

Report from the Field

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Learning Through Collaboration:

**A collaborative school-based approach
to field experiences**

Abstract

Recent research on "collaborative cultures" (Biott & Nias, 1992; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989) has stressed collaborative approaches for working towards change in schools. The development of such approaches, however, requires a movement away from the present dominant paradigm of teacher education as training. This paper reflects on and describes the structure and development of a collaborative school-based approach to field experiences.

Résumé

De récentes recherches sur le rapprochement école-milieu de formation (Biott & Nias, 1992; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989) insistent de plus en plus sur la valeur des approches de collaboration pour provoquer des changements dans les écoles. Toutefois, le développement de telles approches implique une distanciation du paradigme actuel de la formation à l'enseignement. Cet article décrit et examine la structure et le développement d'une telle approche de collaboration entre l'école et le milieu de formation.

The teacher for the twenty-first century will need to be adaptable and equipped with a variety of higher order management and interpersonal skills. She will need to understand herself and others, be able to assess new developments and evaluate action in a very sophisticated way, and be a self-motivated, life-long learner. This complexity requires the development of new ways of educating students as teachers. (Ashcroft, 1992, p. 44)

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on and describe the structure and development of a collaborative school-based approach to field experiences based on this new paradigm.

Background and Context of Study

The English teacher education program at the University of Ottawa is an eight month after-degree program leading to a B.Ed. degree. Candidates have excellent academic records, prior experience working with children, and many are approaching teaching as a second career.

Students involved in this study are part of a program which operates as one option given student teachers in the primary-junior section of the teacher education program. The program was set up by the Faculty of Education after a comprehensive study of programs in response to a major review of teacher education in Ontario (Fullan & Connelly, 1987; Ontario Ministry of Education & Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 1988) which called for a recasting of teacher education as a collaborative venture "into a continuum marked by reflective practice and life-long learning" (p.6).

Rationale and Purpose of this Study

If we are to prepare teachers for the twenty-first century what is required is a paradigm shift: a change from a medieval-type apprenticeship training model of field experiences where the student teacher is primarily concerned with fitting in, with pleasing the associate teacher, to an inquiry mode, where all the partners (student teacher, associate teacher, and faculty advisor) view the student teacher as a student of teaching "involved in discovering, testing, reflecting and modifying" (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990, p. 520, citing Cruickshank). Thus, for the student teacher the orientation for field experiences is changed from a passive to an active role and "from the practical to the analytic" (Guyton & McIntyre, p. 520). Such a shift involves a movement away from the present dominant paradigm of teacher education as training which "assumes an established teacher role into which all potential teachers must fit and against which they will be evaluated" (Bullough & Gitlin, 1991, p. 37).

The shift away from an apprenticeship training model opens up the possibility of developing teacher education programs that model the inquiring and critical approach to teaching which is at the heart of reflective practice (Schon, 1987). Indeed, such an approach makes possible a new reconceptualization of teacher education: teacher education as perspective transformation (Diamond, 1991).

Let us consider what is meant by perspective transformation. For Mezirow (1991), an important missing dimension in the social theories that have given rise to present learning theory is meaning - how meaning "is construed, validated, and reformulated - and how social conditions influence the ways in which people make meaning of their experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. xii). This concern for meaning is integral to the concept of perspective transformation. "Perspectives provide principles for interpreting the meaning of our experiences" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 3). In other words, our perspectives are like lenses through which we view the world. Perspective transformation involves a redefinition of these perspectives, a change of lenses. However, for perspective transformation to occur a process of critical reflection is required - which then "results in the reformulation of meaning perspectives to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one's experience" (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi). "We grow," says Daloz (1986), "through a progression of transformations in our meaning-making apparatus, from relatively narrow and self-centered filters through increasingly inclusive, differentiated, and compassionate perspectives" (p. 149).

It is to this type of process Diamond (1991) is alluding when he proposes that teacher education be reconceptualized as perspective transformation. Recent research on "collaborative cultures" (Rosenholtz, 1989; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Biott & Nias, 1992) has stressed collaborative approaches for working towards change in schools. But where to start? The practice teaching triad was chosen as a focus for the study since it brings together the key players: the student teacher, associate teacher, and faculty advisor, and the school and university elements of the program.

This investigation then is an attempt to address how we might go about developing school-based collaborative approaches to field experiences based on a new paradigm of teacher education as transformation. Specifically, the project in the study setting involves a three-year case study (Merriam, 1988) which seeks: (1) to understand more fully the ways in which a collaborative, school-based approach to field experiences may be structured and developed in a manner that allows each of the partners in the triad to make their specific contribution to teacher education; (2) to identify the kinds of learning opportunities constructed by participants in a collaborative school-based field experience and to examine how these differ from those afforded by traditional field experiences; and (3) to develop role descriptions for each of the triad members in the context of a collaborative framework. The next section of the paper describes the structure and organization of the project.

Organization of the Project

The study project has as its basic unit a cohort of twelve student teachers (one seminar group), twelve associate teachers, one home cluster of schools, and one faculty supervisor. The project has three main elements: school elements, university elements, and school-university links.

School elements of the project

A home cluster of four schools provides the context for field experiences. The schools are chosen to represent different cultures, school boards, and geographic locations: rural, suburban, multicultural/inner city, and one urban school in a high-tech area. Three or four student teachers are placed in each school for their field experiences, consisting of about 11 weeks in all. Students are expected to work in at least three out of the four schools as a means of gaining access to different school cultures, socio-political issues, administrative styles, and school resources.

Student teachers are encouraged to participate on a voluntary basis in additional school-based activities: parent-teacher events, school concerts, staff development seminars, and curriculum workshops.

University elements of the project

The university elements of the project include all the courses in the regular preservice program: pedagogical courses in language, the arts, science, mathematics, and social studies; foundational courses in learning, psychology, and philosophy; a course in legal and professional organizations; and one optional course in values or religious education. Through these courses faculty members seek to introduce student teachers to the foundations of education and open them up to a lifelong study of teaching.

In the school context, student teachers are required to conduct mini-field inquiry projects around the topic of school culture – for example, a study of community groups and parent involvement in the school, as well as small scale classroom learning inquiries centred on the learning of a single student in a specific area over time, or the development of a classroom learning centre, in science or language, over a period of time.

The university element of the program also includes the reflective teaching seminar, which takes place on a weekly basis when student teachers are on-campus. During these seminars, a case methods approach is used as a strategy to develop student teachers as reflective practitioners (Richert, 1991).

School-university links of the project

School-university links include the following: (a) triad conferences, (b) associate teacher and faculty advisor conferences, (c) field journals, (d) shared readings, and (e) a joint planning seminar.

Triad conferences. The triad conference is conducted once each semester on one of the school sites in the home cluster. The conference involves all the student teachers in the seminar group, associate teachers, and the faculty advisor as a community of learners in oral inquiries about children, teaching, planning, and decision making. The conference is planned as a collaborative affair and involves all the triad members in its development and presentation. The conference includes time for (a) responding to questions by student teachers, (b) brief input sessions by associate teachers and the faculty advisor growing out of needs identified by both associate and student teachers, and (c) the sharing of classroom resources.

Associate teacher – faculty advisor conferences. These conferences have as their focus the progress of the individual student teacher. Conferences are conducted at each school site once during each field study session. Feedback is used by the faculty advisor to counsel individual student teachers. In addition, the areas of concern identified are used as a basis for input during on-campus courses.

Field journals. Two types of journals are used in the project. Associate and student teachers are invited to develop dialogue journals that are intended to provide student teachers with a way to describe, reflect on, raise questions, and gain input about their classroom experience in an ongoing manner throughout the year. The second journal is kept as an accompaniment to the reflective seminar and is shared on a regular basis with the faculty advisor.

Shared readings. These readings grow out of reciprocal suggestions on current educational issues from members of the triad. The articles are sometimes used as a conference component or as a basis for journal reflection. In addition, associate teachers have access to the course outlines and readings for the on-campus elements of the program.

The joint planning seminar. The joint planning seminar is the final meeting of the year. It brings together at the university or school site the faculty advisor, student teachers, associate teachers and principals from the schools involved in the project to consider, reflect on, and evaluate the learning gained over the year, and to plan together for the upcoming year.

In the upcoming section of this paper I discuss and reflect on some of the learning gained in the first year of the project.

Starting the Project

The first year was an exploratory one for the project – a year to become familiar with the literature, engage the partners in dialogue, and test the framework for the project. The project involved one seminar group (12 student teachers), twelve associate teachers, three principals, one faculty advisor, and one home cluster of three schools.

In sharing reflections reference will be made to the effectiveness of the overall organization of the project, some main events, and some emerging issues.

The project as a tool to facilitate collaboration

The overall framework of the project worked well to provide members of the triad with a common focus - the shared endeavour of facilitating the student teaching experience. However, this did not happen by chance. Faculty members in this study have chosen over the years to align themselves with a cluster of seven or eight schools. Each faculty member then works with the principals in these schools to place their students for field experiences. Therefore, the principals, associate teachers, and faculty advisor in the project had a history of working together in these schools. Furthermore, the specific goals of the project, as well as its general framework arose out of shared concerns about practice teaching and the problems of teacher education in general. As a result, this effort at collaboration was rooted from the start in a shared sense of purpose and mutual respect. Could such a project have evolved otherwise? Perhaps. But since the traditional practice teaching triad does not have a history of democratic dialogue, establishing relations and dispositions of trust in such cases may have taken longer.

Of course, student teachers are new each year. So relationships of trust between students and the faculty advisor have to be established anew each year and in a limited time. In this regard, the reflective teaching seminar provided an excellent base. For one thing, the seminar group is small. Furthermore, student teachers are enthusiastic about this aspect of the program as is evidenced by answers in their journal to a question on whether the role of the faculty advisor should be maintained:

You need someone that you can go to first with questions and feel you have special attention, unlike the other 120 in the large group. . . The faculty advisor provided assist-

ance with placements appropriate to my goals and needs for development. She provided intervention before my practicum to pave the way for a positive beginning. (Journal, 3/9)

We had a special friend on the faculty for support. . . My associates have known my advisor for some time. They are honest with one another. Between the two of them, I know I got the whole story on my progress as a learning teacher. (Journal, 1/9)

From a school perspective, the project gave rise to a renewed sense of energy around the student teaching experience. Associate teachers, for example, had lots of questions. They wanted to know more about the on-campus program: what had been done to date on lesson planning, on whole language? Were they providing the right kind of direction and support for the student teacher? How did what they were doing as individual teachers compare with what other associate teachers were doing in the other schools? These and similar questions were common during early school visits.

Another area of note, in relation to the schools, was a significant increase in opportunities for student teachers to become involved in extra-school activities. Early in the fall principals and associate teachers provided students with timelines for upcoming events. As a result, student teachers gained opportunities to attend professional development activities at both the school and board levels. Some also attended staff meetings and others were invited to sit in on parent-teacher meetings. In turn, student teachers assisted on a voluntary basis with school concerts, Chinese New Year celebrations, winter carnival, and several sports-related events.

Learning together

The highlight of a year of learning together culminated with the joint planning seminar. This session took place at one of the school sites used in this study after school during the final week of the university program. It involved nine of the twelve associate teachers, all the student teachers (twelve), the three school principals, and the faculty advisor. The purpose of the seminar was to consider, reflect on, and evaluate the learning gained over the year, and to plan together the program for the upcoming year.

In preparation for the seminar, the faculty advisor requested from student teachers a list of the items, strategies, and experiences that had

best helped them learn during field experiences. Four specific areas of learning were identified by the student teachers: (a) getting to know the school community, (b) practice teaching, (c) feedback from the associate teacher, and (d) other school learning opportunities. In consultation with triad members it was decided that this information, combined with perspectives from associate teachers on the same issues, should be summarized in written form to provide the basis for reflection during the joint planning seminar. A copy of this summary, "Becoming a teacher: Support for the journey" was then distributed to each person in the project.

The following representative comments catch the flavour of the dialogue between triad members during the first joint planning seminar.

Getting to know the school community

I appreciated being introduced to other staff members and being made to feel comfortable and welcomed. I felt more welcome in some schools than others. (Student teacher)

Getting an orientation to the school building including the rules for parking was a big help. My associate teacher also showed me how to use the school equipment and provided me with some basic supplies. (Student teacher)

I found information booklets that highlight school expectations and procedures helpful. (Student teacher)

We have school information booklets. That's something we could do. I never thought of it. (Principal)

In one school, I was provided with my own storage cupboard in the classroom and offered a desk and shelf space in the teacher preparation room. It really meant a lot. (Student teacher)

The latter situation was not, however, the case for every student, as Vilot's comments in her journal demonstrate:

My teacher welcomed me on the first day with: "There's no space for your things!" instead of "Hello". It's almost a metaphor. . . If an associate teacher can take a moment to clear a storage cubicle before we arrive, she is also thinking: "How will I fit this person into the lives of my children over the next two weeks. . . ." (Journal, 3/4)

Feedback on practice teaching

The following comments give a sample of the dialogue on the topic of feedback by associate teachers during the seminar.

For me, regular feedback was the single most helpful aspect of my practice teaching. Daily feedback was best. (Student teacher)

Receiving a class list and timetable on Day 1 was really helpful. One of my teachers gave me class photos too. (Student teacher)

My associate teacher created a teaching practice notebook for me. He wrote comments on every lesson I did. He also made suggestions. By the end of the fourth week in his classroom I really felt I knew how to work well with Gr. 5 students and I had a full book of comments on my teaching. Here it is! (Student teacher)

Thanks, Susan. Actually, I am very demanding of student teachers. I start them teaching as soon as possible. As far as I am concerned, that's the way to learn. But I also believe in providing solid support and lots of feedback. Susan was very open to suggestions. She just bloomed over the four weeks. (Associate teacher)

My teacher and I did a dialogue journal. We did one page each. Sometimes, I wrote down my reflections on the events of the morning or the afternoon. I identified what I thought had gone well and made suggestions as to ways I would approach things differently the next time. My teacher responded on the next page. Other times, she wrote comments on my lessons that morning and I responded over the lunch hour. She also provided concrete suggestions and posed questions related to the next day's work. Interestingly, our comments were sometimes almost identical. (Student teacher)

Some teachers didn't tell you anything until the end of the first week. I felt I wasted a lot of time. I could have improved more if I had had more direction. (Student teacher)

We would be able to give better feedback if we knew what was happening at the university. Could something be worked out so we could be better informed next year?
(Associate teacher to faculty advisor)

Sure, there are lots of ways we might do that. Actually, the introduction of a 'reflective log planner' as a component of the reflective seminar is presently under discussion at the faculty. Perhaps we could use that or come up with an adaptation of it to fit our own needs. (Faculty advisor)

Further discussion on practice teaching during the seminar tended to focus on what activities are appropriate for the various levels of field experiences and how these activities should be sequenced and evaluated. A divergence of opinion was evident among associate teachers, a fact that had not escaped one student teacher who had already noted in his journal: "Every associate teacher expects different things" (Journal, 13/10).

Two concrete recommendations for the following year grew out of the joint planning seminar. Firstly, a request that a brief biography of each student teacher be sent by the faculty advisor to associate teachers before the students arrived for field experiences. Secondly, principals and associate teachers requested that some strategy be put in place to inform them as to what student teachers had been taught at the university before they arrived at the school for field experiences.

In the previous section, I have shared some of the learning gained in the first year of the project. In this section, I wish to return to the earlier concern of this study: the shift from an apprenticeship training model of teacher education to teacher education as transformation.

Teacher Education as Transformation: The Project

For Diamond (1991), teacher education as transformation involves "rebuilding of teachers' perspectives through the close and collaborative study of their own teaching experiences" over the course of their careers (p. 122). Can a collaborative approach to the practice teaching triad then provide a vehicle for teacher education as transformation?

Based on the data gained in the first year of this study, the answer tentatively appears in the affirmative for three reasons.

Firstly, the practice teaching triad as construed in the context of this project views teaching and learning from the start as problematic,

and creates a space for triad members to come together to reflect on teaching and learning. Specifically, the triad members are drawn into dialogue around how best to respond to the learning needs of children as encountered by the student teacher in a specific learning context. Such dialogue may, in turn, open triad members up to an examination and critique of their own learning, which over time has the potential to result in their gaining more expanded, more differentiated understandings about learning and learning to teach (perspective redefinition or transformation). A collaborative approach to the practice teaching triad, therefore, demands a democratizing of the student teaching triad and suggests a notion of a more critical and inquiring approach to supervision than is found in traditional teacher education programs (Gore, 1991).

Secondly, since members of the practice teaching triad represent teachers at different stages in their careers and, as is to be expected, therefore, at different stages along the learning continuum, the triad provides a concrete example of the teaching profession in action as a lifelong learning career.

Finally, the involvement of student teachers from the start in action research (mini-field inquiry projects) acknowledges "an appreciation of the student teacher as an autonomous, self-motivated learner who, together with teachers and teacher-educators can develop the dispositions and capabilities to research their own practices" (Tickle, 1987, p.5).

Learning through collaboration, however, provides no panacea. As the dialogue between members of the triad, for example, continued back and forth during the joint planning seminar and at other times during the year, familiar problems from the literature on field experiences emerged. These included the importance of interpersonal relationships, time and institutional restraints, and different power relations (Gore, 1991).

Interpersonal relationships between triad members are different for each triad. Getting to know and be comfortable with each other on a personal and professional level requires a real effort from each member. Such partnerships cannot be mandated. Rather, they are characterized by a certain spontaneity and informality (Hargreaves, 1990). As such they take time – sometimes more time than triad members have to give.

We were unable to secure funds to get release time for associate teachers, for example, so meeting times depended on informal arrangements made by principals, or meetings after school were scheduled. Time is also a constraint for faculty advisors, who in this situation must arrange their schedules to fit those of associate teachers. Additionally,

such close collaboration with school staff exposes faculty advisors to requests to become involved in other related activities: teacher professional development, for example, and at the school level, such things as judging public speaking contests or submissions to the science fair. All of this is appropriate and can be enormously enriching for all partners, but it is also time intensive, involving more hours than faculty workloads allow. A solution to this problem requires collaboration between schools and universities at the institutional level.

Student teachers however, were unanimous in their support for the importance of building such partnerships. As one student wrote in her journal: The three participants find it hard to see life from the others' moccasins at times. A collaborative approach benefits all. (Journal, 9/10)

The shift away from an apprenticeship training model of teacher education also involves a shift in power. Consider, for instance, the student teacher who wrote in her journal:

I disagree entirely with the way my associate teacher disciplines students. She screams and shouts at them. I think her behaviour is completely inappropriate. I don't want to work with this teacher. (Journal, 3/4)

And from the same student. . .

Student teachers would learn more during practice teaching if associate teachers would invite them to describe their strengths (music, gym, etc.) and generate assignments from them; rather than pre-decide what student teachers will "cover" before even talking to them! (Journal, 3/6)

Certainly, from a research perspective there is much work to be done in this area. As Guyton and McIntyre (1990) point out: "Research on the organization of student teaching has not addressed institutional and power issues. Close examination of field programs. . . could lead to an understanding that informs practice" (p. 522).

Conclusion

At this writing, the second year of the project has just drawn to a close. The focus in year 3 will focus on the third goal of the study: an attempt to develop role descriptions for each of the triad members in the context of a collaborative framework. Commitment among the partners remains high. The project has opened up for members of the practice

teaching triad opportunities to construct together shared understandings and meanings about teaching and learning to teach and to model new ways of being together in partnership. Thus, it is hoped, this study represents one more step on a continuing journey to understand how best to educate teachers for the 21st century.

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