said "your planning and teaching is what you are proud of" and that you "feel you are a sound classroom teacher and you are in a position, and are prepared, to share this knowledge".

The associate teachers and the principal, felt that associates had to have the desire to be associates and that the time commitment involved was recognised and actioned. Everyone saw associate teachers as role models.

"Open, warm, supportive relationships between associates and students were highlighted by all interviewees."

Relationships:

Open, warm, supportive relationships between associates and students were highlighted by all interviewees. Student teachers expressed their wish to be seen as professional and school personnel

stated their expectations of students to act in a professional manner while on practicum. Communication between all parties was seen as vital, especially the giving of oral and written feedback. Constructive criticism was also seen as part and parcel of the development of student teachers. Friendliness, taking an interest in each other as individuals and being approachable were seen as important in ensuring a welcoming environment to work in.

Associate abilities:

The ability to be flexible and adaptable was seen as desirable by all interviewees, as was the sharing of ideas. Both the student teachers and the principal, stated that associate teachers needed to be able to give students the freedom to do their own thing. The principal said to "let them incorporate their own ideas" into their teaching practicum, and one of the students expressed that associates be "able to let go" and allow them to try things out. It was apparent that associates, and the things they did or didn't do, were one of the key factors in ensuring that practicum was a successful experience for students.

Other:

Two other points raised only by the principal included the need for associate teachers to be: involved in some other study, so that they were "thinking beyond the curriculum"; and taking an active part in the corporate life of the school. The principal felt these two aspects were highly desirable.

Summary

In summary, a number of qualities to do with experience, commitment, preparation, relationships and communication are necessary to ensure that practicum is a successful experience for student teachers, associates, and in the end, the children. It is important that students are made to feel welcome and are included in the school while on practicum. If the associates and the principal thought carefully about, and took cogni-

sance of the qualities and expectations of associate teachers, then the selection process should be more effective than it is at the moment.

2. What are the areas teachers want to know more about to be effective as associate teachers?

The associate teachers expressed a need to know more about four different areas. First, that prior to teaching practicum, they would like to know more about the strengths and needs of their students. Second, the criteria used by the School of Education evaluative lecturers to judge the students' lessons. The associates were aware of the criteria listed in the Associate Teacher

"...they would like to know more about the strengths and needs of their students."

Handbook, but felt that the lecturers may have another set which they were using. Third, they wished to have information about the avenues to use in order to get support when a teaching practicum was not going smoothly and successfully. This point was also reiterated by the student teachers. Finally, and most interestingly, the associates would like some written feedback from their student teachers, as to their own performance as associate teachers. They felt they were never given any evaluative feedback and that this would be useful. As one associate teacher said "I don't know if I can do anything different, but if I don't know what I can do, I can't improve."

Student teachers also expressed views about what associate teachers needed to know to be more effective. Two points were made: associate teachers needed to be more familiar with the requirements and expectations of student teachers while they are on practicum; and associate teachers needed more training in giving feedback and communicating effectively.

3. *What are the qualities students perceive as being necessary for an associate?*

The qualities student teachers stated that they thought were necessary for associates to have, were the same as those expressed by the other interviewees, however, the students were more explicit about effective behaviour management strategies. One said you "can't learn management through talking or writing essays, you've got to be out there - it's a big thing to be able to manage kids," and the other said "you can't go past experience." They felt very strongly that these strategies were an essential part of a teaching practicum and provided the key to a positive start in their first year as a teacher.

In summary the qualities considered necessary by the students were those answered by the first research question and set out in Table 1.

Other Findings

A number of other points were raised as a result of our questions. These were grouped into the following categories:

1. *Information about the school in which students will be on teaching practicum:*

The following is a list of the information students would like to have available for them either when they make their pre practicum visit or early in their practicum:

- a) a plan of the school
- b) list of staff members
- c) a statement about the school "make-up" including ethnic groups, socio-economic information etc.
- d) a statement about parental involvement
- e) a summary sheet of policies, procedures and curriculum statements
- f) information on school routines eg. assemblies, sport days, technicraft times
- g) school expectations of such things as dress, arrival times, meeting attendance etc.

Written statements should be kept to a minimum but that the student teachers would find this documentation very helpful in giving them basic details for the environment.

2. *Training for associates:*

All interviewees, except the principal who was not asked this question, felt that associate teachers should have some training. There was no total agreement as to the form this should take. Some felt meetings covering certain topics would suffice whereas, others felt there should be courses. Opinions on the content of these 'sessions' also varied. Associate teachers and the in-school liaison teacher listed knowledge of the requirements and expectations of the School of Education. The associates also mentioned planning. Student teachers discussed the above three aspects and added that there should be input on goal setting, effective communication skills and giving feedback.

"They felt practicum experience was extremely important in providing opportunities for them to put theory into practice."

3. *'Theory - practice gap':*

That a 'theory - practice gap' existed (the mismatch that can occur between the theory and practical classroom experience), was confirmed by student teachers, the in-school liaison teacher and the principal. The latter two talked about being "unsure that the balance was quite right", whilst the student teachers were adamant that there definitely was a gap and that university work is very theory based. They felt practicum experience was extremely important in providing opportunities for them to put theory into practice. The students also discussed learning about many curriculum areas in isolation, and it wasn't until they were on teaching practicum that they were able to see integration

across curriculum areas. On the other hand, the associate teachers felt that the student teachers today are aware of the curriculum documents and that they were able to move easily into classroom practice.

4. *Other:*

A number of other interesting points were made. They are listed below:

- a) Students would like to be able to take the 'real' roll - not to mark a photocopied one.
- b) Students are not shown how to take running records at School of Education unless they take a 300 level language curriculum paper, which is optional. They request that associates show them how to do these.
- c) Student teachers would like to know more about associate teachers before making their selection about placement. They would like the system of matching associate and student improved and to be better informed about the process.
- d) Generally liaison between the School of Education and the school is seen as positive. Lecturers are described as being "obliging" and "helpful".
- e) Some teachers expressed concern about the negativity of some feedback given to student teachers by their School of Education evaluative lecturers.
- f) Students would like feedback from the children.
- g) The principal should meet the students on day one of section, and talk to them.
- h) The principal would appreciate an opportunity to discuss the student programme with School of Education staff.
- i) Students would like to be able to contact associates earlier than the one week prior to practicum, which would facilitate planning and communication.

Discussion

Findings from our study were consistent with ideas identified in our reading of the literature in this area. Qualities valued by the associate teachers, student teachers,

in-school liaison officer and the principal we interviewed, were all found in this literature. It was interesting also that there was a high degree of agreement amongst the interviewees themselves about necessary qualities. Only one associate was adamant that associate teachers did not have to be experienced classroom teachers. This teacher felt that her closeness, in time, to being a student teacher, was a positive point as she could more readily relate to, and remember, the needs of the student teachers.

Other aspects, identified in the literature such as, the need for training associates, recognition that there was a 'theory - practice gap', positive working relationships between schools and the School of Education, and improving the associate teacher selection processes were all supported in our findings.

The following two points were made emphatically by the majority of interviewees:-

- That associates need to have sound management techniques; and
- That teaching practicum must be a successful, positive experience.

These were not specifically mentioned in the literature but were implied in many statements made.

Recommendations

From our research the following recommendations are made:-

1. Associate Teachers need to:

- a) be better informed about qualities that make an effective associate.
- b) be more carefully selected.
- c) undergo some form of training so they are fully conversant with their role and the section requirements and expectations.
- d) give quality feedback, both written and oral.

2. The School of Education should:

- a) continue to consider factors which can minimise the 'theory - practice gap.'
- b) outline more clearly to student teachers and their associates the

- c) criteria for assessment.
- c) state clearly in written form, steps to be taken when practicum is not proving successful for either the student teacher or the associate teacher.
- d) increase liaison between principals and themselves about course programmes and practicum requirements.
- e) improve the process of associate teacher selection and communicate this more effectively to student teachers.
- f) make the 300 level language curriculum paper compulsory for all student teachers.
- g) look at the Teaching Practice Handbook in light of the research and our findings.

3. Principal:

- a) meet with student teachers before school on the first day of practicum.

4. Hamilton West School / the school studied should:

- a) have an information brochure for associate teachers.
- b) have an information brochure for student teachers and a map of the school.

Conclusion

A number of factors influence the success of the teaching practicum for student teachers. While focusing on the qualities of effective associate teachers and the needs of associate teachers, other issues became apparent. These affected two sets of people - the student teachers and School of Education staff. Our report, including the recommendations, has attempted to address these.

We have produced two brochures for use at Hamilton West School - one for associate teachers and one for student teachers. We have received positive comments about these and look forward to evaluating them, following their introduction next year.

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Appendix A

Sample questions used with Interviewees

- What preparation do you do before teaching practice begins?
- Do you consider it vital to meet with your associate / student prior to teaching practice? Why? Why not?
- What qualities do you think an effective associate teacher should have?
- How important do you think teaching practice is? Why? Why not?
- What information do you think schools should give student teachers who come to them for section?
- What did the associate do to allow you freedom in planning and implementing your ideas/thoughts into the classroom programme?
- What are your thoughts on the 'theory-practice gap' ... the mismatch that can occur between the theory and practical classroom experience?
- Do you consider it a necessary prerequisite for associate teachers to have some kind of induction/training sessions? Why? Why not?
- What in your opinion would be areas to address in making associate teachers more effective with S.o.E. student teachers on teaching practice?
- How can an associate ensure the section is successful for the S.O.E. student teacher?
- Do you give any 'feedback' to the S.o.E. student teachers? If so, how, when and what type of feedback?
- Any other comments ...?