

What matters in practice teaching? The perceptions of schools and students

Geoffrey Quick*

Social Science Department, Lansing Community College, P O Box 40010, Lansing, MI, 48901, United States of America
quickg@lcc.edu

Rob Siebörger

School of Education, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch, 7701 South Africa
rfs@humanities.uct.ac.za

* To whom correspondence should be addressed

Based on research involving interviews and focus groups with teachers and student teachers involved in teaching practice, the authors sought to identify the factors that make a qualitative difference to school experience in the training of teachers. The factors identified were: how much teaching practice, the relationships between schools and the university, mentoring and supervision, teaching ability and the value added by schools. They were considered in the light of the literature on teaching practice and examples of established international standards. The first factor involved a consideration of the period of time spent by student teachers in schools. Relationships between the schools and university probed the perceptions of the schools and the students of how the university organised teaching practice. Mentoring and supervision explored the implications of an existing system of supervision and the more extensive use of mentors in schools. Teaching ability considered subject area knowledge, relationships with learners and professionalism, and the value added by schools reflected upon those aspects of training that can only be provided by schools. Conclusions are presented for each of the factors.

Introduction

The authors have collaborated in research since 2001, sharing a concern to improve models of student teaching in initial teacher education at a South African university. We began by designing a survey to probe the perceptions of schools and students of the current system of teaching practice. It included conducting structured interviews with a representative sample of teaching practice liaison teachers at a third of the schools (primary and secondary) used for teaching practice, similarly structured interviews with a sample of the teaching practice supervisors, and focus group interviews with approximately a third of the PGCE student teachers involved. A research report was based upon the results of this work. A year later the research was extended to the following cohort of PGCE students, to explore in greater detail what students believed teaching practice involved. Two groups of students were each provided with sets of criteria that could conceivably be assessed during teaching practice. They were requested to discuss which they believed could be effectively assessed, to what extent, and how. The conversations of the groups were recorded and follow-up interviews with individual students were held to clarify views expressed in the groups. The results were then contrasted with the evidence of international literature on teaching practice.

'Teaching practice' is such a long established practice that it is easy to assume that all those involved in it have a clear notion of what it is and how it should be operationalised and managed. The Department of Education's Norms and Standards for Educators, which describes teaching practice as a "mode of delivery through which all the different roles of educators should be developed and assessed" and "the authentic context in which student educators experience and demonstrate the integration of the competences used to develop the entire curriculum" (RSA, 2000:12), and the Qualifications from the Educators in Schooling SGB (SAQA, 2001:44), which specifies exit-level outcomes and competences based upon them to be assessed during teaching practice, appear to share this assumption, as neither pays any direct attention to how teaching practice should be organised. From the research conducted, we distilled five factors that we believe make a qualitative difference to teaching practice: how much, the relationships between schools and the university, mentoring and supervision, teaching ability and the value added by schools.

How much teaching practice

The first aspect that was surveyed involved the perception of student teaching practices. Specific questions were whether there should be

more or less school-based experience than the students currently had? And how much could they cope with?

The vast majority of survey responses felt that the student teachers needed to spend more time in schools, although there was one respondent who felt the current system was fine. The students who participated in the survey also wished to spend more time in schools.

One comment from a school liaison teacher was "I like the fact that there are two practicals. However, I feel that there should be three, with the [teaching] prac. lasting a month if possible. Another teacher claimed "There should be much more school based experience for the university students. The fault is with the present system. The university students should have at least two six week placements." An interviewee compared the university to another South African university, stating, "Students should spend more time in schools. Their students spend six months in schools."

Others felt that the both more time and better quality time were necessary:

The university students need more time in the schools. Two teaching practices are very little. The university students also struggle with on campus assignments. Perhaps they have too much on their plate. This has been a problem in the past. We would prefer if students did one full day teaching as this would allow them to take on more responsibility.

And,

... students should get more involved in the school; they ... should give the school a resume so we can see what they can do. Schools are looking for someone who is eager and involved and not afraid of work. Students should take teaching practice seriously. Do not act like a slacker.

The students echoed this thought noting that they would like to spend more time in schools if possible. They also stated "varsity work should be cut back or eliminated while we are in schools" and "we would like to have three six week practicals or two eight week practicals."

The literature on student teaching supports these views. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), which is the accreditation organization for most teacher education programmes in the United States, states that practice should be "sufficiently extensive and intensive for candidates to demonstrate proficiencies in the professional roles for which they are preparing" (NCATE, 2002:26). Following this guideline most United States teacher education programmes require one semester or approximately sixteen weeks of student teaching. The New Zealand standards for

teacher certification state "blocks of at least three weeks are needed for each practicum. At least fourteen weeks, but preferably twenty or more weeks are likely to be necessary for practicum over a three-year programme" (NZ Teachers Council, 2002:11). In England, the Teacher Training Authority requires "... that trainee teachers spend at least 24 weeks for all secondary and Key Stage 2/3 postgraduate programmes; 18 weeks for all primary postgraduate programmes" (Teacher Training Agency, 2002:15).

Buchner and Hay (1999:320) have discussed this within the South African context especially in regard to practice shock, noting "training programmes do not adequately prepare and equip the student for the realities of the teaching profession — the existence of practice shock underscores this statement" Teaching involves many experiences that simply can not be replicated in a non-school environment. Dreyer summarizes this well by noting: "When initial teacher training students spend more of their training time in schools they get the opportunity to integrate theory of Education with that which they are experiencing at first hand" (Dreyer, 1998:109). McFarlane (1995:27) argued that 25% of a South African education students training should be school based (8 weeks of a 32-week academic year), which is less than the teachers and students in our survey favoured.

Relationships between schools and the university

The second factor identified in the study was the perceptions of the university, its role in teacher education; its staff and organization of teaching practice, in comparisons with other Education faculties.

The overall impression of the university given by the school liaison teachers was fairly positive. As one stated, "the university is much more organized and their students are better prepared than other places. We have a good opinion of the university. Similarly, another said "I am impressed with the university."

There were, however, suggestions from school liaison people and teachers on how the university could improve.

I went to a good meeting that the university put on, but the meeting could have been more informative. The university is turning out good teachers. The staff at the university is nice and we get a good sense of partnership from them. There could be more personal interaction with university people. It would be good to have more face to face interaction.

Another liaison teacher was more critical,

The training at the university is too theoretical. I wonder how in touch the university lecturers are with the needs of students in today's classroom. I believe the university lecturers are out of touch with schools today.

A schoolteacher who had qualified from the university a few years previously was critical of the preparation of the students:

Prior to teaching practice university students should get a letter from the school they are being placed with telling the university students what topics will be covered when they arrive. There needs to be more contact between the school and the university students prior to the university student's arrival. Also the university should have a subject matter person come and evaluate all the university students during teaching practice.

Mentoring and supervision

The next factor in the survey was mentoring, and whether the university should train teachers as teaching practice mentors and use them exclusively? All of the respondents in the survey but one felt that mentor teachers would be useful. However, the mentoring the liaison teachers proposed was not really mentoring, but instead more guidance and structure from the university in the teaching practice. For example, a comment made was

The university maybe does not need to train mentors but needs to give more information and instructions on what schools are to do. Another local university sends out a whole packet of information to the schools. The university should provide guidelines so the

schools could develop a policy regarding the students that come to them.

Some teachers who had hosted university students in their classrooms this past year added:

We would like to receive forms from the university that teachers could use for every lesson; it would make our life easier. It would be nice if the university gave us a packet of forms when the students arrive. The forms could be easy to fill in and make it a bit easier for us ... It would help structure our observation of the university students. This would help a lot.

Another liaison person noted the need for guidelines from the university about teaching practice was greater today because of rationalization, as she said

There is a vast difference among our staff today. It would be great if the university gave guidelines to the host teachers ... If the university developed guidelines for our teachers they should be short and sweet. The guidelines should state what is expected from the university of our teachers. There are some handouts now, but we could use more.

The student teachers agreed with this assessment stating that there should be more contact with the schools and school liaison person prior to teaching practice." "There are no guidelines on what you are to teach. Teaching practice students should be given the [school's] curriculum before going into to teaching practice", one said.

The introduction of formal mentoring by the university did not appear needed. But a better "connection" between the university, the liaison teachers and host teachers of the university teaching practice students was needed. A greater "connection" would not only help the liaison and host teachers, but it would also greatly help the university teaching practice students. Standards for student teaching support this. NCATE requires:

The unit and school partners collaboratively design and implement field experiences and clinical practice, including the assessment of candidate performance. School and the university faculty share the responsibility for candidate learning. The partners share and integrate resources and expertise to create roles and structures that support and create opportunities for candidates to learn. (NCATE, 2002:28).

The English Requirements for Initial Teacher Training state:

All providers must: R3.1 work in partnership with schools and actively involve them in: planning and delivering initial teacher training; selecting trainee teachers; assessing trainee teachers for Qualified Teacher Status; R3.2 set up partnership agreements which: make clear to everyone involved each partner's roles and responsibilities; set out arrangements for preparing and supporting all staff involved in training; make clear how resources are divided and allocated between the partners; R3.3 make sure the partnership works effectively, and that the training is co-ordinated and consistent, with continuity across the various contexts where it takes place" (Teacher Training Agency, 2002:16).

This is similar to the position in New Zealand:

All practicum experiences must be planned with clear links to the rest of the teacher education programme. The practicum should have specific learning outcomes that are supervised and assessed by lecturing staff from the teacher education institution in partnership with a fully registered associate teacher.

(NZ Teachers Council, 2002:11)

Dreyer looked into the expanded use of mentor teachers in a South African context and concluded that a minimum for mentorship to be effective "that a very close relationship/partnership between the training institution and the mentors will have to be established" (Dreyer, 1998:110). Maynard and Furlong (1993:70) support this, claiming teacher training must "be a partnership between training institutions and schools", but argue strongly for a change to an active mentoring model:

... it is necessary to move from the notion of supervision in

schools, where teachers are supervising trainees in the application of training acquired elsewhere, to the notion of mentoring, which is an active process, where teachers themselves as practitioners have an active role in the training process (1993:71).

Hagger, Burn and McIntyre (1993:17) see joint responsibility, but acknowledge that there are separate roles of the school and the university. Mentors do not carry sole responsibility for student teachers and have a partnership agreement setting out exactly what the contribution of mentors to school experience is. Teachers contribute their classroom expertise and understanding, whilst the university contributes awareness of professional practice elsewhere.

Given that there was no formal system of mentoring, how did the respondents regard the existing supervision arrangements? The general feeling towards the supervision of teaching practice was positive. However, many school liaison people felt this process could be improved upon. Most would have liked more contact with the university. For example, one stated

The university supervisor came to our school once a week. Students should do more than one lesson a week under supervision.

The system does seem to work pretty well though I have never sat in on a briefing between a university supervisor and a student, but I would like to.

Another said that it would be a good idea to "have a meeting with liaison teachers, university supervisors and university students before teaching practice begins".

Most liaison people also wanted more feedback from the university supervisors: "The host teachers get no feedback from the university lecturers on the student's evaluation. They ... feel left out." and "I only spoke one sentence to the university supervisor. I would have liked to have talked more with the university supervisor". Another thought,

We would like to know what areas the university supervisors cover. What do they look for when they observe a student teaching a lesson ... Is the university supervisor a subject area expert? It would be great if we received information about how the university students are evaluated by their supervisors. What influence does the school evaluation have on the university student's grade?

Where there had been a meeting with liaison teachers before teaching practice, one reported,

This was great. It was a great step. I think there should be a meeting between our teachers and the university supervisors, so they could talk about the students ... There is not enough supervision from the university. All they observe is two lessons, and this is not enough.

The students also wanted to be supervised more by the university. As most stated,

We feel that we should be supervised at least a few times by a content area person while we are in the schools. We would like to have more supervised lessons, at least one a week. Supervision is not the same for all students. There needs to be standardization in this. There are great differences in supervision.

Teaching ability

Teaching ability, obviously, varied from student to student. Some teachers who hosted the university students in their classrooms during the study felt the university could give additional help to its students in specific areas: "We had to give lots of suggestions to the students. We had to help them prepare many lessons. They did not have much initiative and were scared". A liaison person's view was,

Teaching ability varies from student to student. The university could perhaps give more emphasis on structuring lessons to their students before they arrive in schools. The students need to be taught basics about presentation, structure, and questioning before they arrive in the schools.

The students also desired more information on lesson development. As some said "We do not get enough information on how to teach, we

need more mock lessons. Most of us went with what we saw when we were in school, not what we learned at university."

Subject area knowledge

Most liaison teachers claimed there was no problem with the subject knowledge of the students. Many in fact praised the subject area knowledge of the university students, as one commented "The subject matter knowledge of the university students is very good".

The university education students in responding to this question claimed:

It would help us out with subject area knowledge if we received curricula from the schools before we went to them, so we knew where they were teaching in each subject. A copy of a school student's workbook would be nice. An outline of what the schools teach would also be helpful.

Relationship with learners

According to the liaison teachers, the university students got on well with their learners. As one liaison person stated "The relationship between the university students and our students is very good and professional". Most remarked that the university students relationship with the learners "was fine", or the university student "get on well."

Professionalism

Overall, the study found that the professionalism the university students exhibited during teaching practice seemed to vary from university student to student. Many schools felt that the university students acted "professionally" while at their school. However, other school liaison members of staff felt that the student teachers could improve on their "professionalism". A comment was:

The students do not dress appropriately. We had to send students home because they were not dressed appropriately. Also students need to be on time in the morning. Some students always came late. These things should be mentioned to the university students. They should be taught this.

Another liaison person had a similar comment, "The university students are quite professional. However, we have had some problems with their dress code."

Many educational institutions confront the issue of dress in the information booklets that they give their education students. For example, South Bank University in London has an approximately 80-page school experience handbook for its education students. It states, "Students should take account of the ethos of the school and dress sensitively. Students are advised to consult the class teacher about dress codes before the start of the school experience" (South Bank University, 2002:5). Likewise many American universities look at look at professional image through dress as part of the overall grade of the student, within the student teaching course (Central Michigan University, 2002:46).

Value added by schools

All the school staff interviewed felt that the most important aspect of teaching practice was that it gave students hands on experience in schools. "Teaching practice allows students to find out if they wish to become a teacher. It puts students into the 'real world' and allows them to put theory and philosophy into practice". And, "There needs to be more time spent in teaching practice. It puts the university students on the other side of the fence for the first time. They see the real world of teaching."

Within this part of the study we were looking to find out what information student teachers were given by the schools about school management, administration and record keeping, discipline, marking and extra activities. It was found that these topics were not covered in an organized fashion by the schools. Some schools did go over them with students, whilst other schools did not. Of the students, half had received information on school management during teaching practice, and half had not. Almost all said they would like to have a presentation

from a school headmaster or liaison person on school management. The students had the same view toward the topic of administration and record keeping. On the topic of discipline they clearly needed much more information before teaching practice and would like to know the schools' discipline policies before they went to school. The university students also said they would like more information from their host teachers on how they assess and mark. Students interviewed felt that "attendance at extra mural activities should be a requirement of all teaching practice students."

We found that there was a huge variance between schools on how these topics were addressed, if at all. Many liaison people made comments like, "In an informal way we talk about these things." Others had different comments. One teacher said "There is no formal discussion of these activities. However, these things should be touched on by someone." Another teacher reported that students had to attend all staff meetings and suggested that forms should be given to host teachers to document that they cover such topics.

Hagger, Burn and McIntyre (1993:28) comment on this area extensively. They state the student teacher's first day in the school is very important, but it should be seen as part of a structured programme aiming to introduce and gradually integrate the student teacher into the ethos and workings of the school. They suggest a checklist for the effectiveness of an induction programme (policies students need to get; staff members they should meet; procedures they should be aware of; and what they are entitled to in the school) to be completed by the end of induction day or week.

Conclusions

On how much teaching practice is ideal, those who participated in the study felt that it ought to be more than 25% of a PGCE year programme. The traditional PGCE can accommodate a third of the time (11 or 12 weeks) for teaching practice, and it was considered that this should be divided into at least two, possibly three school experience sessions. The alternative, a learnership programme incorporating a much longer time period at a single school, was not researched. The issue raises questions about sufficiency, a key aspect of outcomes-based education. Is it sufficient to have experience of one school, or two schools only? Also what is sufficient instruction time, and how much of it should be observed by others, how much 'supervised' by mentors or university tutors? These aspects clearly matter in assessing the quality of initial teacher education.

The establishment of full partnerships between the schools that host student teachers and the Higher Education Institutions was identified as a priority in the study. There were indications that schools wished to leave some of the responsibility to the university only, and that the university wanted the schools take sole responsibility for other facets. These aspects need to be covered by partnership agreements. Positively, there was much goodwill on both sides which augurs well for a formal contractual relationship, which would also meet the expressed need for greater connection between the schools and the university.

Maynard and Furlong argue that "Effective mentoring is ... a difficult and demanding task and teachers performing the role need the time and in-service support appropriate to the increased responsibilities being placed on them" (1993:82). The study showed the truth of their observation and supported a shared responsibility with university staff rather than a dependence on the mentor teachers alone.

There are three key things that would improve the supervision of student teachers. The first is greater communication between the host teachers, supervisors, liaison people, and university lecturers. This

could be accomplished by more formal and structured arrangements. In addition, there could be informal meetings among these groups, with the university lecturers visiting schools on a more regular basis and supervising more lessons, or inviting school staff to the university more often. The third is that the supervision could be improved by having some lessons supervised by subject area specialists.

We were surprised that the issue of the professionalism of the student teachers came to the fore strongly when considering their overall teaching ability, highlighting the importance of the transition from university student to classroom teacher. One of the weaknesses of the postgraduate certificate is that there is relatively little time to achieve professional induction, compared to the four-year BEd degree. It also highlights the need for further training and orientation during the first year of employment.

Finally, it was revealed that there was much more value that schools could and would add to school experience if they were directly asked to do so and given guidance about. This is a relatively easy matter to put right, and there ought to be a much wider consensus nationally about the minimum expectations of what experience ought to be provided. It is also an aspect that could enjoy the attention of provincial departments of education and teacher unions.

The research showed how much slippage there is in 'teaching practice' — a concept well understood by schools, students and universities, but, seemingly, with so much potential for lost opportunities. Relatively small changes can lead to dramatic improvements. By paying attention to what matters in designing the teaching practice programme rather than a myriad of disconnected competences, student teaching and initial teacher preparation can be much more thorough.

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