Agent of change: In-situ professional development for associate teachers.


Marion Sanders
Bethlehem Tertiary Institute, Tauranga, New Zealand
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Contact: m.sanders@bethlehem.ac.nz
Agent of change: In-situ professional development for associate teachers.

This paper provides a brief overview of a successfully completed Ph.D. research project in Teacher Education, conducted through Macquarie University, Sydney. The focus of the study was the professional development of associate teachers who open their classrooms to student teachers. The research project explored the hypothesis that professional support could be offered while the associate teachers were in the act of mentoring the student teachers.

Key words: practicum, mentoring, relationship, professional development, student teacher

Background
Teacher education literature on practicum is largely in agreement on the pivotal nature of the mentoring partnership established between the student teachers and the associate (supervising) teachers with whom they are placed (Hoban 2004; Cree 2006). Practicum provides a unique opportunity to contribute to the student teachers’ professional growth at an individual, specific and contextual level (Maynard & Furlong, 1993; Schoonmaker, 2002; Shulman, 2004) and encourages the development of young teachers who fit the description called for in the literature today, that of reflective practitioners (Griffin, 2003; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 2001).

Although the literature contains many references to the desired mentoring behaviours, the writer’s previous investigations into interactions in the practicum setting (Sanders, 2006; Sanders, 2007; Sanders, Dowson & Sinclair, 2005) revealed areas of concern in the associate teachers’ practice: the paucity of feedback, both written and oral, the lack of theoretical, propositional discussions, the unwillingness to genuinely challenge the student teachers and the inability to give access to their professional knowledge.

Many researchers identify communication as the key to this dilemma (Chung, 2002; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Kawaiiliak, 2006), and passionately argue that the main factor underpinning effective communication is the quality of the relationship established (Haigh & Ward, 2004; Lipton, Wellman, & Humbard, 2001; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007). Yet, despite this agreement, regular communication is not a guaranteed feature of a practicum for student teachers and a sense of relationship is often missing (Sanders et al., 2005).

Mentors would benefit from professional development in their role. However, only a few associate teachers partake of such programmes, for various reasons including the lack of time. Application of the principles of adult education (Baugartner, 2001; Day, 1999; Fogarty & Pete, 2004; Merriam, 2001) suggested that a responsive model would embed professional development activities into the practicum itself, to give agency and immediacy, without requiring additional time of the associate teachers.
The nature of the practicum experience means that personnel from the Teacher Education Institute have little opportunity to monitor day-to-day functioning of the associate teacher. The mentoring pair largely operates as autonomous participants, with tutors from the tertiary institution making only occasional visits. The main source of influence available to a tertiary institution then, is through the practicum expectations themselves: the assigned formal tasks set by the tertiary provider to be completed during the practicum.

These tasks typically are the student teachers’ responsibility, and can often be completed without the intervention of the associate teacher. The tasks could be described as things to ‘do’ rather than puzzles to be explored. However, the strength of the tasks is their mandatory nature. The student teachers must complete them if they are to meet the requirements of the practicum and gain credits towards their teaching qualification. Perhaps the tasks themselves could provide an avenue for associate teacher growth?

An hypothesis was formulated that the existing tasks could be modified or new tasks introduced that would require both the associate teacher and the student teacher to be actively involved in pedagogical dialogue. This resulted in the questions at the heart of this study.

Is it possible to formulate tasks for the student teachers that would help them grow as teachers, but at the same time alert, inform and develop associate teachers in regards to their mentoring role?

Could tasks be modified so as to be more authentically collaborative in nature and would such a plan improve the mentoring provided by associate teachers and thereby, the learning experiences offered to the student teacher during practicum placements? Could these tasks become agents of change in the associate teachers’ practice? In particular, which practicum tasks would be effective in building relationship between the mentoring pair and in helping student teachers gain access to the associate teachers’ knowledge?

Methodology
This ethnomethodological study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) contained elements of case study, action research and critical research which were implemented in a naturalistic setting, with the pragmatic goal of uncovering how participants negotiate their roles and interactions, and thereby changing the practice of associate teachers as they mentor the student teachers placed in their classroom.

The research was conducted at a New Zealand Tertiary Institute with data collected from twelve associate teachers and thirty-four student teachers. Participant associate teachers
were those who responded to an open invitation given to all associate teachers involved with the tertiary institution, and who committed to each have a different student teacher for five practicum periods. The three male and nine female teachers represented a range of mentoring experience (four years to twenty plus years), and were working in a range of school settings, including rural and urban, low socioeconomic and high, with varying rolls. The student teachers were preparing to teach in primary schools, and had indicated their active consent to be part of the study. Twenty of the student teachers were placed with a participant only once during the research period, nine students were placed twice and five students were involved in the study three times. This resulted in a total of 53 mentor pairs contributing to the data collated and analysed in this research.

A control group of four associate teachers was also formed. These associate teachers completed an associate teacher questionnaire at the beginning of the research period, and three of them submitted a questionnaire again at the end of the research period. (One member of the pilot group had left teaching in the intervening period.) This provided a base of information from which to gauge the degree of professional growth that might occur without the interventions having been applied. The control group teachers were drawn from a school where there were no participant associate teachers, to eliminate the possibility of professional growth through ‘informal discussions’ with participants.

A longitudinal design over eighteen months was selected for the study, since such an approach allowed changes in the associate teachers' mentoring practices to be charted. In each practicum the specifically chosen tasks were introduced and then assessed by the participants for their effectiveness in both growing the student teacher and developing the associate teacher in their mentoring role.

Data were collected from the participants at six different points of time during the study, using a range of tools. By adopting a mixed method approach, it was hoped the research would uncover information that was a richer and more powerful explanation of the setting, context and participants (Janesick, 1998, p. 63). The data consisted mainly of self-perception reviews, and some peer assessment reviews, gained through the use of questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and repertory grids. These drew on the idiosyncratic thoughts, feelings, reactions and evaluations of all participants. It was recognised that the response to the interventions would be highly individualistic, since the participants are autonomous not plastic versions of each other (Cohen et al., 2000).

Each data gathering tool was carefully selected and developed according to advice contained within the sourced literature. Table 1 summarises the research methods chosen, the concomitant approach to the analysis of data gained, the key foci of each tool and the literature sources which guided the construction of these instruments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research method</th>
<th>Data to collect</th>
<th>Data analysis approach</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Guiding and informing sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Associate teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Transcripts of four group conversations. Data reduction – Content analysis – key words, themes Ranking of significance of tasks</td>
<td>Ability to access professional knowledge Advantages and disadvantages of each task Relative effectiveness of selected tasks.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bouma 2000 Cohen 2000 Henn 2006 Tolich 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>53 completed Ranking Open questions Collating numerical responses Data reduction Content analysis – key words and themes</td>
<td>Sources of knowledge valued Types of professional knowledge available</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table: Data Gathering Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Analysis/Display</th>
<th>Mentoring Behaviours</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Transcript of one group</td>
<td>Data reduction – Content analysis – key words and themes</td>
<td>Identify and evaluate roles played by associate teachers. Assess effectiveness of practicum tasks in enhancing roles Descriptors of effective mentors</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table provides an overview of the rationale for the inclusion of the chosen data gathering tools, that is, questionnaire, interview, focus group and repertory grid.

The multi-methods were conducted concurrently, with information integrated during interpretation (Creswell, 2003). Data from different sources in relation to the same issues also allowed a degree of triangulation cross-checking. However, the main validation occurred as findings were checked with the subjects themselves, with other groups and with a ‘critical colleague’. It was important to re-cycle through the process, that is, to re-search to check the validity of patterns identified. As a sole researcher there could be a danger of distortion as it can be difficult to cross check information.

The research hypothesis proposed that using the student teachers’ practicum tasks as an intervention vehicle could instigate change in associates’ mentoring practices. In particular it was hoped that careful selection of these interventions would assist the mentoring pair’s growth of both propositional and craft knowledge, particularly through building relationships and facilitating the sharing of professional knowledge between themselves. Twelve tasks were chosen and introduced at various stages during the research period.
Selection of intervention strategies

During the research period, each intervention was set as a student teacher requirement for one or more practicum, but the task could not be completed without the associate teacher’s involvement. This approach required realistic tasks that would generate a shared purpose, which focused on the concrete level while still encouraging exploration of empirical pedagogical theories, which allowed for flexibility and that led to genuine, effective collaboration (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999). In particular, it was important to trial tasks which contributed to the associate teachers’ understanding of the mentoring role, acceptance of the importance of relationship in opening access to professional knowledge, and increased confidence and competence in the use of various mentoring strategies (Athanases et al., 2006).

Ideas for the strategies came from reading, personal reflection and past experience. The tasks needed to build on the associate teachers' professional repertoire in a way that did not undermine their professionalism, usurp their professional judgement or consume their already stretched time allocation.

The twelve tasks are briefly outlined below. Further, more specific, details about each task are available from the writer.

Four tasks to aid the establishment of initial relationship were chosen in the belief that they would assist the associate teachers to more effectively build relationship with their student teachers. It was hoped the tasks would highlight for the mentors the importance of setting the parameters for the mentoring relationship, exposing their own pedagogical beliefs, and sharing personal aspects of life so as to develop a pellucid learning relationship.

Concept map

The mentoring pair developed a visual tool for building a mutual narrative about how the practicum would play out. This task was chosen on the basis that understanding each role is a prerequisite to establishing strong working relationships, since relationship involves the acceptance of shared responsibilities within the mentoring pair.

Attitude belief inventory
(Ferrier-Kerr, 2004; Hamlin & Weisner, 2003; Loughran, 2006; Reynolds, 1989).

Student teachers and associate teachers were provided with an inventory containing 22 Likert items related to attitudes and beliefs about teaching in a primary school. They completed the inventory separately and then use the completed sheets to initiate discussion. This task was
chosen to challenge student teachers to make assumptions explicit, to uncover, develop and revise their own theoretical foundations, and to help the mentoring pair understand each other’s educational language and bring theory to the support of practice.

Discussion starter envelope
(Lacey, 1999; Monk & Dillon, 1995; Nichols & Sutton, 2006).
Sharing personal information helps the mentoring pair to become more real to each other. Building on the idea of ‘icebreakers’, a range of questions/statements that could be used as conversation starters and which covered both professional and personal topics, was prepared. For each practicum where this task was to be included, six statements from the list were randomly chosen and then each statement was written on a separate piece of card and placed within an envelope. The concept was that each day of the first week the mentor pair would select a card from the envelope and discuss the topic written there.

Metaphor
(Bullough and Gitlin, 1995; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Griffiths and Tan, 1998).
Metaphors represent a simplification of experience and can be used to build an image to help interpret and solve teaching problems, and to expose implicit theories and unconscious assumptions on which practice is based. The mentoring pair was encouraged to develop metaphors for teaching and learning.

Eight strategies to aid access to the associate teacher’s professional knowledge through both observation and dialogue were developed because it seemed imperative to include tasks which held the potential to unlock the associate teachers’ tacit knowledge and to legitimise the student teachers’ question-asking. The hope was to introduce tasks that encouraged reflexive systematic inquiry sustained by the opportunity to participate in conversations (Fairbanks et al., 2000, p.107).

Guided observation of the associate
(Crave, 2002; Edwards & Collison, 1996; Feiman-Nemser et al., 1993; Fish, 1995; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Hagger et al., 1993; Monk & Dillon, 1995; Schriever, 1999; Trumbell, 1986).
The best methods of transfer of professional knowledge are experiential learning, modelling and understanding performances. Therefore guided observation has the potential to be a very powerful tool. Templates used by the student teachers when observing their associate teachers were modified by the addition of key guiding questions (usually one or two) for the student to consider and record while observing the lesson in progress, in the hope that this would encourage the student teachers to ask fruitful questions about observed lessons. These guide questions were designed to encourage the student teacher to focus on the ideas behind the associate's performance, not just the performance itself. Talk can be the catalyst
that progresses the student teacher from merely looking (observing) to actually seeing (Janesick, 1998).

Negotiated feedback

In the case of observations of the student teacher by the associate, it would appear that being involved in choosing the focus of that observation would greatly increase its value to the student teacher. This strategy increased a sense of agency for the student teacher, while also showing respect for the knowledge and skills of the associate teacher. Negotiation allowed for the associate teacher to be a co-inquirer, to be aware of the student teachers' intent before the teaching experience, which then assist the analysis of the relationship between intent and actual practice after the teaching experience.

Templates for observation of student teacher
(Coppenhaver & Schaper, 1999; Coulon, 2000; Edwards & Collison, 1996; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Sanders, 1999; Sanders et al., 2005).

It was proposed that providing templates covering a range of observation foci could educate the mentors about possible components of a student teacher’s practice that could be critiqued and lead to both attitudinal and procedural changes in the associate teachers. Using provided checklists, charts, diagrams and questionnaires might help ensure judgments are accurate, consistent and based on evidence. This accumulated data could then become a basis for reflective discussion, specific goal setting, and help with the systematic implementation of teaching practices.

Mid-point progress report

Rather than have the associate teacher wait until the end of practicum to complete a progress report, it was reasoned that there might be benefit in having the student teacher tentatively complete the report mid-way through the practicum period. This draft report could then be the basis of a dialogue between the mentoring pair and might be a tool to break the pattern of hierarchical one-way communication which is so prevalent in practicum. The associate teacher could articulate progress to date and the mentoring pair could set goals for the remaining period.
Research article
(Edwards & Collison, 1996; Harste et al., 2004; Monk & Dillon, 1995; Zanting et al., 2003)
Student teachers are on the boundary of knowledge communities and are often unwilling or even unable to ask probing questions of the associate teachers. It is known that common set tasks can provide opportunities for discussion. This idea led to the strategy of providing the student teachers with two copies of a recent relevant research article. One copy was for the associate teacher and one for the student teacher. The student teachers were instructed to read the article, formulate some questions relating to it, give the second copy to the associate teacher and when the associate had read the article, to have a discussion about the content.

Critical incidents
(Bullough & Gitlin, 1995; Chesney, 1996; Crisp & Lister, 2006; Distad & Brownstein, 2004; Fish, 1995; Griffin, 2003; Knowles & Cole, 1996; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007; Shulman, 1992; Shulman, 2004).
A critical incident is a situated and specific chance event or a disruption to a plan that signals an important change in course, and results in a shift in one's thinking. Students were introduced to a possible format (template) for writing a critical incident report. Critical incident reports, because they are a form of autobiographical writing, have been shown to move student teachers from concrete thinkers to alert, reflective thinkers. On its own, a written report can be an effective tool, but when linked with collegial reflective discussion it has the potential to be very powerful.

Dialogue journal (split journal, collaborative reflection journal)
Often, without writing, the student teacher can miss key elements and important issues, whereas written accounts allow student teachers to reveal their own thoughts, perceptions, and biases which can be used in discussions with the associate teacher. This opportunity is strengthened when the associate teacher is also able to make written contributions to the journal. Because they can be written in at any time during the day (or night for that matter) they were offered as a way to circumvent the problem of time to develop genuine dialogue.

Photo interpretation
The literature suggested that photos could provide data that allowed reflection, and encouraged the mentoring pair to think more broadly about practice as they revisited events and noted the contradictions between their previous conceptions of teaching and their present practice as evidenced in the photos. Additionally, if the photos are directed at the children
rather than the student teacher, the resulting discussion could shift the focus from teaching to the children's learning.

These eight tasks mandated interchange between the mentoring pair, but it was hoped the associates would be prompted to sustain the quality and quantity of interaction beyond the actual tasks, such that dialogue and genuine pedagogical conferencing became a normal part of the mentoring experience. The tasks were designed to help the student teachers by giving them access to the associates’ professional knowledge and at the same time the tasks demonstrated to the associate teachers strategies to enhance their mentoring practices.

In summary then, this longitudinal study involved twelve associate teachers and 34 student teachers working together over five practicum that occurred during the 18 months of the study. These mentoring pairs implemented twelve carefully selected practicum tasks designed to build relationship and enhance the sharing of professional knowledge. Questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and repertory grids allowed them to share their views regarding the effectiveness of these tasks in developing the associates’ mentoring skills. The data gained through these instruments was then analysed, using both qualitative and quantitative tools, for evidence of growth in five main areas: relationship, support, challenge, access to professional knowledge and reflection. The goal was to reach an answer to the research questions and to test the research hypothesis that that it is possible to provide student teacher learning tasks that also engage the associate teacher in such a way as to encourage the development of the associate teacher as well as the professional growth of the student teacher.

**Results**

The associate teachers perceived personal growth during the research period, with claims for this growth supported by data from the interviews, the questionnaires and focus groups. An increased awareness of the possibilities within mentoring was evident in the discussion of roles and the consideration of the challenging aspects of being an associate teacher. Changes in relationship building were identified through the mentoring behaviour scales and the interviews. Increased willingness to challenge the student teachers was highlighted through the mentoring behaviour scales and the role discussion. That the associate teachers were engaging in more dialogue with the student teachers was evident in the mentoring behaviour scales, the role names used, and the interviews. In particular, change is apparent in the associates’ ability to give feedback as they observe and evaluate the student teachers performance in the classroom, thereby giving access to their professional knowledge.

The literature related to practicum speaks of a common mismatch between what teachers think they are doing and what actually happens in practice. It also refers to a common discrepancy between associate teacher and student teacher perceptions of the mentoring
experience. Were the associate teachers' views of their personal growth shared by the student teachers placed with them for practicum? Were the associate teachers’ perceptions reflected in the student teachers’ appraisal of their performance as mentors? Data collected from the student teachers were analysed to see if they corroborated the associate teacher results.

The student teacher viewpoint is not often closely considered in research literature. But it gives valuable insight and information into the practicum placement as experienced by the student teachers, as well as providing responses which address the specific research question. The student teacher focus group and the questionnaire section on sources of professional knowledge provided data that strongly affirmed the associate teachers’ claims for improved relationships and increased dialogue. These claims were also alluded to in other sections of the questionnaire and the repertory grid, although somewhat more tentatively. Changes in accessing professional knowledge and challenge were also noted in the repertory grids in relation to some of the associate teachers, and in the questionnaire section on roles. The student teachers added evaluator and assessor to the role names they assigned to the associate teachers, which supports the associates’ claim to increased feedback and evaluations of student teachers’ performance in the classroom.

Even though at times there was a disparity between the associates' view and the student teachers’ perceptions, there was present in the data a sense of movement, a sense of changed behaviour, a refocusing of the associates’ practice as mentors. Specifically there was evidence of mutually accepted growth in at least one area for each associate. In general terms, both groups agreed that relationships have strengthened, and that those relationships had moved closer to the learning relationship desired by the literature and indeed the researcher. Also noted was increased incidence of the challenge role so that both support and challenge were present and complementing each other. The associates appeared, in the eyes of the student teachers, to achieve the oxymoron of supportive challenge. The associate teachers were seen as particularly encouraging, and increased dialogue was fulfilling an important role, even though it was still not covering the range of topics hoped for.

The data also seemed to suggest that there was indeed a connection between the relationship between the mentoring pair and the student teacher’s ability to access the associate teacher’s professional knowledge. Additionally, the data demonstrated that it was possible for the associate teacher to both support and challenge the student teacher, especially if tools have been offered to the associate teacher, allowing them to feel secure enough in their role to engage in pedagogical critique.
In summary then, the quantitative data suggested, but did not provide definitive evidence that the associates had professionally grown because of the intervention tasks applied. Several factors affected the ability to make such claims, including the sample size, the unique individuality of each participant, the distribution of mentoring pairs, the possibility of changing reference points during the eighteen months of the study, the possible influence of the focus groups and the varying interpretations of language used during the data gathering.

However the qualitative data did strongly suggest that the associate teachers experienced growth in both their competence and confidence as associate teachers. They claimed to engage in a wider range of mentoring behaviours than they used before the study was implemented. In particular they attested to being more intentional in their relationship building, and more focused in their discussions with the student teachers, claims which the student teachers affirmed.

**Discussion**

Interestingly, neither the associates nor the student teachers initially attributed the change in mentoring practices to the tasks, even though they attested to growth in the associate teachers' mentoring practices during the research period. A key learning point for the researcher was the importance of being explicit about the two-edged role of the intervention tasks. Participants in this study did not fully see explicit links between the tasks and their growth, or between the tasks and improved relationships, until they were encouraged in the interviews and focus groups to critique the tasks' role. Then the significance of the tasks' role in their growth became apparent. The principles of explicit teaching apply in this situation as in any other. Associate teachers are more likely to recognise of their growth as mentors when the role that the tasks might play in that growth is made explicitly clear to them. If the associates were aware of the potential of each task to develop their mentoring skills, they might become more proactive in their employment of the tasks.

Nevertheless, each of the tasks used as interventions acted as a double-edged tool and contributed to the growing knowledge and passion in both the associate teacher and the student teacher, by strengthening communication pathways. Both groups named belief inventory, discussion starter envelope, concept map and guided observation of the associate teacher as the most effective tasks. There are hints that these early, intentional, somewhat 'forced' discussions may help establish a base that allows for genuine challenge and critique later in the practicum. Together, all of the tasks appeared to contribute to building relationship, generating pedagogical dialogue, facilitating the exchange of professional knowledge, providing genuine contexts for pedagogical inquiry, giving agency to the student teacher and building confident, competent associate teachers. The associates did not seem to find the tasks restrictive, or disdainful of their professional judgement and self-efficacy. Rather the tasks were welcomed in a busy context where associate teachers want to do a
good job, but often lack the time and resources to fulfil their mentoring roles as they would like.

It is not the intention of the study to suggest that the twelve intervention tasks offered are the only tasks that can contribute to the growth of an associate teacher's mentoring skills. Rather those tasks chosen are simply indicative of the range of learning experiences that can both support the student teachers in their journey towards being qualified teachers, and inform the associate teachers of more effective strategies to assist the student teachers towards their goal. Flexibility in the presentation of tasks is recommended, with some choice to allow for different personalities, mentoring styles, contexts etc. In addition, once associate teachers have gathered a small repertoire of effective mentoring tools, they will, as professionals, be able to supplement those tools, using their own creativity and professional judgement.

It appears that the interventions implemented in this study, that is, using the student teacher tasks to both grow the student teachers and professionally develop the associate teachers while working together, has successfully changed the attitudes, dispositions and skills of the participant associate teachers. The strategy has, for these associates at least, been an agent of change which has had further positive ramifications for the student teachers working in their classrooms.

The implementation and findings of this research study have highlighted implications for tertiary providers in the way they set up practicum experiences and in particular the way they meet their ethical responsibility to professionally develop the teachers who also work as teacher educators by welcoming student teachers into their classrooms.


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 22 January 2010