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'FROM TRAINEE TO AUTONOMOUS TEACHER'

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on the results of an investigation into the various professional support systems available to TESL pre-service teachers. Using questionnaire and group interviews, feedback was obtained from respondents to determine the most helpful types of support they received and the support they expected. The paper concludes that there are many constraints on the effective operation of a mentoring system and suggests that the supervisory triad be strengthened and other support systems be utilised.

Introduction

We were like a bunch of oiphans (TESL trainee teacher)

This reflection on teaching experience provided by a pre-service trainee teacher has implications for the professional support given to trainees during school experience. A significant part of teacher training courses is the teaching practicum. Student teachers develop their professional and personal skills in a classroom situation and we must ask ourselves in teacher education what type of support trainees need in schools and classrooms. In this paper I intend to provide an overview of the nature of the support systems available to TESL preservice teachers, from a Malaysian government teacher training college, undertaking teaching experience in Malaysian secondary schools.

Firstly, what are the support systems which should be available for our trainees during teaching experience? Ideally these 'life support systems' (Hull, 1990) should include a college supervisor, a mentor, professional resources, peer networks and a school-based induction programme. Research has shown that trainee teachers go through a state of unrealistic optimism at the start of school experience, quickly followed by reality shock since reality rarely matches their expectations (Ode!! and Ferraro, 1992). A supportive context for teacher training is a prerequisite for reflective practice and reflection on teaching experience can foster trainees' professional autonomy. As Wallace (1991) points out, strong support systems encourage reflection, whereas isolation breeds isolation. According to Howley (1988), autonomy is responsible self-direction. Therefore, we would expect autonomous teachers to be decision-makers, confident and responsible to work independently. However, this does not imply that support is unnecessary. It can be hypothesised that when challenges and support are high, professional growth will occur (Daloz, 1986). In thinking about school experience and support systems we should begin with the trainee perspective as their learning needs are the foundation of practical training (Maynard and Furlong, 1993). A supportive context for teacher training is essential for reflective practice. Reflection on teaching experience fosters trainees'

professional autonomy. Importantly, the trainee who knows there is a support system available will feel empowered and grow professionally as a self-directed teacher. As one of our TESL trainees observed, support systems provide *a mattress to fall back on*.

Secondly, I'd like to report on a case study of the school experience of twenty Bed TESL pre-service trainee teachers. This study, using questionnaires and group interviews, was undertaken at the end of the trainees' second period of teaching practicum in Malaysian secondary schools. The aim was to obtain feedback from the perspective of the trainees on the professional support they received during teaching experience from both the training college and the school where they were placed. I have tried to establish the most helpful types of support they received and the support they expected during their school experience. I have also looked at the extent to which TESL trainees exploit the support systems available. This case study provides an initial insight into the effectiveness of the supervisory triad of college supervisor, cooperating teacher and trainee. The study also raises issues concerning the training and professional development of pie-service teachers.

The Supervisory Triad

A cooperating teacher, a college or university supervisor and a trainee teacher form a supervisory triad (Kauffman, 1992). The key person in the school support system is the cooperating teacher, known in different educational contexts as school supervisor, pedagogic counsellor, associate teacher, partner teacher, coach or mentor. The cooperating teacher is the link between the trainee and the school community, and the link between the training institution and the school. A relationship based on effective communication and collaboration between the triad members making explicit their aims and expectations can have a significant effect on the teaching experience of the trainee, intern, or student teacher. Research has shown that the rapport between the supervisory triad members and the time available for the support process are key influences on teacher trainee attitudes and self-direction (Faire, 1994).

However, roles in the supervisory triad may be unclearly defined and expectations and perceptions of the supervisory process may differ. The supervisor may be the source of theories, the cooperating teacher may be the provider of practice and the trainee teacher may be the uneasy bridge between these worlds. As one of our trainees explained, *theory and reality sometimes do not match and one has to constantly change and adapt*. It has been suggested that the triad members should be matched closely rather than randomly so that role expectations are complementary (Kauffman, 1992). However, it may be more practical to create the best possible conditions for mentoring relationships rather than optimal matches (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Misunderstandings due to poor communication or a lack of unity between supervisors and cooperating teachers can result in the trainee being caught in the middle. It certainly seems that there is some truth in the view that 'there are vast differences in the degree and quality of support students receive from college supervisors and cooperating teachers during the teaching practicum' (Anderson, 1993: 62)

College Support

Wallace (1991) describes clinical supervision as an interaction between supervisor and trainee teacher to discuss and analyse the trainee's teaching with a view to professional development. There are a number of ways in which clinical supervision can be implemented and a simple classification is

provided by Wallace (1991). In the traditional directive approach the supervisor is the authority, expert and judge. The supervisor meets with the trainee for pre-lesson consultation, then observes a lesson and follows it with a post-lesson analysis. The overtones are prescriptive, and the ways in which supervision is carried out can be variously helpful, ineffective, or positively damaging to trainees' (Kennedy, 1993: 162). However, the literature (Wallace, 1991) shows that trainees generally prefer a counselling model of clinical supervision, that is, a collaborative approach rather than a prescriptive approach. In this approach the role of the supervisor is that of an understander who develops a rapport with the trainee, challenging the trainee's perceptions and exploring goals within a supportive and empathetic context (Cogan, 1995). The supervisor aims to encourage trainees to reflect critically on their teaching and to be responsible for self-evaluation. Due to the large number of teacher trainers needed to supervise Bed student teachers for the teaching practicum at our training college in Malaysia, it is certainly impossible and undesirable to impose one prescribed approach to supervision within the institution. Nevertheless, it is highly desirable to propose that there are alternative supervisory models to a prescriptive approach (Gebhard, 1990). However, 'it has to be admitted that certain approaches to supervision may more readily be accepted and adopted within one cultural setting than another' (Cogan, 1995: 5).

The literature has shown that trainees first and foremost mainly seek practical advice on strategies and activities and help with classroom management. Their needs are situation specific and they look for short-term teaching solutions to help them survive reality shock. They also seek encouragement and confidence boosting. In this case study, all Bed trainees were very satisfied or satisfied with the number of visits from their supervisors. All trainees received feedback on lessons observed and most received feedback on teacher qualities. Many were given both guidance in lesson planning and suggestions for teaching strategies. The majority received moral support from their supervisors. Since the literature shows that teacher trainees prefer the supervisor to be someone they know rather than an unknown quantity (Kennedy, 1993), further investigation is needed into whether trainees feel confident to contact their supervisor when a problem arises and whether they are encouraged to do so. Suggestions for classroom management, teaching strategies and activities, feedback on lessons observed and moral support were the most helpful types of college support reported by trainees.

Whilst support from supervisors is obviously encouraging, supervisors do not always provide trainees with the type of support they need to meet their immediate survival needs. Trainees may also need more concrete advice relating to particular classrooms and specific groups of students and supervisors are not necessarily in a position to give this particular advice.

School Support

I would suggest that the role of the experienced teacher-mentor is crucial in the professional support system. The inexperienced trainee may initially see the mentor as a role model; an experienced practitioner passing on specialist skills. At the apprenticeship stage of mentoring, the mentor's role is primarily collaborative and the trainee's role is often simply as co-teacher and classroom observer (Maynard and Furlong, 1993). During the competency stage, the trainee's role is to acquire basic classroom competence and the mentor's role is that of coach and instructor. At this stage the trainee takes on increased responsibility. At the reflective stage, the mentor, in the role of co-enquirer, supports the trainee's gradual shift in focus from his/her own teaching to learner-oriented language learning and to an emerging individual style of teaching. The mentor encourages critical reflection and increasing autonomy amongst trainees. The mentor's role therefore changes as the trainee moves

along the training continuum (Anderson, 1993). An appropriate analogy for the mentor's role is that of a guide on the trainee's journey from trainee to autonomous teacher (Daloz, 1986).

A partnership model of mentoring, rather than an apprenticeship model assumes close collaboration between mentor and trainee (Anderson, 1993). In some countries, school teachers have been trained as mentors by teacher trainers in colleges or universities. They supervise student teachers' school experience and are responsible for the trainee's induction into the culture of the school (Bodoczky and Malderez, 1994). They take on the roles of co-trainer, counsellor, advisor and friend. However, trainee assessment may still be the sole responsibility of the university supervisor. The literature shows that a good rapport between trainee and mentor is more likely when the mentor's role does not include that of assessor. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that in the supervisory triad established between our training college and secondary schools in Malaysia, the cooperating teacher-mentor does have an assessment role. Furthermore, one trainee may have to establish a partnership with two cooperating teachers in the roles of assessor. Cooperating teachers in the secondary schools where our trainees are placed for school experience receive no formal mentor training as yet.

The case study showed that most of the trainees received professional support from a cooperating teacher, the majority received support from a senior teacher or the vice principal, and some received support from other English teachers. All trainees were provided with some form of school induction programme. Half of the cooperating teachers provided information about school organization and the majority provided information on school facilities. However, there were a few of our trainees whose expectation of assimilation into the culture of the school went unrealized.

Cooperating teachers gave support to trainees primarily by observing lessons and giving feedback. A number of cooperating teachers offered advice on teaching strategies and classroom management. Trainees suggested that the most helpful support was comments on lesson planning and lessons observed by their cooperating teachers, as well as discussion of teaching strategies. Half of the trainees had the opportunity to observe veteran teachers' lessons. One of our trainee's comments illustrate the partnership model which can emerge between trainee and cooperating teacher; *'working with the cooperating teacher, the cooperating teacher could learn about current reaching methodology and I could gain from the teacher's rich experiences in teaching'*.

The key to successful mentoring must surely be a willingness on the part of experienced teachers to be mentors, to encourage autonomy and effective teaching amongst trainees, and to have a commitment to the profession. Cooperating teachers who take on the responsibility of providing professional support for our trainees are in a good position to meet trainees' needs with concrete advice. They are able to provide insights into specific classroom situations, pupils' learning styles and levels of motivation.

However, there are many constraints on the effective operation of a mentoring system. Mentors frequently have many professional responsibilities and the available time for counselling and guiding trainees is limited. The match between mentor and trainees may not be optimal and furthermore weak or difficult trainees may require close support. Whereas the college supervisor escapes to his/her academic shelter, the mentor is constantly in the midst of the trainee's reality shock.

Mentors may have been assigned rather than have chosen their role. They may have had little or no formal mentor training as exemplified in this case study. Since mentoring is a complex process, in-service support and available time should be the minimum requirements of an effective mentoring system. There may be a lack of commitment and interest on the part of the chosen mentors (Moon, 1994). Inducements should be offered to mentors in the form of a financial incentive, additional

instructional materials, released time from the classroom, support for further study, or attendance at professional conferences. The success of a mentoring system also depends on the principal of the school understanding the significance of professional support for trainee teachers. I would suggest that informing and adequately briefing the school management about expectations for the placement of trainee teachers should be the responsibility of the teacher training institution.

On a note of caution, however, the school-based mentoring model needs to be looked at carefully. Simply placing trainees with practitioners is neither a sufficient guarantee of professional support nor a guarantee of induction into the profession (Tellez, 1992: Wilkin, 1992). Is the mentor-mentee relationship voluntary or imposed? Mentors should be carefully chosen and generally highly qualified veterans with management and subject-based experience (Wilkin, 1992). Do mentees have any choise of mentor? In a study by Tellez (1992) he observed that teacher trainees may feel uncomfortable and embarrassed asking for help from a mentor, and the mentor may seem distant and aloof or inaccessible. Trainees' first choice of support may be the supervisor who they know rather than the mentor with whom they have had no chance to build a rapport Since insecurity and fear of failure are major concerns of trainees during teaching experience, the need for psychological or moral support should also be a consideration. This case study suggests that trainees often sought this type of support from family and peers.

Resources

Few of the trainees in this case study utilised outside resources as a means of support, such as an educational library and professional associations, teachers' magazines and professional journals, and educational resources on the internet. For example, teacher resource centres have been set up at the district level in Malaysia to loan materials to teachers. The Malaysian English Language Teaching Association conducts workshops and publishes a journal for professionals to exchange views, ideas and research. The Star newspaper provides workshops for teachers on materials development In addition, a new web site has just been launched, Malaysian English Language Teachers on-line. Trainees felt constrained by the syllabus, lacked the time or lacked the skills to exploit outside resources. There is certainly a need for awareness raising amongst trainees of the professional resources available to support them during training and beyond.

Recommendations

I can offer a number of comments and recommendations arising from this exploratory study for further consideration in teacher training contexts. Firstly, there is an established trend towards school-based initial teacher training in schools and an increasing proportion of course time devoted to school experience. Through their involvement in initial teacher education, schools which develop a professional support system for both pre-service teachers and beginning teachers are more likely to recognize their teaching expertise, articulate and evaluate practice, encourage collaboration and disseminate new ideas. A 'commitment to professional development fostered by initial teacher education makes a school an attractive place to work, both for entrants to the profession and for experienced teachers' (McIntyre, 1994: 99). It has been suggested that good mentoring relationships emerge from a positive organizational situation (Tellez, 1992).

Secondly, an operational school-based mentoring system should bring professional benefits as initial teacher training establishes a firmer foothold in schools. However, since mentoring is a complex process, in-service support and available time should be the minimum requirements of an effective mentoring system. Incentives are needed to encourage veteran teachers to actively take on a mentoring role, as their professional lives are busy enough without increased responsibilities. A school-based mentoring system can also be an effective strategy for diminishing the problematic loss of beginning teachers from the profession in some countries (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Familiarity with the culture of the school and a developing sense of professionalism contribute to the retention of good teachers in the profession.

Thirdly, a recommendation is made for strengthening the supervisory triad as the framework for support systems in initial teacher education. Preservice teachers need opportunities to reflect on classroom practice with supervisors, cooperating teachers and peers. Mentoring systems have tended to be characterised by a one-sided partnership in the past with the training institutions dominating the relationship (Wilkin, 1992). Training is best seen as a partnership between training institutions and schools and a collaborative and cooperative approach to the supervisory triad ~wil1 be most effective. Wilkin (1992) suggests that effective mentoring is the most beneficial way for trainees to see how theory and practice can be intergrated in the classroom. In addition, we need to look at the way in which teacher trainees can be both challenged and supported by college supervisors and mentors during school experience. The work of Daloz (1986) if applied to initial teacher education suggests that when both challenge and support are high, professional growth is fostered.

Self-evaluation and critical reflection are not easy skills to develop as Kennedy (1993) has pointed out. These skills require a strong foundation of both received and experiential knowledge which young trainees may not have. Since experiential knowledge cannot be passed on, trainees need support in making the link between theory and practice. Ideally, if the conditions for reflective practice and professional development are established during school experience, the trainee is more likely to emerge as an autonomous beginning teacher. As Wallace (1991: 116) has observed 'if the concept of reflective practice ... has any validity at all, the fostering of *intellectual autonomy, independent inquiry, analysis and self-evaluation* must be a desirable goal'.

We cannot assume, however, that trainees will seek help through the formalized professional support systems. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the norms of equality and autonomy in schools are likely to discourage beginning teachers from seeking or receiving help (Tellez, 1992). We need to equip our trainees with the interpersonal skills to utilise existing professional support systems and explore alternatives. Thus, we should encourage a gradual shift away from dependency on external sources of support towards professional growth and self-reliance by the end of teaching experience (Dilworth and Imig, 1995).

Conclusion

The transition from initial teacher training to beginning teacher is arguably a weak link in the process of professional development. The training received by pie-service teachers on school experience needs to be looked at closely with the intention of further enhancing the quality and effectiveness of teacher supervision. In this paper I have suggested that we need to change our models of college supervision and mentoring as teacher trainees move along the training continuum. We should help our trainees to gain the interpersonal skills needed to ask for the professional support they find most helpful, to understand that help-seeking is not a sign of failure and to realize that support may still be

needed in the beginning years of teaching. The aim should be to provide the conditions for professional autonomy; 'a framework of support which does not at the same time create dependency' (Anderson, 1993: 62). In the words of one trainee from this case study, *Gradually I was able to make decisions independently on the various strategies which Ifelt would be most useful for the classes that I was teaching. I was able to be more independent of my supervisor and cooperating teacher'*.

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