

Reports from the Field

Colla J. MacDonald
University of Ottawa

The Teaching Practicum: Issues and complexities

Abstract

This paper reports on a study which investigated student teachers' perceptions of who was important during their year in a teacher-education program, and it explores student teachers' views regarding their relationships with associate teachers. Data were gathered by means of surveys, focus-group interviews, observation visits, and journal writings. Data from all sources were analyzed and compared by searching for themes and trends related to issues and complexities that arose during the teaching practica. Two key themes emerged: (1) student teachers' perception of who was important to their professional development changed over the year, and (2) while the practicum was a valuable experience, students described it as the most stressful part of the teacher-education program, mainly because of the nature of the relationship with associate teachers. These findings cite real voices from focus-group interviews and personal relationships with associate teachers and the ambiguity felt by student teachers during the practicum.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur une étude axée sur la façon dont les professeurs stagiaires perçoivent qui a été important durant leur année de stage et il analyse le point de vue des professeurs stagiaires au sujet de leurs rapports avec les enseignants associés. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen de sondages, d'entrevues de groupe, de visites d'observation et d'entrées dans un journal. Les données de toutes provenances ont été analysées et comparées

par une recherche des thèmes et des tendances se rapportant aux problèmes et aux complexités qui se sont dégagées des stages pratiques d'enseignement. Deux grands thèmes s'en dégagent : (1) la façon dont les professeurs stagiaires percevaient qui avait été important pour leur perfectionnement professionnel a évolué durant l'année; et (2) alors que le stage pratique était perçu comme une expérience enrichissante, les étudiants l'ont décrit comme l'expérience la plus stressante de leur programme de formation, surtout en raison de la nature des rapports avec les enseignants associés. Ces constats ressortent surtout des entrevues de groupe et des journaux intimes. Cette recherche démontre l'importance des rapports personnels avec les enseignants associés et l'ambiguïté éprouvée par les professeurs stagiaires durant le stage.

Much of the research on teacher education suggests that the teaching practicum is an essential and valuable element of the teacher education program (Griffin, 1989; Goodman, 1985; Housego, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989). MacKinnon (1989) wrote, "indeed, it [the teaching practicum] is most commonly identified as an indispensable element of professional preparation (p. 2)." Teachers perceive the practicum as important (Griffin, 1989), and the practicum is further viewed as "an important part of teacher education, an occasion when theory and practice are melded" (Housego, 1987, p. 248).

Other researchers (Gilliss, 1987; Grimmitt & Ratzlaff, 1986; Jelinik, 1986; Tardif, 1985) suggest that the benefits of the teaching practicum should not be assumed. Gilliss (1987) writes, "...it [the teaching practicum] will reflect the style adopted by a particular teacher, rather than the specifics of a codified set of approved teaching practices (p. 33)." Similarly, Tardif (1985) states, "In view of the fact that the student teaching experience has long been regarded as the *sine qua non* of preservice teacher education, there is a need to know what happens to 'teachers in training' as they move through the practicum (p. 139)." Tardif suggests that because of conformity, practice teaching can be a "growth-inhibiting experience."

The literature on teacher education further suggests that the teaching practicum may not be as useful as intended: in an effort to avoid conflict and stress, associate teachers and student teachers may fail to discuss issues or take advantage of the learning situation. According to Housego (1987), "interaction between associate teachers and their student teachers reveals a conscious avoidance and a tendency not to engage in substantive discussion (p. 251)." Associate teachers often excessively praise student teachers but provide very little constructive criticism. Some researchers suggest that such encouragement can actually become destructive and inhibit the learn-

ing process: "Well meaning praise from associate teachers, coupled with a focus on management, fixes the attention of the student teacher in the wrong direction" (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987, p. 272).

These conflicting points of view on the teaching practicum emphasize the need for more research in this area. Moreover, there is a need to examine **student teachers'** experience of and perspective on the teaching practicum. This paper investigates student teachers' interpretations of the relationships they develop during their year in a teacher-education program. The paper also explores student teachers' views regarding their relationships with associate teachers. The information so gained can help teacher educators better understand and address the issues and complexities arising in the teaching practicum.

The Study and Its Methodology

Data were gathered from surveys, focus-group interviews, observation visits, and journal writings. All data were reviewed regularly throughout the teacher-education year to identify emerging conceptual categories and to guide further data collection. At the end of the teacher-education year, data from all sources were analyzed and compared by searching for themes and trends related to issues and complexities that arose during the teaching practica.

Overview of the program

The teacher education program used for this study lasts for eight months. It involves on-campus classes taught by professors and a total of twelve weeks of teaching practica: eight weeks of evaluated practica and four weeks of nonevaluated practica.

On admission to the program, student teachers are randomly placed in seminar groups of eleven students. There are eleven such seminar groups, and this is the format used to cover the content of two required academic courses: psychological and sociological foundations of education. The seminar group meets for three hours a week on-campus.

Each seminar group has a leader, who is a faculty member. The seminar leader assists in the placement of student teachers for all their teaching practica and visits student teachers while they are in their placements.

All student teachers have a minimum of one university degree. Program applicants are evaluated equally on teaching-related experience and

academic grades. Competition for places in the program is intense, with over four thousand applicants for the three hundred positions in the program. Candidates admitted to this program are generally mature, have high grades, and have considerable life and teaching-related experience.

Selection of participants

In September 1990, eleven student teachers were invited to become participants in an in-depth study of experiences in the teaching practicum. All eleven students were members of the same seminar group in an on-campus Primary-Junior Teacher Education Program. (There were eleven such seminar groups in this program in 1990, and student teachers were randomly assigned to one group at the beginning of their teacher-education year.)

All eleven members of the seminar group agreed to participate in the study. All student teachers had at least four years of university, two had master's degrees, and one had a Ph.D. One student teacher had been a nurse for several years, another had been a priest, and still another had been a day-care worker for twenty years; one student teacher still owned and operated a successful business. Four of the student teachers had been full-time teacher aides for at least one year. The group consisted of three men and eight women, and they ranged in age from 23 to 42 (average age 28 years).

Survey

The eleven student teachers were administered a survey during a seminar session in September 1990. The purpose of the survey was to identify who student teachers believed were and would be significant in their professional development. In addition to identifying these individuals, student teachers were asked to explain why and how they believed these individuals had or would have influence. The completed surveys were analyzed in terms of relationship type, significance of relationship, and comments concerning the relationship.

Focus-group interviews

Two focus-group interviews were held with the eleven student teachers. The first interview took place in November 1990, the second in March 1991, and both interviews were conducted during student teachers' regular seminar meetings. The purpose of conducting two interviews was to gather information both early and late in the teacher-education year and to ascertain whether student teachers' perceptions had changed in the intervening period.

Through a series of open-ended questions, student teachers were asked to discuss their experiences and perspectives. In particular, student teachers were asked to elaborate on the key factors contributing to or limiting the development of their professional relationships. All audio tapes and field notes were transcribed for data analysis.

Observations

Observation visits were made by the researcher to all student teachers' classrooms. These visits took place between November 1990 and March 1991, and each student teacher was visited once during each two week practice-teaching block. The purpose of these visits was to investigate student teachers' relationships in various contexts.

Journals

Throughout the year, all student teachers recorded their concerns and questions related to their teaching practica in a personal journal. Student teachers were asked to reflect on the relationships they developed with peers, associate teachers, and professors during the teacher-education program. Journal writings were used to document student teachers' impressions and to supplement the information obtained from the survey, focus-group interviews, and observation visits.

Findings

Two key themes emerged from this study. First, student teachers' perception of who was important to their professional development changed over the course of the year. Moreover, the importance of particular relationships seemed to be related to the amount of time student teachers spent with the individuals in question. Second, while student teachers found their field placements a valuable experience, they also described them as the most stressful part of the teacher-education program. Furthermore, this stress was attributed mainly to the nature of the relationship with associate teachers during the teaching practicum.

Relationships

Student teachers' perception of who was important to their professional development changed over the course of the year. In the survey conducted in October, student teachers identified friends and relatives as most significant to their professional development, with the emotional support they provided being cited as the reason for this importance:

This friend offers reassurance and support outside the program. Friends can serve as an escape to relieve stress and anxiety. (Charlie, survey, October 1990)

Seminar-group peers were also identified at this time as a major influence in student teachers' professional development. Members of the seminar group had common goals, and the group provided moral and emotional support:

I think we have a terrific group and it is interesting to see how everyone looks out for each other and simply accepts everyone for who they are. It is a positive group and I think we are already bonded. (Heather, journal entry, September 23)

Even before student teachers met their associate teachers, they said when surveyed that they expected associate teachers to play an important role in their professional development. Student teachers believed that associate teachers would act as role models and provide practical ideas, resources, and support. Several student teachers said they thought the seminar leader was significant because of time spent with her, the role model she acted as, and her sense of humor, knowledge, and support. In sum, while student teachers reported that different relationships were important for different reasons, support was in all cases a critical component.

However, during the focus-group interview in November, student teachers reported that their relationship with the seminar group and seminar leader was most important to their professional development. With the exception of the seminar leader, professors were less important than peers or associate teachers.

Fourteen weeks into the program, in December, student teachers reported in their journals that the seminar leader was becoming less important and seminar-group peers were becoming more important. However, as the year progressed, the role of the seminar leader became less important to student teachers than that of seminar-group peers. As Chris put it in the second focus-group interview:

I think my seminar leader at the beginning was really a big support, but due to the limited time that you spend with your seminar leader, that relationship isn't as important anymore. (Chris, interview 2, March 1991)

Student teachers also reported at this time that professors were almost insignificant to their professional development because they spent so little time with them. Both of these findings were confirmed in the second

focus-group interview, in March. In most cases, student teachers reported in both interviews and in their journals that they learned more in the second term from their associate teachers than from their professors.

In general, student teachers felt that the large classes and the limited amount of time they spent with professors made it difficult to develop a relationship with them:

On the whole it was a very fragmented year in terms of the time we had with the professors. There were some professors I would loved to have had time to get to know what their research was, understand the sort of slant they had and why they taught the courses they taught. (Laura, interview 2, March 1991)

Student teachers did not feel that they had much of a relationship with any professors but the seminar leader. One student put it this way:

It is like we [the seminar group] are all on the same boat and we are all trying to get to land, which is umpteen miles away, and there are rocks and waves along the way, and you [seminar leader] are on board too because you are part of us here, but certainly the other professors aren't. They are more like light houses along the way. (Charlie, interview 2, 1991)

Although student teachers said they did not think it was essential to have a good relationship with professors, it did seem important when they perceived they had a bad relationship with a professor. Student teachers had strong opinions about professors they considered outdated and incompetent:

I had absolutely no relationship with one professor and that was due to the plain fact that there was no interest in the topic being covered and not a great deal of interest in moving the students to a higher level. I would say that most of the professors are committed, but there was one professor who was counting the hours to retire and it came across that way. (Kay, interview 2, 1991)

Student teachers were also very critical of professors they perceived as insensitive to their needs or who did not treat them with respect or as adults. Andre, who had taught university courses, shared his concerns and frustrations:

This is going to be a rambling entry but if I don't get it off my chest I will burst. It had been a fairly good week. . . . Then it

happened or rather she happened. "She" is all that is terrible in teaching: she had 159 points to cover and she was going to cover them all come hell or high water. She had all the answers; she rushed through everything and succeeded in leaving behind a whole class full of frustration and confusion. I know that this is her first year at university but I also remember how I coped with my first university lecture. I was nervous and insecure but instead of acting like God's gift to the universe, I let my humanity show. (Andre's journal entry, September 12, 1990)

Overall, student teachers felt that their seminar-group peers had the strongest influence on their professional development during the year. The importance of peers may be due to the amount of time student teachers spent together. In addition to membership in the seminar group, student teachers took all their additional classes together; did considerable group work requiring collaboration, exploration, and discussion of issues; often did their teaching practica in the same schools; and frequently socialized with one another outside the program.

Stress and the associate teacher

The literature on teacher education suggests that student teachers experience stress when roles are not clearly defined during the teaching practicum (MacDonald, MacKinnon, Joyce, & Gurney, 1992; MacDonald, 1992; Aitken & Mildon, 1991; Wideen & Holborn, 1986). For example, student teachers have expressed uncertainty regarding how long they should teach, how much control they should exercise in the associate teacher's class, how soon they should take over the role of the teacher, and whether to teach in their own style or that of the associate teacher (MacDonald, MacKinnon, Joyce, & Gurney, 1992).

In their journals, seminars, observation visits, and focus-group interviews, student teachers described what they felt the role of the associate teacher should be. Student teachers further reported that a good associate teacher treated them with respect, made them feel they could be themselves, did not make them feel threatened, demonstrated trust toward them, shared resources, made them feel welcome, gave feedback, and admitted his or her own teaching faults. Student teachers also said that a good associate teacher served as a role model and made expectations clear early in the field placement:

I think one of their [the associate teachers'] roles is to serve as a model for myself and other teachers along with giving us

*the freedom to find our own teaching style in the classroom.
(Jan, interview 1, 1990)*

In this study, lack of role clarity emerged as an issue during focus-group interviews. Student teachers expressed concern about whether they should conform to the teaching style of their associate teacher or whether there was room for flexibility and freedom. Laura spoke of this issue in the second focus-group interview:

In my last placement I felt a lot of pressure to conform to the style of teaching that had its merits but there was a part that really upset me. But I went along with it because I didn't think being there for 2 weeks was really an appropriate amount of time to give my opinions about something that had been set up at the beginning of the year. (Laura, interview 2, March 1991)

When Laura was asked to explain why she felt pressure to conform, she said:

Well you see it was all connected to awards and stickers. There were awards for cleaning off your desk, finishing your work, putting everything away, there were awards for sitting straight, for doing independent work, . . . and when I got evaluated . . . I knew that I wouldn't get in the top category. . . just because I felt that I didn't conform 100% to her. (Laura, interview 2, March 1991)

Andre also described a field placement in which he was very uncomfortable with what was going on but felt he had to conform to the structure established by the associate teacher. In the second focus-group interview, he shared this experience with the rest of the seminar group:

I found my first placement suffocating to a degree . . . it was shameful. They . . . had done [the theme] last year and they knew more of the unit than I did and they could tell you what was coming next . . . it is very hard to get the kids excited, and you are thinking what in the name of sweet Mary are we doing this for? This is silliness, this is pure and utter laziness. (Andre, interview 2, March 1991)

Even when student teachers disagreed with associate teachers' teaching methods, they did not feel it was their place to confront the associate teacher or disagree. Rather, they felt their role was to "fit in" to the existing

structure. Andre discussed his view on this issue during his second interview:

Whether or not you would simply comply with the teacher's curriculum plans, for myself the answer is absolutely "yes." I am not there to take over, and I have to fit in. She's been good enough to let me come in and that's the least I can do. . . if they are in rows I have no right to come in and say "we are now going to form a circle" . . . that would be intrusive; second, this person has 20 years of experience and I have 3 1/2 days; and third, this is fundamentally her classroom and I'm the guest and I have to act like the guest. (Andre, interview 2, March 1991)

Student teachers reported several reasons for conforming to the teaching style of their associate teachers. They believed that they would not be evaluated highly by the associate teacher if they didn't teach in a similar manner to the associate teacher. (Student teachers believed that evaluation reports could be the difference between getting hired and not getting hired.) Student teachers also felt that because they were in the associate teacher's classroom for only two or four weeks, it would not be fair to the associate teacher or the students to impose on or disrupt the classroom. Charlie expressed this concern during the second focus-group interview:

The way I see it is there are two reasons why you have to conform. One, because your career is on the line with these stupid evaluation forms, and the other is that if you are taking over the class where the children are used to a certain style and in order for you to be effective you have to follow that style. (Charlie, interview 2, March 1991)

Student teachers believed they could learn from a negative situation and could therefore bide their time with the associate teacher. Andre addressed this point in his journal writing:

I learned an enormous amount, from positive and negative situations. I will always be extremely grateful to this person, but certainly during the first session I learnt through negative experiences. (Andre, journal entry)

Although student teachers believed their role was to fit in, they also said they continued to believe in one-on-one interactions with students. They also pointed out that they were not necessarily open about the values they held. When asked how she handled a situation she didn't agree with,

Laura replied that she thought she did conform, but not completely. She said that while she didn't oppose the activity that went against her teaching philosophy, neither did she get involved in or actively cooperate in it. Laura explained this during the focus-group interview:

So sometimes kids were asking me for stickers, and I'd say, "Well you'll have to ask the teacher because I don't know what the stickers stand for," because I was really trying to avoid it. So in that respect I suppose it was a sort of subversive type of behavior. (Laura, interview 2, March 1991)

Even though Andre thought it was the student teacher's role to fit in with the classroom's existing practices and structure, he also believed that subtle changes could be made — particularly at an individual level — without being confrontational or disrupting:

It doesn't mean I don't do anything. I've been in a situation like one of the last speakers too, where I worked at an individual level with a student, but I didn't confront the teacher. (Andre, interview 2, 1991)

Student teachers reported that they appreciated knowing what associate teachers expected from them:

I like to know what they [the associate teachers] expect, and that was something that didn't come out so much with the alternative school. It was sort of looser; there was certainly room to bring in our own styles, but I think you'd have to know what you can do up front and I think it has to be stated what the teacher expects of you. (Charlie, interview 2, March 1991)

Kay supported Charlie's comments when she said during the second focus-group interview, "I agree, the first week we flew by the seat of our pants." Student teachers felt that while some associate teachers expected student teachers to be at school at the same time in the morning and evening they were, others wanted to be alone in their classroom at these times. Similarly, student teachers wanted to know what associate teachers expected concerning their teaching responsibilities, how much they should teach, and whether or not they wanted lesson plans:

You are in the one school and then you're in the next school and then in the next school and . . . my last teacher didn't want any lesson plans and this teacher wants them; so it

certainly makes life interesting. (Kay, journal entry, March 8, 1991)

Further investigation into these comments revealed student teachers felt they were under constant pressure because they were being evaluated by associate teachers. When asked about the evaluation portion of the teaching practicum, student teachers said that each associate teacher handled it differently. They said that some associate teachers seemed obsessed with the evaluation and constantly made notes while the student teachers were teaching. Others appeared far more comfortable and almost seemed to forget about the evaluation until the last day. This inconsistency was a concern for all student teachers:

The evaluation is different, yes. My first teacher, I thought evaluation was uppermost in his mind at all times. The second teacher, it wasn't important, which was exactly my attitude. But it may be important to some boards. (Andre, interview 2, March 1991)

Student teachers said that part of the problem was caused by the evaluation form itself. They reported that several associate teachers shared their frustration with and uneasiness about the form. Student teachers also believed associate teachers were inconsistent with their interpretation of what marks on the evaluation form meant. Andre addressed this issue during the interview: "Evaluation to me is kind of meaningless. One person's 79 can be another person's 97" (March 1991).

Many student teachers suggested that the evaluation system was not fair because some associate teachers would never score the top category and others almost always score the top category. As Laura said:

I don't know how they look at those forms but everything seems to be a big mystery. The categories of marks are what I am most uncomfortable with. (Laura, interview 2, March 1991)

Andre supported Laura's comments:

It's not only the problem of marks, it's the criteria that go along side it. If you take the form seriously, it's absurd, the top category, God would only dare to get. How could anyone get the top mark. My second teacher said that she herself wouldn't come within a hundred miles of the top mark and she doesn't know anybody in her wildest imagination who possibly could. (Andre, interview 2, March 1991)

Conclusions

Two key themes emerged from this study. First, student teachers' perception of who was important to their professional development changed over the course of the year. The findings suggest that peers have a powerful effect on student teachers' learning and professional development. Moreover, the importance of particular relationships seemed to be related to the amount of time student teachers spent with the individuals in question. Second, while student teachers found their field placements a valuable experience, they also described them as the most stressful part of the teacher-education program. Furthermore, this stress was attributed mainly to the nature of the relationship with associate teachers during the teaching practicum. The reasons student teachers find student teaching stressful during the teaching practicum and why student teachers feel conformable to associate teachers were identified.

Although the small sample size of this research study (eleven subjects) does not permit definitive conclusions, the trends and themes that emerged from this study support the literature on teaching practica and suggest areas for further research and exploration. The findings suggest the complexities of student teachers' sentiments by citing real voices from focus-group interviews and personal journals. The research moves toward helping teacher educators better understand the complicated feelings that student teachers have during their practicum because of the lack of personal relationships with associate teachers and the ambiguity of their role.

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Colla J. MacDonald is an Assistant Professor in the Primary-Junior Teaching Division of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests include the use of the arts as an innovative method of teaching and integrating the curriculum, collaborative research between the university and school boards, and the teaching practicum.

Colla J. MacDonald est professeur adjoint à la division d'enseignement primaire de la faculté des sciences de l'éducation de l'Université d'Ottawa. Ses recherches portent sur le recours aux arts comme méthode novatrice d'enseignement et d'intégration des programmes, sur les recherches concertées entre les universités et les commissions scolaires et sur les stages pratiques d'enseignement.