

# Reports from the Field

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## A “Whole School” Approach to the Practicum

### Abstract

*We describe an action research and development project undertaken by a faculty of education and a school board seeking to move teacher education—and, in particular, the practicum—in directions consistent with current research. A practicum program was introduced into two schools as part of the larger endeavour of teacher education and staff development in which those schools, the faculty, and the board were already engaged. The program was developed using Carr and Kemmis’s (1985) model of collaborative action research. The “whole school” project appeared to be successful in its aims: student teachers, cooperating teachers, the faculty, the school board, and, indeed, everyone involved in the project reported professional or pedagogical benefits.*

### Résumé

*Nous décrivons un projet de recherche-développement entrepris par une faculté des sciences de l’éducation et une commission scolaire en vue d’imprimer à la formation des enseignants—et en particulier aux stages pratiques—une orientation cadrant avec les recherches en cours. Un programme de stages pratiques a été mis sur pied dans deux écoles dans le cadre d’un projet plus important de formation des enseignants et de perfectionnement professionnel auquel ces écoles, la faculté et la commission participaient déjà. Ce programme a été conçu selon le modèle de recherche d’action concertée de Carr et Kemmis (1985). Le projet “d’école totale” semble avoir atteint ses objectifs: les professeurs stagiaires, les professeurs coopérants, la faculté, la commission scolaire et à vrai dire tous ceux qui ont participé au projet ont fait état d’avantages professionnels ou pédagogiques.*

It has been suggested that “the major influence on a student teacher’s acquisition of skills is the ecology of the school” (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990, p. 518, citing Copeland). Whether we are concerned with “acquisition of skills” or with other aspects of student teacher growth and development, the context in which student teaching takes place—the nature of the classrooms and schools selected for practica, and the underlying view of teaching and teacher education manifested there—is without doubt a significant factor, and one to which researchers have given little attention (Zeichner, 1987, 1990).

Guyton and McIntyre (1990), among others (e.g., Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987; Fullan & Connelly, 1987), have pointed out that the influence of school context on student teacher development is not always positive. These reviewers acknowledge the “negative influences” (p. 519) of cooperating teachers and of the socializing pressures of the schools, the “conservative attitudes and practices” (p. 518) that student teachers encounter, the general lack of preparation and support provided for cooperating teachers, and the low priority accorded teacher education in schools. As well, the isolation that tends to characterize the lives of both beginning and experienced teachers, and that militates against collegial professional relationships (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989), goes unchallenged by the current practice of assigning student teachers to individual cooperating teachers in self-contained classrooms. Despite the continuing debate over the effects of field experiences, however, (e.g., Applegate, 1985; Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1987), student teaching is widely considered the most important and justifiable component of teacher education programs.

Guyton and McIntyre (1990) cite research which suggests how the student teaching context might be reformed to mitigate undesirable effects and to enhance the professional development of both student and cooperating teachers. They point out that:

- a) student teachers should spend less time teaching and more time studying the culture of the school;
- b) school districts should establish “teacher centres” where a number of preservice students can be assigned for their student teaching;
- c) cooperating teachers should be better prepared and supported in their roles; and
- d) student teaching should be more of a “laboratory” activity than an apprenticeship, emphasizing exploration, discovery, and reflection, and the testing and modification of teaching practices.

Other literature on teacher education and development, and on educational change (e.g., Cole & McNay, 1989; Fullan & Connelly, 1990; Fullan, 1985, 1990; McNay & Cole, 1989a; Smyth, 1989) suggests that teacher education should be viewed as a continuum—that is, that the practicum is but one component in the career-long process of being and becoming a teacher, and that a commitment to teacher education means an interest not only in preservice programs but in teachers throughout their careers. This literature also calls for closer collaboration among schools, school boards, and faculties of education in the teacher education endeavour.

### **The "Whole-School" Project: Its Origins**

The "whole-school" project is in the tradition of countless other projects involving professional development schools that date back to the late 19th century. (For a brief overview of research on laboratory schools and other professional development schools, see Stallings and Kowalski, 1990.) Current interest in professional development schools is characterized by a conception of teacher education arising in part out of the reports of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986), and the Holmes Group Report (1986), a conception of teacher education as a collaborative endeavour involving faculties of education and schools linked in professional partnership.

Our project had its origins in 1988 when we set out with a local school board to consider a very specific project, the development in that board of induction programs for beginning teachers. A "Project Committee" of faculty and board personnel was organized for this purpose. The Committee's early discussions, however, led it to the realization that induction programs offer an opportunity to do more than serve a relatively small group of new teachers—they offer an opportunity to work towards a true continuum in teacher education. Thus, a project that had begun with a focus on induction programs very quickly expanded to focus more broadly and ambitiously on the continuum—on practicum and career-long staff development as well as induction.

The Committee went on to articulate a vision of teacher education as an endeavour that should indeed be characterized by faculty/school board collaboration. The practicum, because it is already shared by the faculty and the board, seemed a promising place to start in developing the collaborative relationship. The Committee decided that the first phase of the project would be dedicated to moving the practicum in directions consistent both with current research and with the Committee's vision of teacher education as a collaborative and continuing endeavour.

**Aim of the Project:  
Developing the Context for Teacher Education**

A commitment to **collaboration** in teacher education means more than simple cooperation among interested groups; collaboration involves a fuller sharing of responsibility. In terms of the practicum, collaboration meant that the Waterloo Region Roman Catholic School Board (where this research was carried out) would not only permit student teachers to be placed in its schools but would work with the faculty in determining the pedagogical structure of the practicum, sharing in related decisions, costs, and benefits. A commitment to the teacher education **continuum** meant establishing the practicum as one component of the larger endeavour of teacher education and staff development in which the faculty and board were already engaged. Finally, commitment to collaboration and to the continuum meant attending to the **context** of teacher education, and the context of the practicum. The Project Committee determined that in the year to come:

- a) the practicum would be introduced not into isolated classrooms but into whole schools as a part of the larger teacher education/staff development program of those schools;
- b) student teachers would be assigned to cooperating teachers for primary support, but would spend up to half their time with teachers and staff members in other classrooms and other parts of the school;
- c) student teachers would be assigned to different cooperating teachers for each of the three practicum periods, but would remain in the same school for all three practica;
- d) the whole school staff, including non-teaching staff, would be encouraged to explore ways in which they could support and help to educate student teachers; and
- e) cooperating teachers and other staff members would be provided with preparation and support in their roles.

The Project Committee believed that this approach would serve a number of aims consistent with current research on teacher education and the practicum, and with its own vision of teacher education it would:

- a) initiate a “teacher centre” approach to preservice teacher education;
- b) enable student teachers to focus on the culture of the school as well as on single classrooms; and

c) encourage among both preservice and career teachers a professional commitment to teacher education and career-long staff development.

Because the project focused on the **context** for teacher education as it was provided by schools and all staff members, the project came to be called the "whole school approach to practicum," or the "whole school" project.

### **An Approach to Research**

The "whole school" project was developed using Carr and Kemmis's (1985) model of collaborative action research. Consistent with this model, the project was intended to improve not only a practice but the understanding of the practice, and of the context in which the practice occurs. The project "proceed[ed] through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated" (Carr & Kemmis, 1985, p. 165).

In the "whole school" project, one of the principal researchers (Cole) gathered information from student teachers, cooperating teachers, principals, and other school staff members through regular school visits and attendance at meetings, workshops, and planning sessions associated with the project. Over the course of the preservice year, Cole interviewed all participants in the project, documenting the course of development and institution of the program in the participating schools, and the impact of the program on both the institutions and the personnel involved. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and, along with extensive field notes, reviewed regularly. By using a number of data sources and multiple methods of information gathering, data triangulation was possible. At the end of each practicum session, these data, and implications for practice arising from them, were considered by the Project Committee and, when appropriate, by the student teachers and staff members of the participating schools. Thus we systematically returned to the participants with summaries of our findings in order to verify interpretations and perceptions, and to seek further information. In true action research fashion, the project underwent continuing modification and development.

### **Context of the "Whole School Approach to Practicum" Project**

The aims of the "whole school" project had to do with developing the **context** in which the practicum took place. The characteristics of existing contexts helped to shape the project.

### *The school board*

The participating board administers over 50 schools. Its philosophy includes a commitment to “inclusive community,” and to excellence in education for all children, including within regular classrooms children with many special needs and different capabilities. The director espouses what he calls “servant leadership,” a belief that change in education will come from servant leaders—from teachers and principals—rather than from “those at the top.” Thus the board is committed to school-based planning and school-based professional development programs, and has acknowledged the importance of preparing the context—the schools and their staffs—for new roles in the institution of educational change, and in teacher education and staff development.

### *The schools*

Two suburban elementary schools which we will call Sparling and Cooking Hill participated in the project. Board personnel on the Project Committee selected these schools for a combination of logistical, political, and pedagogical reasons: the geographical location of the schools and their proximity to each other facilitated visits by researchers; the board wanted to balance its special projects between schools in outlying areas of the region and more centrally located schools; and the schools were judged to be strong, well administered schools that would introduce student teachers to “the real world” of multicultural communities and children with special needs.

Both schools had strong, active staffs. The principal at Sparling noted that shared decision making characterized his relationship with teachers:

Teachers feel part of the school . . . . They taught me the decision making process very quickly when I first came here. I found out very quickly that they like to be part of the decision-making process and [that] you get marvellous results when you [work together].

Both staffs were characterized by an attitude of deep professional commitment. At Sparling, for example, new teachers were taught English-as-a-Second-Language teaching techniques by more experienced teachers. At Cooking Hill, teachers engaged in collaborative curriculum planning on their own initiative. The vice-principal there commented: “One of the things that stands out [in this school] is the great diversity of staff, and that if we provide them with opportunities they learn from each other.”

A variety of ethnic groups was represented in both schools: 60%-85% of families were Portuguese-Canadian; other families were of Polish,

Caribbean, or Filipino descent, or had recently migrated from the Canadian Atlantic Provinces. Teachers believed that children's cultural and economic backgrounds affected school life in several ways. Because English was the second language of many children, a "language barrier" made teaching a challenge, especially at Sparling. Teachers observed that school was "not the highest priority" in children's lives, but that good relations among children of different cultural origins gave the school a pleasant atmosphere.

### *The Faculty of Education program*

The program in which the students in this project were engaged is an eight-month after-degree program leading to the B.Ed. degree. Students pursue courses in curriculum studies and foundational areas, and spend ten weeks on practicum: four weeks in October, and three weeks in each of February and April. They do not return to the faculty after the April practicum. Admission standards are high, and students have excellent academic records. Their average age is 29; many are taking up teaching as a second career.

A "panel" of 15 students at the Faculty of Education volunteered to participate in the "whole school" project. All had requested practicum placements in elementary schools in the participating school board. Some intended to seek positions with that board, and believed that participation in the project would enhance their employability. Most wanted to avail themselves of the richer experience they believed the project would offer them. A member of the Project Committee (McNay) was faculty advisor to the panel, an assignment that meant overseeing all aspects of their practica.

### **Initial Implementation of the Project**

Through the work of the Project Committee, a collaborative relationship had begun to form between the Faculty of Education and the school board; the next step was to engage schools in the endeavour. The Project Committee prepared a proposal describing the intent of the "whole school" approach, and the commitment required, and presented it to the principals of Sparling and Cooking Hill in June, 1989. The principals presented the proposal to their own staffs for consideration and discussion, and, when the schools expressed tentative interest, the Project Committee met with each staff. On the last day of school, the Committee held an "orientation" workshop for all staff members from both schools (including secretarial, janitorial, and other non-teaching staff members) and for school board support staff, to raise awareness of the need for a "whole school" support program for student teachers, to identify purposes of the program, and to begin to build staff commitment to the project.

### **Course of Development of the "Whole School" Project**

Early in the 1989 school year, six student teachers were assigned to Sparling and nine to Cooking Hill.

A week before the October practicum began, a half-day workshop was held to identify ways in which staff members (teaching and non-teaching) might support students in practicum. Kindergarten and primary teachers, junior teachers, custodial and secretarial staff, librarians and resource personnel, and paraprofessionals (teacher aides) formed discussion groups which were led by Project Committee members. Each group identified its particular roles, responsibilities, expectations, and priorities related to the practicum and the support of preservice teachers. Each school staff, under the guidance of the principal, outlined a plan coordinating the various forms of support each staff would offer the student teachers. These plans ensured that student teachers had a variety of activities to choose from during the practicum:

- a) a tour of the school with the custodian;
- b) introduction to school office procedures by the school secretary;
- c) observation in classrooms of other teachers;
- d) overview of library resources and procedures by the librarian;
- e) introduction to school philosophy by the principal;
- f) seminar with first-year teachers about preparing for the first year; and
- g) social events with the school staff.

The School Board and principals made administrative commitments to their staffs in support of the roles they were taking in the project, such as:

- a) release time was available to permit cooperating teachers to meet with student teachers for planning, evaluation, and so forth;
- b) release time was available for cooperating teachers and student teachers to meet with the principal, faculty advisor, and principal researchers, to express concerns and to request and receive help or support of various kinds; and
- c) principals coordinated meetings to accommodate the project's research goals as well as program goals.



As the project proceeded, short-term and long-term plans were developed and modified in light of information gathered during each practicum. A "planning day," for example, was added to the program just prior to the second practicum to enable student teachers and cooperating teachers to meet for an extended period of time. More efficient ways to organize and coordinate student teachers' activities outside cooperating teachers' classrooms were developed. A workshop on "Being a Cooperating Teacher" was arranged to help these teachers better understand their roles.

### **Reflections on the "Whole School" Project**

Involving all members of the schools' staffs in the practicum program had a number of felicitous effects. Both staffs made special efforts to welcome the student teachers, to help them get to know the school and all staff members, and to help them feel "at home." One student teacher said,

I don't think there has ever been a situation I've been thrown into— as many new personalities, new settings, new children—[where I have] felt so comfortable so quickly . . . . By Thursday or so of the first week, I felt as if we really belonged here. And that's amazing considering all the things that happened between Tuesday [the first day of the practicum] and Thursday.

The "whole school" approach offered student teachers a richer school experience than would otherwise have been possible, and permitted them some responsibility for developing their own program. They valued the opportunity to observe in classrooms other than those to which they were primarily assigned. One student teacher described how, based on her informal encounters with other teachers, and her observations of how those teachers interacted with children and colleagues, she decided which teachers she was likely most to benefit from. School principals met with student teachers to explain administrative policies; paraprofessionals, custodians, secretaries, and other staff members also made themselves available to student teachers who thereby got to know the schools and school personnel in ways they would not have done if confined to single classrooms. Another student teacher commented:

[Listening] to other student teachers not involved in the project, it was evident that very few were involved in P.A. days, staff meetings, extra-curricular activities, and meetings with the principal of their schools . . . . The invitation to be involved in each of these areas, as well as the warmth that we felt in the schools, reflected the "whole school" commitment.

Student teachers considered the group placements—six student teachers at Sparling, nine at Cooking Hill—a major advantage.

*First student teacher:* Ordinarily, I feel silly asking questions but, with so many of us, it's easier.

*Second student teacher:* I need the support and understanding of someone else in the same situation.

As well, because they returned to the same school for the second and third practica, their school experience was less disrupted by uncertainty, anxiety, or concern about problems unrelated to schools and teaching:

*Third student teacher:* [On the second practicum] I won't have to deal with all the changes—finding the school, finding the right bus route, meeting all new people—all the things that don't even have anything to do with the classroom.

*Fourth student teacher:* [At the first practicum] it was all new and . . . it took a couple of days to adjust, to get to know everybody . . . We won't have to go through that all again. It will just make it that much easier. And not only that, we already know who our [cooperating teachers] will be . . . There's already a bit of a relationship there.

Some students expressed concern about seeing only one school during the preservice year, and wondered what more they might have learned in other settings. They believed the advantages of one school placement, however, far outweighed the disadvantages, in terms of both ease of adjustment and richness of experience:

By returning to the same school, we were able to experience the school community. The children we met in our first two practicum periods would hold our hands at recess, and even students who didn't have a student teacher in their classroom recognized us and greeted us in the halls. It was a great feeling to be welcomed back by the students. And those of us who went back to observe or teach in the classrooms we were in before could see the progression and development of the students.

Both cooperating teachers and paraprofessionals found "whole school" involvement in the practicum not only personally satisfying but professionally valuable. Cooperating teachers found that working with student teachers "provided new challenges," caused them to question themselves more and engage in "a lot of self analysis." "It makes you look at what you're doing and why you're doing it," one teacher commented. Other classroom teachers also found professional satisfaction in supporting student teachers.

Paraprofessionals reported that their participation broadened the scope and extent of their involvement in the school at large, and improved communication with the staff. One of the principals commented,

More than anything else, with the staff here we have opened doors to how adults . . . learn and grow and develop. I don't doubt that some saw this prior to the Project, but this has given them one more impetus to look at themselves . . . . It's more than just a preservice project. It's a staff development project.

The “whole school” approach to the practicum created within the schools a sense of community responsibility for the practicum. As one teacher said,

It's our program [now]. It's the whole school's [program]. Before, when student teachers came in, they were with particular teachers and that was their problem. It's not that way now. They [the student teachers] are *ours*. They're our *school's* student [teachers]. There's the difference.

A principal said, “I continue to be convinced that this is the route to go—to involve the entire staff.” Everyone seemed to feel that all staff members had something to offer, and that teacher education might indeed become a community endeavour.

### Summary Reflections on the “Whole School” Project

By the end of the year, participants in the “whole school” project were able to point to several accomplishments consistent with the aims of the project.

1. Two schools had begun to develop into “teacher centres” where a number of student teachers could study for the year, and where all teaching and non-teaching staff made commitments to supporting student teachers. The board had made available a variety of resources to support the program.
2. Student teachers had worked in the context of the **whole school**: they had been assigned to individual cooperating teachers for primary support but, in response to invitations from other staff members, had spent up to half their time in other parts of the school. They had gotten to know the schools and all staff members as well as individual classrooms.
3. Teachers who had never been cooperating teachers before had discovered the **professional satisfaction** of the role. All staff members

had discovered ways in which they could contribute to the practicum. Working with student teachers had led to reflection and self-analysis, and helped to encourage a positive attitude towards their own professional development.

Our evaluation of the “whole school” project suggested that it had been successful for student teachers, and valuable in a variety of ways for the staffs of the schools. Attending to the context in which the practicum took place appeared to contribute to improved educational experiences for almost everyone involved. The Project Committee believed the approach was worth pursuing and nurturing at Sparling and Cooking Hill, and that it should be introduced to other schools as well. Accordingly, three more schools were invited to participate in providing “whole school” support for the practicum. The principals and staffs of Sparling and Cooking Hill, and student teachers who had participated in the project, worked with the Project Committee to introduce the approach to the new schools.

### Planning for the Future

The “whole school” project’s accomplishments had begun to move the practicum in directions consistent with current research and with the vision of teacher education shared by the Project Committee and the participating schools. Even during the first year, however, it was clear that there was still far to go. Participants made several recommendations:

1. Staff members requested more help in developing and coordinating their activities. They suggested that a *key teacher* be identified in each school to take responsibility with the principal for coordinating the practicum, and that the key teacher, principal, faculty advisor, and staff members meet regularly.
2. Student teachers found little opportunity to engage in concerted critical reflection about the classrooms and schools they were getting to know. They suggested that more time be provided in the practicum program, both at school and in the faculty, for discussion and reflection.
3. Teachers expressed interest in greater opportunity for professional development, not only to aid in their roles as teacher educators, but to help in other areas such as curriculum development. They requested the board’s commitment to a more substantial staff development program.

As three new schools undertook the “whole school” approach to practicum, these recommendations were acted upon. It should be noted that both the faculty and the board were, in a variety of ways, poised and ready

to contemplate change in teacher education and staff development, and that, indeed, initiatives consistent with some of the recommendations were already under way in both institutions. Thus, key teachers were identified, and workshops were planned. The faculty began to consider replacing the evaluative role of faculty advisors with a role directed more towards helping and supporting cooperating teachers. The faculty program was modified to accommodate weekly "panel meetings" designed to provide opportunity for critical reflection on school experiences; time for such reflection was also inserted into the practica. In relation to staff development, the board instituted a plan for decentralized, school-based staff development, and the faculty continued its commitment to the development of an "additional qualifications" course for cooperating teachers.

During the first year of the "whole school" project, participants had identified a number of more general factors they deemed essential for the success of projects such as this one. The Project Committee attempted to respect these requirements as the project entered its second year:

**Commitment:** staff members are willing to invest time and effort in teacher education if they are provided with:

- a) a full understanding of how the objectives and activities of the project support the larger goals of the faculty, board, school, and teachers' own professional development programs;
- b) an element of choice concerning their involvement;
- c) a variety of kinds of ongoing, visible support (release time, workshops, etc.) as evidence of the commitment of the faculty and board; and
- d) expressions of appreciation (including social activities and informal gatherings), and reassurance that they are making a worthwhile contribution.

**Time:** efficient planning and creative scheduling are required for cooperating teachers and student teachers to make best use of time; some release time is essential.

**Communication:** open and frequent communication between all participants in the project, and especially between cooperating teachers, student teachers, board personnel, and faculty personnel is essential.

At this writing, Sparling and Cooking Hill are entering the third year of the "whole school" project, and three other schools are entering their second year. Commitment remains high.

### **Collaboration and the Continuum**

The collaborative relationship between the faculty, board, and schools in the “whole school” project grew out of a shared commitment to the improvement of teacher education, and involved the sharing of costs, resources, and benefits related to the practicum. The faculty achieved a richer practicum experience to offer their students; the board moved forward in its staff development program. The collaborative relationship, however, required effort, constant nurturing, and a willingness to be flexible and adaptive. Project Committee members acknowledged that it could be lost at any point should the mutuality and good will present among the participants in the project break down. A fuller discussion of the collaborative effort as it developed in this project has been presented elsewhere (McNay & Cole, 1989b).

Although the Project Committee’s emphasis in its first year was on the development of the school context for the practicum, the Committee never lost sight of its larger goal—attention to the continuum of teacher education. After initiating the “whole school” approach to the practicum at Sparling and Cooking Hill, the Project Committee went on to begin development of an induction program for first-year teachers (McNay & Cole, 1991). Several student teachers who had participated in the Project at Sparling and Cooking Hill were hired by the board, and were among the first to participate in the new induction program. The program was expanded the following year to accommodate many more new teachers. The board has also moved forward with substantial school-based staff development initiatives.

### **Future Research and Development**

Zeichner (1987) has suggested that analysis of three elements in the “ecology” of field experiences—the structure and content of the field experience program; the characteristics of placement sites; and the characteristics, dispositions, and abilities of the students—is necessary if we are to move closer to understanding the role of field experiences in teacher development. The “whole school” project was devoted to aspects of the first two of these elements. A fuller description of **all three** elements, and a closer analysis of how they interact in the “whole school” setting, would help to identify the most significant educative components of the program, and to guide the further development and evolution of the project.

### **A Final Word**

We view this project not as an isolated attempt at small-scale change but, rather, as part of a larger reform agenda. Teacher education in Ontario, as in many parts of North America, is in the midst of change:

Preservice teacher education is clearly in transition, pressed by a growing number of reports calling for renewal and redirection . . . . Concomitant with program innovations are improved linkages with the university and the professional communities . . . . Projects with schools and school boards are designed to extend field experiences, to train associate teachers, and to combine preservice, induction, and inservice activities. Reaching out for other partners in preservice teacher education acknowledges that faculties of education may have the most at stake but are not the only stake holders in the initial preparation of teachers. (Thiessen & Kilcher, 1991, pp. 16-17)

We join others in the educational community who are involved in such initiatives (e.g., Anderson & Hennessy, 1991; Beynon, 1991; Kirk, 1990; Martin, 1989; Sydor & Hunt, 1990; Rolheiser-Bennett & Hundey, 1991), and remain optimistic that teacher education in the 1990s will, indeed, be re-formed.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Both *Sparling* and *Cooking Hill* are pseudonyms. We would particularly like to thank all members of the staffs of these schools, and their principals, for their participation in the "whole school" project.

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