

Cooperating Teachers

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"That's the reason they are called lessons," the Gryphon remarked; "because they lessen day to day."

Lewis Carroll

(Alice Adventures in Wonderland Chap.9.)

Teacher Trainees are put to the test of fire when they are placed in public schools during the practicum. The description of the practicum is said to be "the single most powerful intervention in a teacher's professional preparation" (Turney et al., 1982 p.47). Supervision of teacher trainees are a crucial part of teacher education. Almost everyone involved in education has at some point been a teacher being supervised or a supervisor. How prepared were we at either role? Perhaps it was something we were thrown into and were expected to land on our feet. The closest some teacher trainees have come to actual teaching would be peer teaching.

Some of the functions of a supervision are as follows:

- to direct or guide the teacher's teaching
- to offer suggestions on the best way to teach
- to model teaching
- to advise teachers
- to evaluate the teacher's teaching

(Jerry G.Gabhard, 1989)

Realistically, how much time is spent on directing and guiding, offering suggestions, model teaching and advising trainees as opposed to assessing them for a grade?

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that with careful planning and selection, teacher training programs can use a resource already available – experienced professional teachers. Researchers have found that there has been alarmingly little connection between the practicum supervisor's feedback and research-validated pedagogical knowledge (Griffin et.al 1983). This could be because the focus of the observation visits is to obtain a grade. There is little time to look into detailed teaching techniques like pacing, sequencing and turn-taking. A case study done by Zimpher, de Voss and Not (1980) showed that much criticism by the supervision stemmed from the supervisor's own personal, often research unwarranted, biases about teaching. "Being common-sense biases, some were probably accurate but nevertheless impeded the students in developing their own teaching style." (Zimpher, de Voss and Not).

The triad of Supervisor, Cooperating teacher and Teacher Trainee should be carefully defined before it can be implemented. The fine thread of professionalism must be recognised for each member of the triad can contribute to the betterment of education.

The Role of the Cooperating Teacher (CT)

Five expectations for Cooperating Teachers expressed by Grimmatt and Ratzlaff (1986) are claimed to have transcended the bounds of time and content. The first expectation is that CT should provide teacher trainees with basic information regarding rules, policies and the physical set-up of classrooms and the school to enable the trainee to adjust to the environment. This includes introducing the trainee to the members of staff, academic and non-academic.

A CT would also ensure that the trainee acquires resource materials (i.e. teacher guide, teacher's manual, textbooks, teaching aids, etc). If these are not available the CT should state what the teachers of the school are doing about it. Apart from that, the CT should be involved in planning and evaluation of learning experience. Some teacher trainees find that they have either prepared too much or too little. The CT would be able to indicate which areas might prove difficult for the pupils. However, trainees should be given the freedom to have the full responsibility for the class.

Though some researchers suggest that teachers do not easily change their teaching behaviour, Gebhard (1985) discovered that

if trainees “had the opportunity to process self-selected aspects of their teaching through activities, investigative projects and readings, they would “start changing their teaching behaviour.” But time to reflect and experiment must be given to the trainee.

Conferencing is equally crucial to enable trainees to receive feedback and give their defense. It should be done at regularly scheduled hours. The CT is responsible for bringing to the trainee’s attention, classroom management problems. Finally, the CT has to evaluate the trainee’s progress and development (in collaboration with the University Supervisor). This must be done through regular observations and feedback.

So What Do The Supervisors Do?

Supervisors play an important role in setting the direction to which the CT would guide the teacher trainee. The supervisor would do a minimum of three assessment visits, but each visit will be divided into three sessions:

- (a) Pre-observation – where the trainee states the purpose of the lesson and what is to be achieved from the lesson pedagogically and emotionally. The Supervisor looks at the lesson plan to familiarise herself with the lesson content. The supervisor may also check on the trainee’s impressions of the school, checking to see if the trainee teacher is not treated merely as a substitute teacher (relief teacher).
- (b) Observation – looks at trainee’s teaching and prepares feedback based on research-validated information. Supervisor takes into account the school environment and any special conditions that might affect the teaching.
- (c) Post-observation – a discussion session involving the supervisor, teacher trainee and the cooperating teacher takes place here. The Supervisor gives his feedback based on research-validated pedagogical knowledge. Specific information on pacing, sequencing, turn-taking, etc must be provided to the trainee who will then try to implement these suggestions with the help of the cooperating teacher who is also invited to give any suggestions. This is collaborated with feedback from the supervisor. The teacher trainee is also given a chance to

express an opinion on how the lesson went. This is to enable the trainee to be involved in a constant learning process.

The supervisor could also encourage the trainee to keep a log or a journal. This would provide for self-evaluation. It could either be a factual recounting of events or an entry on any impression connected to the whole process in the school. The entries could be contrasted with the feedback from the supervisor and CT.

Assessment, however, can take place at different times. It can be analytical, where parts of a problem or situation are carefully examined. The supervisor could also include an evaluative type assessment which is value based. This type of assessment is subjective and should be treated as one part of an assessment. The third type of assessment is ethnographic in nature. This can be done in collaboration with the cooperating teacher. It entails assessing the trainee's teaching while considering the setting and context.

The Advantages of Having a Cooperating Teacher

Since the relationship between the supervisor, teacher trainee and cooperating teacher is closely linked, the advantages can be seen from three different angles.

The teacher trainee gets a support group outside the university. The CT is the link to the school community. Furthermore, there is true supervision. Trainees would be guided and coached without the threat of a grade. It also provides another point of view and allows for an immediate response to what is happening in schools. The CT acts also as a cushion for the beginning teacher as the trainee knows that there is help available and that might prompt him to take greater responsibility in the classroom. The opportunity to discuss alternate techniques is tremendous as the CT could be a model for teaching. The trainee could also observe other teachers in the school. This, in turn, lets the trainee experiment and develop a style rather than merely imitate teaching behaviour.

Many supervisors have not been in a school recently enough to know its needs. As the needs of schools vary according to its location, the CT provides an excellent link between the university and the schools. This could facilitate the improvement of Teacher

Education programmes. From the point of view of the supervisor, a solid relationship can be formed with schools and all those involved in teaching can contribute by gaining first-hand information on areas that require more research. Supervisors would also be able to concentrate on assessment.

The cooperating teacher can himself use this position to establish a professional network which would pave the way for information dissemination. Research findings would be available through discussions and the practicum could serve as a learning experience for participating teachers. It is also a chance to introduce new methods and perhaps adopt existing methodology to a style preferred by the trainee. Ideally, it would also encourage professional exchange. Often it is the lecturers or officials who conduct workshops for teachers already in service. The teachers themselves have experiences and ideas that might develop into interesting research topics. The holistic advantage would be that the CTs could gain an insight into their own teaching and may emerge even better educators.

The Disadvantages of Having a Cooperating Teacher

If careful planning and selection is not done, the cooperating teacher can retard the move towards educating better teachers. Teacher trainees can be caught in between the cooperating teacher and supervisor. This could be due to differences in techniques and/or methodology and the possibility that both parties refuse to come to an understanding. The Trainee has the added stress of not knowing who to model. It is also very likely that the student's opinion is not asked for. When put in between two people whom the trainee has to trust for guidance, should she ignore one party and pay the consequences of that action, or try to please both people?

It also cannot be denied that there are working relationships which are wrong. This could be due to personality clashes or merely that the cooperating teacher has no faith in the trainee. Some teachers have also complained that some trainees are upstarts. Prejudices based on stereotypical judgements can mar the whole process of educating teachers. There was a case in Hawaii where a cooperating teacher had written out the trainee's lesson plan and instructed her to follow it to the letter. The trainee lost her self-confidence and the pupils picked up on this unset-

ting problem. For a profession which deals with people, many educators rely on their own resources for dealing with people. Training in people management could overcome some problems.

It is necessary to remember that teachers sometimes suffer from low morale. Some become disillusioned and often downplay the need for formal education. One teacher quoted Oscar Wilde,

“Education is an admirable thing but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing worth knowing can be taught.”

A cooperating teacher who believes that nothing taught at the university is of any use because “THIS IS THE REAL WORLD” may impress on the trainee that research has no place in the classroom. The trainee might tune in on the negativism felt by the cooperating teacher and pick up traits which affect their own teaching behaviour.

The Supervisor, too, faces the risk of cooperating teachers introducing age-old, home-made ideologies to trainees. There is also the danger of trainees and cooperating teachers ganging up on the supervisor, who is regarded as the person who would decide the trainee's fate. As the supervisor spends less time with the trainee, he/she may not empathize with what is happening on a day to day basis. The cooperating teacher becomes the trainee's confidante and role model.

That in itself may not be a problem. However, if the cooperating teacher is not exemplary and professional, we would be doing a great injustice to the teaching profession to have a beginning teacher model poor teaching.

There are various factors to consider before employing the services of cooperating teachers.

Factors to Consider

Who makes the selection?

The decision as to who is selected should be made by the University Academic Staff. The teacher education programmes offered by them have specific objectives and aims which have to be achieved. Supervisors should have full autonomy as to who they and who the trainees will be working with.

How is the selection made?

A list recommending several teachers from numerous schools could be sent in to the University. Headmasters or Programme Coordinators could submit a professional biodata of the teachers recommended, or volunteer to be on the list. A possible candidate should be open to being observed by members of her peers. Interviews must be conducted to ensure the suitability of the cooperating teacher. The questions in the interview have to be carefully formulated to derive as much information possible about the teacher. Teachers who are respected by colleagues and pupils should be perfect candidates. The interview would also allow these candidates to voice their opinions on education and make queries on the programme. The nature of the interview should be that of peers and not supervisors.

What qualifications are required?

The academic qualifications are somewhat standard as teachers would have a degree and a Diploma in Education. The cooperating teacher's specialised area is important. Teachers trained in Geography must not be allowed to supervise English or History. Though the underlying principles of education are similar across subjects, a teacher trained in language would be able to cue in on the finer aspects of teaching it. Professional qualifications are of similar importance to that of the academic ones. Teacher involvement in the field can be assumed through seminars attended, papers presented at conferences, on-going mini-research, subscription to professional journals and most obviously an enthusiasm about the teaching profession.

Why would teachers act as CTs

It is an opportunity for innovative teachers to have an ally with whom they could experiment and learn. A more attractive offer could also be made above the professional benefits. An honorarium can be paid to ensure commitment. If we expect teachers to be burdened with work which is not in their job description, we have to reward them for it. In turn, the university can expect total involvement in their education programme.

When is the choice made?

Decisions must be made well beforehand. A corpus of cooperating teachers around the country can be selected and engaged. The list should be ever growing and changing to enable teachers to contribute seriously to this profession.

Feedback from teacher trainees on cooperating teachers could also be a factor to be considered. Briefings should be made prior to practicums.

How to prepare for the practicum

Both the supervisor and the cooperating teacher should fully comprehend their roles. An understanding should be formed on the basis that the training of the beginning teacher takes precedence over personal differences. The cooperating teacher is not the supervisor's subordinate but he/she must conform to the objectives and aims of the programme. Collaboration is important and even more crucial is cooperation.

Conclusion

The introduction of the cooperating teacher into the teacher education programme is not merely placing trainees in the care of a teacher who has been teaching for five or more years. Carefully defined objectives and an even more cautious selection of candidates must be made before trainees are put in the trust of these teachers. This article is a working paper and research is needed to fine tune the expectations and functions of the cooperating teacher.

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