

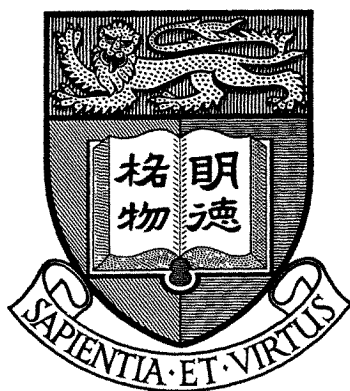
**Professional Learning Together:  
Building a Collaborative Culture in  
Teaching Practicum Supervision**

Edited by

**Ora Kwo**

INSTEP  
Faculty of Education  
The University of Hong Kong

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG  
LIBRARIES



*This book was a gift  
from*

Dr. Ora Kwo  
Faculty of Education, HKU

Published by:  
The In-service Teacher Education Programme (INSTEP)  
Faculty of Education  
The University of Hong Kong  
Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China

Local price: HK\$100.00

Overseas Price: US\$18.00 (including postage)

© 1998 copyright Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong

#### Copyright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

The opinions expressed in this book are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the editor or publisher. Contact with the authors can be made via the editor through phone (852) 2859-1956, fax (852) 2858-5649, or e-mail: [wykwo@hku.hk](mailto:wykwo@hku.hk)

ISBN: 962-8093-08-8

# Contents

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| Acknowledgements  | 1    |
| Foreword: <i>Brian Cooke</i>  | 2    |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>   |      |
| Chapter 1   | 9    |
| Professional Learning in a Context of Change<br><i>Ora Kwo</i>                                      |      |
| <b>PART ONE: LEARNING WITH STUDENT<br/>TEACHERS AND PROMOTING<br/>POSITIVE CHANGE</b>               |      |
| Chapter 2   | 23   |
| Beyond Expectations<br><i>Bob Adamson</i>   |      |
| Chapter 3   | 31   |
| Encouraging Pre-service Mathematics Teachers<br>to Change Old Beliefs<br><i>Margaret Taplin</i>     |      |
| Chapter 4   | 41   |
| Survival Support for Student Teachers<br><i>Lo Mun-Ling and Lee Chi-Kin</i>                         |      |
| Chapter 5   | 50   |
| Probing the Depth of Student Teachers'<br>Reflections<br><i>Elizabeth Cheung and Benny Yung</i>     |      |
| <b>PART TWO: DILEMMAS IN SUPERVISION</b>  |      |
| Chapter 6   | 59   |
| Pre-lesson Discussion in Supervision: Can it be<br>More Than a Ritual?<br><i>Francis Lopez-Real</i> |      |

|           |   |    |
|-----------|---|----|
| Chapter 7 | Taking Over a Class from Student Teachers:<br>A Decision About Intervention<br><i>Lo Mun-Ling</i>     | 68 |
| Chapter 8 | Assessing the Teaching Practicum at the<br>Pass/Fail Borderline<br><i>David Bunton</i>                | 77 |
| Chapter 9 | Tensions Between School Expectations and the<br>Need for Professional Learning<br><i>Tse Shek-Kam</i> | 87 |

## CONCLUSION

|            |  |    |
|------------|--|----|
| Chapter 10 | Towards Improved Understanding of<br>Professional Learning: Future Perspectives<br>and Actions<br><i>Ora Kwo</i> | 99 |
|------------|--|----|



# Foreword

*Brian Cooke*

It is a pleasure to be asked to write this foreword. The contributors to this volume, former colleagues in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Hong Kong, explore a variety of ideas, issues and dilemmas which feature in their work as teacher educators. I have been pleased to have shared in some of their thinking and discussions. Many other teacher educators, wherever they are, will identify with them, for many of the themes, topics or problems addressed in these pages are universal, transcending time and place.

The following chapters reveal a wide range of questions and challenges. One worthy of particular attention may be expressed simply: how do teacher educators learn their jobs? Flowing from this question are others. How do teacher educators grow and develop professionally? What provision is made, and by whom, for their initial preparation, their induction and their continuing inservice education as teacher educators?

Many complete higher degrees, before or during their appointments as teacher educators. Many of them undertake research and development projects, some of which are collaborative, involving schools and teachers as well as their own colleagues or students. Such degree studies or research projects may contribute to their academic and professional development, but will they be certain to influence or support directly their daily work as teacher educators? This question is of special relevance with respect to the supervision and assessment of their students' teaching practice or field experience. On this specific point there is much we do not know. Indeed there is much detail that we do not know about the careers and lives of teacher educators.

This situation contrasts markedly with that of school teachers. Accounts and studies of teachers' stories, their biographies or life histories, feature increasingly in the educational research literature. They offer information about significant points or phases in their

careers, and also about their professional education and development over time. Conversely, biographies of teacher educators are rarely reported, yet they too should be important sources of data for their careers and professional profiles. They would have added significance since there is little evidence of comprehensive and systematic provision for the education, training and continuing development of teacher educators as specialist professionals.

There are, of course, teacher educators' stories to be recounted. One, to be told here, will be typical of many. It is an instructive story which began over twenty five years ago. It is a story of its own time and place, yet familiar in other times and places. It is no less relevant today than it was more than a quarter of a century ago, and its relevance may be expected to continue for years to come. Within the context of this foreword, it is a very personal story.

This story concerns a group of teacher educators who became increasingly aware of their lack of professional preparation. They agreed to explore how they might work together, and with others, to meet their responsibilities to their students, and to the pupils, teachers and schools of their wider educational system. The story has to do with how they attempted to learn their craft; and with their commitment in accepting responsibility for their own professional growth and development in a collegial setting.

They were a group of seven lecturers in the Department of Education in a well established university in the south of England. All but one were appointed between 1969 and 1971, and were in their early/mid-thirties. Five of them were 'major methods' staff, each a specialist in a secondary school subject, namely Biology, English, Geography, German and History. They had previously been successful teachers in grammar or independent schools. The other two were educational psychologists who had been recruited from professional service in local education authorities.

Their major responsibilities were the training of student teachers enrolled in the one year full-time, pre-service Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme. They had been appointed on the basis of their qualifications and reputations in their previous posts, which were not in teacher education. They were given no training, and only



minimal briefing, on taking up their university appointments. It was assumed that they already possessed the knowledge and skills they needed to teach, supervise and assess young graduate student teachers. That is, their previous training, experience and expertise provided their preparation. Yet, though essential, this background alone fell some way short of preparing them for the theoretical and practical foundations in terms of adult learning, clinical supervision and counselling skills which they quickly realised dominated their work as teacher educators. Their approaches to working with their students were shaped initially by their personal beliefs and predilections, and by their experiences as schoolteachers, often based on a largely pragmatic view of what young student teachers needed. They soon came to accept the limits of such approaches, that teaching secondary school pupils is not the same as tutoring or supervising adults.

Their teacher education programme followed a well known pattern. The first and third terms involved university-based courses whilst the middle term was devoted wholly to teaching practice in schools. Each 'methods' lecturer was responsible for supervising and assessing some 15 students specialising in their subject. During this practice period of 12 weeks each student was visited three times by their university supervisor. Additional visits might be made to certain student teachers by an educational psychology lecturer if such help was thought to be merited. The University had to place the student teachers in schools throughout a large region, some as far as 100 miles from the campus, which added to the complicated arrangements for supervision and assessment.

Issues arising from teaching practice were selected by the seven lecturers as the focus of their own professional development efforts since these were perceived to be most problematic. As newcomers to teacher education, critical of teacher training in general as they had witnessed it from the viewpoints of their previous roles as schoolteachers, they brought energy, enthusiasm, idealism and a commitment to new initiatives for improvement.

And so much seemed to need improving in their own university's teacher education. They found that for the most part they were

expected to work alone, with their own students, much as schoolteachers did. There was no tradition, for example, of Chemistry, Geography, French, Physics or other specialist lecturers exploring together pedagogical issues arising from teaching practice. Ideas or problems to do with the nature of supervision were usually treated in isolation by subject rather than shared across disciplines. For instance, strategies and styles adopted in pre- and post-lesson discussions; the nature of guidance given to student teachers in relation to opportunities for them to learn and develop, and to express their own ideas and beliefs without being merely compliant to the demands of schools or teachers; giving, and helping students to learn how to respond to, positive feedback; being sensitive to variations amongst student teachers and school settings; coping with difficulties which emerged from the different roles of university lecturers as supervisors and assessors; how best to involve schoolteachers in the supervision and assessment of student teachers.

Such issues as these became topics for in-depth group sharing and exploration, with an agreed refusal to accept the simplistic "this is what I do, now tell me what you do" formula. The efforts became an agenda for researching their own practice collaboratively.

Almost thirty years later colleagues at the University of Hong Kong have been exploring similar kinds of ideas and approaches, and rightly so. This is not a matter of reinventing the wheel, of an apparent inability of teacher educators to make progress. Rather, these sorts of efforts must be pursued contextually by teacher educators wherever they work, in the light of their specific local circumstances and personal experiences, as a major feature of a collaborative, 'home-grown' professional development culture.

To stress the importance of such activities it should be noted that the supervision and assessment of student teachers' teaching practice is not thoroughly researched. There is not a widely understood and accepted knowledge base for supervision. Moreover, what does exist is not familiar to many teacher educators, partly because of their emphasis on other specialist interests, and partly because of the lack of professional training for teacher educators. Whilst the working contexts, demands, pressures and so forth faced by teacher educators

have changed over 25-30 years, much of the significance of collaborative professional learning remains substantially unaltered.

Teacher educators are, in general, no more trained in 1998 than they were in 1978, or indeed 1968. Their experience as school teachers is still regarded as essential at the stage of their recruitment. Once appointed, their induction into their new roles may be brief and superficial, and the notion of continuing professional development is underdeveloped. Where it occurs it is often fortuitous rather than planned. Much must rely on the initiative and commitment of teacher educators themselves to work collaboratively to advance their professional knowledge. Hopefully, they learn by trial and error, by experience and by sharing. They may find such efforts not merely helpful in their day-to-day work but also of major significance in shaping their subsequent development and careers.

Opportunities a quarter of a century ago, to work closely with my six former colleagues, were seminal in my own professional development. Much of what I have believed and tried to achieve since, and above all what I hope I have learned, has been influenced by those experiences in the early years as a teacher educator. Such experiences are vital for all teacher educators; but complacency, indifference or ignorance may mean that they are not always available or explored. The thinking and action reported in the following pages, however, demonstrate exemplary professional qualities and commitment. The contributors have learned a great deal together, and will continue to do so as they explore and develop further their ideas and practices. Their efforts serve as challenging models and encouragement to others.

# INTRODUCTION



## Chapter 1

# Professional Learning in a Context of Change

*Ora Kwo*

### Background and Orientation

This collection of papers is a collaborative product from a series of workshops conducted in the context of change in a university setting. The chief impetus for change focuses on teaching quality, in addition to the university's traditional emphasis on academic research. The workshops focused on quality enhancement in the teaching practicum, and comprised a major part of a project funded by the Teaching Development Grants provided by the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong in 1996. During the project, a professional discourse developed amongst teacher educators which led to a concern for teacher educators' self-renewal and professional development (Kwo 1996a). This book contributes to the literature on teacher education, and highlights the potential for teacher educators' collaborative learning for professional development.

The participants, and hence authors of this book, are all teacher educators who supervise the teaching practicum of student teachers. The papers are based on reflective reports on individuals' work in practicum supervision. Through the open interflow of experiences in lunchtime workshops, the presenters of the reflective reports reached a better understanding of the intentions and the impact of their supervisory practice on student teachers' learning during the teaching practicum. Further insights were developed during the process of writing up the cases. The book is therefore intended for teacher educators and senior teachers/principals in schools who are involved in the induction of new teachers or staff development. Though the issues

discussed are contextualised in the Hong Kong setting, it is believed that the underlying themes are relevant for all readers who are concerned with the professional development of teacher educators and the meaning of collaboration in the process.

### **A Strategic Response to the Challenges of Change in Pursuit of Development**

Change is a prominent concern in education literature. International studies (e.g. Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1995) show that broad social changes demand changes in education systems. However, whether education is adequately responsive to the changing demands of society remains a constant concern. In the world-wide movement towards the accountability of teachers, the pressures for changing practice in schools and teacher education institutions are considerable. Alarmingly, research often has little impact on changes in the practice of the teaching profession (Boostrom et al., 1993; Lauriala & Syrjala, 1995; Zeichner, 1995).

In Hong Kong, the 1970s and 1980s brought the expansion of secondary education, which was followed in the 1990s by rapid expansion of higher education. The 1997 change of sovereignty has brought further expectations of educational changes in the fast-paced society, and education has been declared to be among the priorities in the policy statement of the new government (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 1997). The project on which the book focuses was contextualised within a scenario of expanded educational opportunities in Hong Kong in quantitative terms, and with an emerging focus on quality (Education Commission, 1997). External pressures from government policies are sometimes responded to by schools and institutions with kneejerk reactions. The real challenge is to steer changes that can lead to substantial development.

The goal of professionalising the teaching force and helping teachers to improve classroom teaching remains a critical task. In initial teacher education, the effect of the teaching practicum crucially influences teaching quality among the new generation of teachers.

Stones (1987) presented a succinct analysis of the nature of the teaching practicum in institutionalised training programmes, and queried its effect when much of the student's time on extended practice is spent without guidance.

Teacher educators' own professional learning is essentially a prerequisite to their fulfilment of the role of providing effective guidance to facilitate the process of learning to teach. However, this important dimension for our educational development tends to be assumed rather than addressed directly. If changes are to lead to development, arguably it is *strategic* to address teacher educators' professional learning. It was the intention of this project to focus on the teaching practicum and create a platform for teacher educators to enter a collective review of their practice as supervisors of the teaching practicum.

With proactive and plan-oriented strategies to embark on changes that can contribute to progress and development of our educational scenario, it is also important to consider research literature on the complex processes of change. Fullan (1993) articulated eight basic lessons from research on institutional changes. The pattern underlying the eight lessons of dynamic change, he asserted, concerns one's ability to work with polar opposites (p.40):

simultaneously pushing for change while allowing self-learning to unfold...having a vision, but not being blinded by it; valuing the individual and the group...valuing personal change agency as the route to system change.

When proposing the project, I was guided by a belief that teaching and learning quality is a collective rather than an individual matter. As teacher educators' collaboration in professional development has not been the dominant culture of our workplace, the project was initiated with considerable apprehension. It nevertheless received attention and commitment from a substantial number of colleagues in the first year. The membership grew in the second year with an open invitation to all. This voluntary force developed into a learning community, with individual contributions from colleagues, as demonstrated in the



reflective reports in this book. The experience, to me, went beyond the focus on practicum supervisory experiences, and promoted an understanding of the complexity of the change process. Even when the project had come to an end, the changes in our work culture and professional practice continued. Fullan's lesson (1993, p.21) that "change is a journey, not a blueprint" helps to extend a long-term perspective for understanding the nature of change. With the production of this book, the project can be seen to have been a brief but significant episode contextualised in a long-term complex process of change, marking the meaning of professional learning together.

### **The Significance of Professional Learning of Teacher Educators**

The impact and effectiveness of the teaching practicum are matters requiring continued attention and investigation. One strand in the literature has developed understanding of processes of learning to teach with a focus on the cognition underlying teachers' classroom behaviour (e.g. Fuller, 1969; Berliner, 1988; Kagan, 1992; Kwo 1994, 1996b).

Although the research findings can contribute to a knowledge base of teacher education, and teacher educators can be better informed practitioners, the link between research and practice is often ambiguous. From a rational-positivist view, an immediate link is not expected, because research does not usually solve practical problems in teaching in a direct way. Much research aims to develop basic theory to aid understanding of practitioners, which may only ultimately lead to improved practice. However, research on teacher education does not simply develop basic theory, or yield findings which can be applied. The benefits of research and the connection between theory and practice are complicated. A review of teacher education traditions can facilitate the identification of a direction for reform movement and research in which professional learning of teacher educators plays a significant part.

First, the composition of the body of teacher educators is worth considering. In the university tradition, teacher educators are generally appointed for their academic strength and their expert knowledge in

particular disciplines. As teacher educators, the challenge is to move beyond expertise in disciplinary knowledge to expertise in teaching and teaching supervision. Alternatively, teacher educators may be recruited for their professional expertise as competent school teachers. In that case, their new role requires them to move beyond classroom expertise to the facilitation of learning how to teach, which demands research knowledge and research activities. To help students to bridge the worlds of university learning and classroom teaching, there is a need for professional development of teacher educators from all backgrounds.

To provide stronger supervisory support to student teachers, one major trend in teacher education lies in the venture into partnership with schools for which a mentoring force has to be developed. Even with expertise in classroom teaching, experienced teachers may feel uneasy about how to offer mentoring help to enhance student teachers' processes of learning to teach. To fulfil their supportive role, they need training. While Hong Kong is in the early stage of such a venture, the initial challenge is to set up institution-school dialogues on professional concerns. This dialogue will gradually demand a re-defining of the roles of teacher educators. A further challenge concerns the lack of local literature on teacher mentoring. When teacher educators have to take up the challenge of training mentors, with their knowledge in supervision of the teaching practicum being implicit in their varied practices without any self-examination, training can be most difficult. An unprofessional response to such a new demand would be to rely on a transmission mode to introduce an external body of mentoring knowledge from the existing literature. In this respect, it is again vital to look at the significance in creating a force for professional learning together, initially amongst institutional teacher educators, and subsequently between teacher educators in institutions and schools.

### **Contributions of the Book**

Creating opportunities for developmental changes is not just a matter of technical decisions in committee work. It is through the genuine

experience of learning together that a new culture can be developed to break the long-standing tradition of teachers working in isolation. This book is the product of a staff development project which was conceived with attention to nurturing a collaborative culture in our workplace. With a supportive frame developed through the continual discourse at regular lunchtime meetings, we were able to address problems together and see problems as opportunities to develop new insights into our professional practice. As a result, the contributors to this book can be seen as a collaborative learning force which begins a joint re-structuring of practical knowledge in supervision. The continuation of this force in different forms will be significant in promoting a professional culture among teacher educators.

The cases reported in this book are contributed by teacher educators with varying lengths of supervisory experience in Hong Kong and elsewhere. The cases are all authentic and from the Hong Kong setting, thus adding to the field of mentoring literature within a Hong Kong perspective. They also help satisfy the need for case studies in teacher education (e.g. Kagan, 1993; Shulman, 1992; Rosaen & Wilson, 1996). Teacher education, in parallel with teaching, is an intellectual and practical activity in which decisions are followed by actions. It is through reflections that improvement can take place, but seldom is the intellectual dimension of the profession made transparent and visible. Case descriptions presented in this book, as rich and authentic representations of the complexity of our pedagogical decisions, will illustrate our developing knowledge in a way that can generate further reflections on our professional development as teacher educators. Such developing knowledge amongst teacher educators and the underlying culture of sharing authentic experiences will hopefully form a basis for the creation of a mentoring and peer coaching culture in schools.

Given the trend for closer university-school partnership in teacher education, we need to address the essence of partnership. As discussed in the literature (e.g. Baker et al., 1991; Sarason, 1990; as cited in Fullan, 1993), partnership cannot be achieved through a top-down mode of operation, whatever justification there could be from a planning perspective. Partnership is a process of developing a working

relationship from a shared vision of problems and a joint pursuit of solutions with a diversity of thinking. This process requires time, commitment and accommodation of conflicting viewpoints. Without the ground for a developed working relationship within one institution, new ventures into inter-institutional partnership would likely be among the well-intended reform efforts that Fullan (1993) identified as failing to address the core culture of teaching and learning. Apart from a focus on our supervisory practice, the professional discourse generated in this project, and partly presented in this book, has also demonstrated the prospect of a changing culture within our own workplace. Within the frame of a university-based model of teacher education which is characterized by a clear division of subject boundaries, it is possible to break down the boundaries, celebrate our diversity of thinking and broaden our awareness of the constraints in existing practicum arrangements. Such an awareness will build a common vision for a future changing force in our faculty in curriculum reform which would require further re-structuring of the university-school relationship.

### **The Collaborative Learning Process**

The learning as experienced by all the project participants necessarily began with individual reflections. In order to contribute to the regular lunchtime meetings, we began with an identification of a critical experience we had encountered personally in supervision of our student teachers during the teaching practicum. The experience was selected for reporting because it had triggered new insights about our own practice, thus showing our learning with student teachers.

Professional development requires time for teaching staff to engage in collective thinking, not just on existing experiences, but also about our capacity for improving practice. The challenge is to create time amidst our multiple schedules in teaching and committee work. To meet this challenge, we decided to use 90 minutes of our lunchtime for a monthly seminar during which it was most unlikely that we would have overlapping commitments. Essentially it meant giving up our lunch break to engage in work related to our own professional

development. Alongside the intensity in the use of our lunchtime, our collegiality was also reinforced through the sharing of light snacks.

In each meeting, each presenter reported on a case, and raised some questions, followed by participants' comments and further questions. Individual reflection was thus followed by collective reflection. Given the limitations of time, the meetings often adjourned in the midst of a heated discussion, as we had raised a lot of interesting thoughts and sometimes disagreements which revealed dilemmas in our decisions. We never had time to come to a consensus on a view of the best practice, but the open sharing certainly helped us to improve our understanding of our own individual practice. I managed to follow each meeting with electronic mail which summarised the presentation and our discussion, for the benefits of the absentees. Sometimes the collective reflection continued by electronic mail. This, by itself, became an interesting part of a process in a joint pursuit of insights into professional learning.

With input from the open discussion where dilemmas and a diversity of views were shared, most presenters managed to gather their thoughts and write up the reported cases. In reviewing the written cases as the editor, I had both the pain and the pleasure of seeking to clarify the authors' thoughts. The process of my editorial work included moments of exhilaration at the sharp insights that the authors derived from their meaningful experiences. From the perspective of an interested and critical reader, I aimed to continue the professional discourse at a personal level by joining the authors in asking and addressing the questions raised in their written reflections. The process of professional learning together created new demands — the development of collegial rapport and mutual trust in polishing the manuscripts. While I was trying to identify major thrusts in each contribution, and consider how the authors could communicate clearly to reach the readers, I was also trying to see how all contributions could come together with the diversity of perspectives and the harmony of professional concerns. In the process of working on different manuscripts, I greatly appreciated the authors' responsiveness to the schedule of deadlines, and patience with my persistent endeavour in seeking clarification. To me, the editorial involvement in thinking

together with each author has been a most rewarding learning experience.

Throughout the process of my editorial work, the continual challenge has been struggling to find time between competing commitments in communicating with the authors, and finally, in coming to my writing of the chapters of introduction and conclusion. It has been a journey of actualising a vision, and making a way for an episode of professional learning together to enhance the quality of the teaching practicum, which is now signposted by the production of this book!

### **Nature of Contributions and Structure of the Book**

Each paper has contributed to a professional discourse on the supervision of the teaching practicum, and raised questions and issues for further reflections. While the case descriptions are based on genuine experiences, the general ethical concern for anonymity of our student teachers is upheld. Pseudonyms are used for all student teachers in all cases, which are presented factually in a fiction-style. Using a story-line, each case is built on a description of the background, and the critical incident which leads to actions of the concerned authors as practicum supervisors. The rationale behind the decided actions is described, and the pains or delights about consequences of the actions are reported, concluding with insights of the authors into their specific cases. The authors share the principles of focusing on salient facts while identifying the problem. In parallel, the reflections focus on renewed understanding of the effect of their supervisory practice, rather than subjective evaluative judgements of individual students, whether in positive or negative terms.

To highlight the important themes of the project, the authors' contributions are grouped into two major parts, each with four cases. Part One emphasises professional learning with student teachers in parallel to their developmental changes, whereas Part Two deals with dilemmas in practicum supervision. Except for the case of Margaret Taplin which reports on the Bachelor of Education Programme with

specific details, the setting from where most cases are reported is the Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme (PCEd) offered at The University of Hong Kong. The PCEd is an initial professional qualification for graduates intending to teach, or who are already teaching in secondary schools, where students of ages ranging between 12 and 19 are graded into Secondary 1 to Secondary 7. The qualification is obtained through two years of part-time inservice or one year of full-time study within a university-based teacher education model. For the inservice students, the practicum takes place in their own schools where they are teachers working within a subject panel or department under the leadership of the subject panel head. The full-time students are sent to secondary schools for two periods of teaching practicum: three weeks in the First Semester, and seven weeks in the Second Semester. The authors of the reported cases are supervisors to both inservice and full-time students undergoing the initial process of learning to teach, at undergraduate, as well as, at postgraduate levels.

The purpose of each contributor is to communicate experiences in supervision of the teaching practicum and personal reflections. Each author is sharing what has been learned from the experience, as the problem has been tackled but not completely resolved. No single case can make the complexities and significance of our reflective practice straightforward and complete, and representative of the benefits all individual authors reap. A further goal of this book is to raise questions about the meanings of our practice for consideration in the enlarged community of teacher educators and school leaders beyond our institution. Hopefully, it will generate a wider discourse for our continual pursuit of professional development. As a collective force, let us make learning a more dynamic experience for ourselves and for those who learn with us!

## **References**

- Baker, P., Curtis, D. & Benenson, W. (1991). *Collaborative Opportunities to Build Better Schools*. Illinois: Illinois Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- Berliner, D.C. (1988). Implications of studies on expertise in pedagogy for teacher education and evaluation, in *New Directions for Teacher Assessment*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Boostrom, R., Jackson, P.W. & Hansen, D.T. (1993). Coming together and staying apart: How a group of teachers and researchers sought to bridge the "Research/Practice gap", *Teachers College Record*, 95 (1), 35-44.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Cobb, V.L. (Eds.) (1995). *Teacher Preparation and Professional Development in APEC Members*. Singapore: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Secretariat.
- Fullan, M. (1993). *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Fuller, F.F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualization. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6, 207-226.
- Glickman, C.D. (1995). Co-reform as an approach to change in education: The origin of revolution. In O'Hair, M.J. & Odell, S.J. (Eds.) *Educating Teachers for Leadership and Change* (Teacher Education Yearbook III). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (1997). *Progress Report: The 1997 Policy Address*. Hong Kong: Printing Department of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 65-86.
- The Education Commission of Hong Kong (1997). *Quality School Education* (Education Commission Report No.7). Hong Kong: Printing Department of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government.
- Kagan, D. (1992). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62 (2), 129-169.
- Kagan, D. (1993). Contexts for the use of classroom cases. *American Educational Research Journal*, 30, 703-723.
- Kwo, O.W.Y. (1994). Learning to teach: Some theoretical propositions, in I. Carlgren, G. Handal & S. Vaage (Eds.), *Teachers' Minds and Actions: Research on Teachers' Thinking and Practice*. London: The Falmer Press, 215-231.



- Kwo, O.W.Y. (1996a). Professional learning of teacher educators through the teaching practicum, *Curriculum Forum* (a journal of the Department of Curriculum Studies, The University of Hong Kong), 5 (2), 31-42.
- Kwo, O.W.Y. (1996b). Reflective classroom practice: Case studies of student teachers at work, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 2 (2), 273-298.
- Lauriala, A. & Syrjala, L. (1995). The influences of research into alternative pedagogies on the professional development of prospective teachers, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 1 (1), 101-118.
- Rosaen, C.L. & Wilson, S.M. (1996). Making teacher education problematic: Using cases to prepare teacher educators. *Teaching Education*, 7 (1), 45-52.
- Sarason, S. (1990). *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Shulman, J. (Ed.) (1992). *Case Methods in Teacher Education*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Stones, E. (1987). Student (practice) teaching. In M.J. Dunkin (Ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Education*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Zeichner, K.M. (1995). Beyond the divide of teacher research and academic research, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 1 (2), 153-172.

**PART ONE: LEARNING WITH STUDENT  
TEACHERS AND PROMOTING  
POSITIVE CHANGE**



## Chapter 2

### Beyond Expectations

*Bob Adamson*

#### Introduction

Portrayals of teachers in the public domain are a constant source of irritation to members of the profession. The typical Hollywood depiction of teachers, as dowdy men or women giving rambling or sentimental presentations until they are surprised by the bell, has its counterpart with individual variations in most cultures. Irritating though these portrayals may be, they are not inherently demeaning or damaging to the process of teaching or learning — although they may discourage some worthy people from joining the profession. The following case, on the other hand, involves stereotyping which can arise in teacher education and which can have serious consequences. In this instance, several misconceptions and prejudices were at work, hampering the development of a professional relationship between a student teacher and a supervisor.

In recent literature reviving attention to the concept of a 'reflective practitioner', it has been emphasised that teachers — including teacher educators — bring to their work pre-formed beliefs about teaching, drawn from their own past experiences as students and other formative influences (e.g. Wallace, 1991). The beliefs are then critically re-evaluated in the light of further experiences. In this developmental cycle of reflection and practice, there will always be times when reflective constructs prove, in the light of subsequent practice, to cater inadequately for the complexities of reality. Arguably, a teacher can never afford the luxury of complacency, as even the strongest convictions need periodic reassessment. In the

following case study, narrow beliefs were held not only by the novice teacher, but also, and especially, by the supervising lecturer, resulting in a series of misunderstandings.

The novice teacher, Barbara, was a student on an inservice programme. Her subject area, English as a foreign language, is significant in that the pedagogical trend in recent years has been towards emphasising communication rather than grammatical knowledge. This shift has been accompanied by a change in the role of English teachers from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning. Their remit is to provide and orchestrate opportunities for students to process and produce communicative language. The teacher-centred nature of the structural, grammar-translation methodology is to be replaced by a more learner-centred approach, which places greater demands on the pedagogical skills of the teacher in resourcing, teaching, organising and managing lessons. These skills form the main focus of the supervisory visits by the teacher educators.

### **Searching for Common Ground**

My first visit to Barbara's classroom was also the first time we met, as I had not taught in the programme that she was attending. Her school was located in a remote part of the New Territories, necessitating a hovercraft trip, a long bus ride and then a complicated journey on foot, which turned into a taxi ride when I lost my way. As a result of these peregrinations, I reached the school five minutes before the lesson was due to begin, instead of the more comfortable margin of twenty minutes that I preferred. This meant that I did not have enough time to have a chat with Barbara and to be properly briefed on the double lesson that she was to teach.

My initial impressions of Barbara were, to be frank, prejudiced by the fact that her appearance closely matched one media stereotype of teachers that I dislike very much: the association of ideas that entered my mind presented adjectives with negative connotations

such as 'dour', 'humourless' and 'authoritarian'. I must admit that, as I entered the secondary 4 classroom, I was not looking forward to the next hour and a half. On reflection, of course, I realise that the problems lay with me. I was tired and frustrated from the long, rushed journey, and my personal dislikes were also hindering my ability to provide professional support. I was also to learn later that my first impressions were inaccurate.

The irritation that I felt grew as the lesson progressed. Although I recognised that Barbara had put a lot of time and effort into preparing the lesson, she seemed to me to be an uninspiring teacher. She was softly spoken and monotonous. There was no spark of humour or liveliness to lighten the lesson. The students dutifully carried out the exercises and activities that Barbara provided, but they seemed to find the whole business as tedious as I did. The lesson was centred around a reading passage, which did not allow for very much student participation. This was limited to a brief teacher-centred discussion at the start of the lesson to establish the topic of the passage, and answer checking in pairs at the conclusion of the comprehension exercise. In terms of pedagogy, the lesson was conservative but it followed recommended procedures: there was logical organisation and the students seemed to be coping with the material throughout. But these positive aspects only served to irritate me even further. My inclination was to be harsh in my judgement of the lesson, with the main criticism hinging on teaching personality: it seemed to me that Barbara did not possess the zip that I felt was an essential characteristic of a competent language teacher.

As the lesson finally drew to a close, I began to think about what I should say to Barbara in our post-lesson discussion. Fortunately, enough of my frustration had dissipated, and I began to think of how I could be supportive rather than destructive. I had recovered sufficient composure to be aware that any premature comments on teacher personality could be extremely hurtful and damaging, and that I needed to give this whole issue greater thought — although I was not yet aware that many of my feelings were actually misjudgements. I decided not to bring up this subject. Instead, I

followed some advice that a veteran teacher educator in the field of English language teaching had offered in a talk that I attended a few years previously. He said that, in post-lesson discussions, he and the teacher would identify two or three areas of the teacher's practice for further development.

Bearing this advice in mind, I started by focusing on the strengths of the lesson. I congratulated Barbara on her lesson planning, and we discussed various ways of tailoring her ideas to meet the specific needs and interests of the particular class that I had observed, and for developing ways of increasing student participation. As for weakness, I mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to hear what Barbara was saying, because she was so softly spoken. We talked about techniques for remedying this problem. As we talked, I noticed a change in Barbara. She seemed to be relaxing much more, particularly when she realised that my comments were not highly critical of the lesson.

### **Reflections after the School Visit**

As I returned to the office, I was still very concerned about what I had observed. On the one hand, Barbara had demonstrated a grasp of relevant techniques for teaching English. On the other hand, her teaching personality seemed somehow deficient: she lacked the ability to 'perform' and, as a result, the lesson had not been an enjoyable experience. However, I also had a nagging doubt that my judgement might be askew. I decided to mull over the issue for a while.

Later that day, I visited the library to browse through journals, and came across a pertinent discussion on the question of teacher personality. I was struck by a comment by Anna Kolbuszewska (1996, p.181) in a letter to the *English Language Teaching Journal*: "As teacher trainers we may seem preoccupied with what 'works' and often have too little time to help trainees find the *kinds of behaviour most suitable for their personalities*" (my emphasis). I found this a telling remark because it reminded me of the plurality of teacher personalities — something I had tended to neglect. My starting point

should be to accept Barbara as she is, and not to view her as deficient according to my own vague notions of an ideal English teacher.

Kolbuszewska's comments were written in response to an article by Jeremy Harmer (1995), in which he discussed ways of accommodating 'teacher ego' within learner-centred English language activities. He chooses adverbs "which would best describe the manner of performance most appropriate for that activity" (p 343). As an example, he associates games with the following teacher performing styles: *energetically, encouragingly, clearly, fairly*; and reading aloud with *carefully, commandingly, dramatically, interestingly*. These descriptors closely matched my own ideas, and to a large extent, I believe, my own teaching personality. My ideas, in turn, obviously influenced the kind of teacher performance that I had encouraged in my student teachers.

In reading Kolbuszewska's response to Harmer, I realised that my views were, to some extent, stereotyped and narrow. I had been worried in Barbara's lesson by her lack of strong teaching personality, which I felt was a severe handicap in her work as an English teacher. However, as Kolbuszewska pointed out, a strong teacher personality could well be a source of egotistic satisfaction to the teacher, but excessive performance could be a problem: "just as we can talk about attention-seeking students, we can also talk about attention-seeking teachers. It is human to want to be loved, but the bottom line is: do our students learn?" (Kolbuszewska, 1996; p.180).

In the light of these comments, I decided that I should look at Barbara's teaching from a new angle. The questions that I now felt appropriate were not "Does she have a lively classroom personality? Are her lessons entertaining?" but "How effective are the design, organisation and management of learning experiences? How can that effectiveness be enhanced in ways that are most suitable to Barbara's character?" The two sets of questions are related, but issues of liveliness and entertainment are subsidiary to the issue of teacher effectiveness.



## **Developing Rapport**

Two months later I paid my second visit to Barbara's school. Once again, there was little sparkle in Barbara's classroom presence and the activities did not lend themselves to a great deal of learner-centredness, but her teaching personality seemed to have changed subtly. She was more relaxed and there was much more interaction between her and the students than in the lesson I had observed on my first visit. The focus was a listening activity. Barbara had rejected the materials supplied in the coursebook and had chosen other resources that she judged to be better suited to her students. She asked them to work in pairs in finding the answers to the exercise — not just, as previously, checking answers in pairs — which appeared to enhance the learning process and the concentration of the students. I did not find the time passing quickly, but that no longer was a matter of importance. I was impressed by the good learning atmosphere. Instead of feeling bored, the students seemed to be studiously engaged in the lesson.

In the ensuing discussion, Barbara told me that this was much more of a normal lesson. For my first visit, she had been very nervous, as had the students: we had not met before and it was also the first time that a foreigner had visited that particular class of students. She explained that, for the first visit, she had prepared a lesson according to what she imagined I would be looking for: carefully following the prescribed pedagogical approaches, and taking no risks of losing control of classroom management, which she believed that supervisors equated with noise levels. She had come to realise, after our first discussion, that I was actually encouraging her to take risks, and that I would be unconcerned if a more student-centred approach resulted in some relaxation in the learning environment. Hence, she had decided upon a less defensive approach for my second visit. We then discussed ways in which she could develop her techniques to further enhance the effectiveness of her teaching, on the lines of what she felt appropriate and suitable for her. The issue of teacher personality was not explicitly raised — at least, I had abandoned any thought of mentioning it as a criticism.

### **Moving Beyond Stereotyping**

On reflection, stereotyping made this case unnecessarily complicated. As the supervising tutor, I had preconceived notions of the characteristics of a competent English teacher: a lively, entertaining facilitator whose classroom was filled with the happy buzz of students participating in a range of meaningful communicative activities. Those who did not display these characteristics were somehow deficient in teacher personality, and this deficiency could render them unsuited for teaching. These preconceptions can have demoralising consequences for the student teacher, who is the vulnerable partner to the authoritative, powerful supervisor. As a consequence of her own preconceptions, the student teacher, Barbara, had adjusted her pedagogy to match the style that she thought the supervisor would wish to see: a well disciplined class stolidly and silently ploughing through exercises. The complicating factor was that the supervisor's and student teacher's stereotyped preconceptions of each other's requirements did not match.

This case study fortunately ended quite happily, but it brings out the potential dangers of stereotyping. The student teacher's preconceptions as to a supervisor's requirements resulted in a potentially damaging misunderstanding, but this could be overcome through better communication. The second instance of stereotyping, which affected the supervisor's view of the student teacher, was much more problematic in that it could have led to frustration and a loss of confidence on the part of the student teacher.

As a supervisor, I came to realise that I had a tendency to try to develop clones with similar characteristics in terms of personality. As a result, I was applying congruence too narrowly to pedagogical ideas: in reality, such-and-such a method does not necessarily require teachers to behave in such-and-such a manner. Communicative and student-centred approaches may indicate that emphasis should be placed on student participation and catering to their needs, interests and abilities, but there are many ways by which this can be achieved. Arousing students' interest and getting them to participate in their

own learning does not automatically mean that teachers have to be entertaining: their interest can also be stimulated by challenging or valuable activities. My approach had failed to take the needs, interests and abilities of the student teacher into account.

The chemistry of human relationships is complex and there is no single catalyst that can serve to produce effective learning in every instance. The challenge for student teachers — and their supervisors — is to develop a teacher personality and pedagogy that suits not only the classroom circumstances but also their individual characters.

### **References**

- Harmer, J. (1995). "Taming the big 'I': teacher performance and student satisfaction", in *English Language Teaching Journal*, Vol. 49 (4), 337-345.
- Kolbuszewska, A. (1996). Letter to editor, in *English Language Teaching Journal*, Vol. 50 (2), 180-181.
- Wallace, M.J. (1991). *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Chapter 3

# Encouraging Pre-service Mathematics Teachers to Change Old Beliefs

*Margaret Taplin*

### Introduction

It seems that an essential pre-requisite to teacher change is motivating teachers to want to know about the change and explore how it can affect their practice (Hord et al., 1987). This has concerned me for some time, as I have seen too many pre-service teachers go through our programmes, then go into schools and spend the rest of their careers teaching in exactly the same way as they, themselves, were taught. While many of them can acknowledge interest in the teaching approaches to which they are exposed, it is clear that not all think it is necessary or practical for them to change from the methods which their own former teachers used. The focus of this paper is to explore what we can do as teacher educators to encourage our student teachers to develop an attitude, early in their careers, of wanting to grow professionally. This professional growth, to me, means being aware of developments in teaching and learning theories, and exploring how they can best incorporate the changes into their teaching. The study is based on the rationale that, if the prospective teachers are expected to try different teaching methods and reflect on how the use of the ideas will affect them, they will be more likely to be motivated to use these ideas in their future teaching.

In this project, case study data were collected from a group of pre-service teachers who were required, as part of their assessment process, to participate in a teaching experiment to try some teaching approaches which were new to them. They were asked to do this

over a minimum of three teaching sessions, to allow time for some reflection between lessons. This chapter reports analyses of written and interview data, and explores the changes in student teachers' beliefs about teaching practices as the result of this experiment. Finally, it addresses specific issues which are the most important to the student teachers, thus shedding light on their belief patterns which can be changed the most easily.

### **Teachers' Professional Growth**

Professional growth as a teacher is very much dependent on the teachers' willingness to examine their own practices in the light of developing theories about teaching and learning, and to modify their approaches to incorporate the best ideas from these theories. Nevertheless, it has been claimed (e.g. Gregg, 1995) that many teachers are reluctant to do this and so their practices remain the same year after year. In mathematics teaching, the consequence of this can be that students are produced who can "follow the rules and procedures and conventions specified in the textbook" (Gregg, 1995, p.461), rather than being equipped to meet the changing demands of society. Gregg suggested that, even if teachers were aware that aspects of their practice needed to be examined, they often "developed explanations to account for these problems", and believed that they just had to live with the problems because they could not do anything to overcome them. If they could not see a visible way to implement the change, they would not bother to try. Consequently, it is necessary to encourage teachers to believe that the problems can be surmounted, as a first step to changing their teaching practices. If we can encourage this change at the pre-service level, we may be more successful in producing teachers who are open to change throughout their careers.

Hord, et al. (1987) proposed a seven-stage model of change for teachers, shown in Figure 1. This model was used as a basis for encouraging my student teachers to change their practices. However, I found that just lecturing to them failed to elevate them beyond the

first two levels. It seems that, unless the teacher has an intrinsic awareness of a need to change, and a desire to know more, the growth process will never begin. Clearly, if we are to encourage the growth process to begin, it is necessary to find a way to make them aware that some of their beliefs may be challengeable. It was Piaget (1929) who first claimed that learning occurs when the learner is placed in a state of 'disequilibrium' which challenges the validity of old conceptions.

Figure 1: Model of teacher change (Hord et al., 1987)

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| Awareness     | I am not concerned about any change                |
| Informational | I would like to know more                          |
| Personal      | How will using these ideas affect me?              |
| Management    | I am overwhelmed. How do I organize?               |
| Consequence   | How is the innovation affecting my students?       |
| Collaboration | I am concerned about sharing ideas for change      |
| Refocusing    | I am confident that I can improve on ideas learned |

The purpose of this chapter is to report one attempt to expose pre-service teachers to such a state of disequilibrium, and encourage them to consider the desirability of change. The student teachers under consideration had completed the two-year primary school

### *Professional Learning Together*

teachers' professional certification programme in the Colleges of Education, and were in the final semester of a two-year full-time programme to convert the certificate to a Bachelor of Education degree. They had been given considerable exposure to current theories about teaching and learning mathematics, and had visited a school where they were able to observe these theories being put into practice. In discussions, they confirmed that they could see value in the new approaches, but they also made it clear that they intended to teach in the more traditional way that they had themselves been taught when they were in primary school. Their reason was that the traditional way was easier and more conducive to the syllabus and time constraints with which they would be faced. My intention was to find a way to help them to confront their belief that there is only one teaching approach which can 'work' for their situations, and to encourage them to think about how others might be applicable.

#### **Using Assessment to Create Disequilibrium**

In this particular case, the catalyst for change was a major assignment for their final mathematics education module. Using assessment to create a state of disequilibrium is a strategy used quite commonly by other teacher educators. Delaney (1996), for example, reported that assessment tasks can provide an effective way of encouraging student teachers to challenge their own beliefs and promote their professional growth.

The student teachers were asked to work with a student or group of students, to teach at least three lessons using approaches which had been discussed in class. They chose for themselves the approaches they would use. After three lessons, they were asked to report to their colleagues in the class on what they had learned, or in what ways their beliefs about teaching mathematics had changed. In a sense, the fact that this exercise was a major component of their assessment 'forced' them to practice different approaches to teaching.

## *Encouraging Pre-service Mathematics Teachers to Change Old Beliefs*

From the student teachers' reports, two interesting issues emerged. The first was that there were some teaching theories which the majority of student teachers chose to focus on. The second was that most of them reported that they had changed some of their beliefs, as a result of the teaching experiment. These issues were examined to enable me to gain insight into this stage of the teachers' professional learning. I could then plan follow-up interactions with student teachers by building on their state of thinking and practice. While it was almost certain that the student teachers would have chosen teaching approaches which they thought would 'please me' as the assessor, it was still useful to explore which ones were more popular than others, and which ones they found more 'realistic' to implement.

### **Commonly Used Teaching Strategies**

One of the teaching strategies trialed extensively was the use of discussion. In class, the student teachers had told me it would be difficult to implement in-depth discussion between the students and the teacher, or between students. Their main reason was the lack of time in the typical Hong Kong classroom, but another was the cultural belief that the teacher should be the only person to talk. Nevertheless, in the assignment most of the student teachers reported that they had used activities which encouraged their students to talk about the mathematics they were doing — to explain to the teacher or other students, or to share and use each other's ideas.

Another commonly trialed strategy was to present mathematics in real-world contexts, so children could see how it is used as a tool, and see a reason for doing the tasks. The student teachers were able to create good examples of such real-world contexts, and there was considerable attention given to the use of games to provide motivation. A third teaching strategy which received considerable attention in class was the use of concrete materials to model mathematical situations. Before they did the assignment, the student teachers had commented that they supported this idea but that time



constraints and large classes would make it difficult for such an approach to be practised regularly. Nevertheless, in the assignment, half of the student teachers reported activities which encouraged the children to manipulate materials. Most of these also used effective strategies to link the concrete modelling to appropriate symbolic recording.

It was good to see that several of the student teachers were able to ask questions which encouraged the students to take responsibility for their own mathematical thinking. This is in contrast to their old belief, that the teacher should directly tell the child if an answer was wrong, or how to find an answer. Some of the questions they asked included:

- What is the relationship between...?
- How is the first case similar to the second case?
- Can you use diagrams to explain...?
- Why do you think this is so?

Some of the student teachers again experimented with relinquishing teacher control. They managed to encourage and guide their students to develop their own strategies for completing the given tasks, rather than just expecting them to do it 'the teacher's way'.

One particular concern amongst teacher educators is that many teachers tend to select activities which are worthwhile and fun to do, but which do not fit logically into a sequence which takes the child from one level of development to the next. It was therefore, again, encouraging that several of the student teachers were able to provide a logical, developmental sequence of activities when asked to do so. Similarly, about half the group were able to use their evaluation outcomes of one lesson effectively as a basis for planning the subsequent one. Despite this, it was noticeable that not many actually began a new lesson with activities which tested the students' retention of the previous lesson's content.

It is of interest to mention, here, that there were several aspects of mathematics teaching which I had particularly emphasised in class, but which were not particularly acknowledged in the students'

lessons. Although considerable attention had been given in class to teaching via problem-solving approaches, very few student teachers presented tasks in problem contexts or asked open-ended questions. There was little encouragement for students to find more than one method of solution to the given tasks, to make generalisations from the tasks they had done, or to transfer their knowledge to different contexts. The development of estimation strategies and the use of calculators were similarly omitted. A further issue which was overlooked was that of paying more attention to individual students. For example, there were few comments on specific individuals in the written evaluations. Not many student teachers mentioned that they provided extra challenges for the children who finished early, and few catered for the needs of specific individuals or modified their lessons in response to the children's needs, such as when they were becoming bored with the tasks.

### **Reported Changes in Student Teachers' Beliefs**

The second part of this paper describes the outcomes of the reports which the student teachers made after the teaching experiment, when they discussed the beliefs which had either changed or strengthened during the teaching sessions. They commented on a range of issues, including the students' needs, teaching strategies, the teacher's role, evaluation and organisation.

One area about which the majority of the student teachers showed enthusiasm was the need to use more daily life examples and motivational activities. Several of them said they had become more convinced that mathematics teaching should involve the development of children's mathematical thinking rather than just telling them what to do. Some mentioned that their experiences had convinced them of how important it is to use extended questions to probe the students' thinking continually.

In summary, the student teachers were quite willing to try ideas that were new to them. In particular, there was a great deal of effort to present tasks in contexts which were related to daily life and hence

motivational to the children. They also tended to choose tasks which encouraged active, worthwhile discussion by the students, and fostered a situation where the students, not the teachers, were doing the majority of the thinking. Their reports suggested that they had become convinced of the importance of these. The following comment, made by one of the student teachers, reflects typical changes in their thinking:

Listening to what children said during discussion offered me a continuous and detailed means of assessing their understanding and progress. Before this session I doubted whether talk/discussion could be obtained in working with a class of thirty-six children. The class was formed into groups, for discussions which took place without my presence. I interacted with these groups by circulating. I controlled a second level of interaction between groups, by calling on spokespersons to report, and drawing in other children appropriately. Through doing this, I became convinced that children need more opportunity to talk about their mathematics.

I learnt that children working together not only have the opportunity to listen and learn from each other, but also are able to try out some ideas in a non-threatening environment. Every member of a group has the chance of seeing the activity in more than one way than if they were working alone.

Team work can lead to better development of mathematical understanding because of the communication that must occur for the group to function. These activities necessitate that children use all four components of language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Interactions are indeed the heartbeat of the mathematics classroom. Mathematics is learned best when students are actively participating in that learning. One method of active participation is to talk to the teacher and peers about the mathematics they are learning.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that the assignment was successful in encouraging student teachers to examine, and in many cases, change their beliefs about mathematics teaching. Specifically, they reported that they had experimented successfully with the use of discussion, encouraging children to take more responsibility for their own thinking, presenting tasks in real-world contexts, and using concrete materials to model the mathematics. There are three ways in which the outcomes of the student teachers' reports will influence my future practice, and my interactions with future groups of student teachers. The first is that I will continue to use assignments as catalysts to encourage the student teachers to see the need to think about change in their practice. This is because I believe that some changes in thinking have been brought about in this way. I do think, however, that while the assessable assignment can be used to encourage them to try new practices, it is important to enable the student teachers to reflect on their practices in a non-threatening and non-assessing way.

The second effect on my practice will be, now that I have some understanding of the teaching strategies the student teachers are the most likely to adopt, that I will use these as a basis to encourage them to explore and share their experiences with further strategies that they have not readily incorporated, such as problem solving, estimation and the use of technology. For example, since so many of the student teachers' reports reflected a growing enthusiasm about the use of games, we can focus on the use of games to develop calculator and estimation skills. We can also explore the use of real world tasks, which the teachers believed to be important, for further ways to develop problem solving skills.

The third effect on my practice will be to use other assessment tasks designed specifically to 'force' the student teachers to consider the role of less popular issues. Again, I will make provision for them to reflect and report on their beliefs in a non-assessing situation.

The analysis of student teachers' work has enabled me to identify student teachers' beliefs about teaching from their actual practice. This helps me to consider future measures to encourage them to

continue to grow. There is still a lot more to find out about the process of struggle which they will continue to face in implementing these changes in their future classrooms, and the prospect for successful change. However, it appears that the teaching assignment has provided a worthwhile starting point in encouraging the student teachers to examine some of their beliefs about teaching practices, and explore ways to implement some teaching approaches which they had thought impractical or impossible. It has demonstrated that first-hand experience can be more powerful than lectures in persuading student teachers that some of the current teaching theories can be implemented successfully in practice.

### **References**

- Delaney, K. (1996). Personal transformation through assessment tasks: exploring beliefs about teaching and learning mathematics. Paper presented at the International Congress on Mathematical Education, Seville, Spain.
- Gregg, J. (1995). The tensions and contradictions of the school mathematics tradition. *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, 26 (5), 442-466.
- Hord, S., Rutherford, L., Huling-Austin, L. & Hall, G. (1987). *Taking Charge of Change*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Piaget, J. (1929). *The Child's Conception of the World*. Harcourt, New York.

## Chapter 4

### Survival Support for Student Teachers

*Lo Mun-Ling and Lee Chi-Kin*

#### Introduction

*"It was my first day of teaching. I was very nervous. I felt I was on test, like an actor before the audience. I wanted to smile to show my students I was relaxed and able to enjoy teaching. But I was nervous. I couldn't smile. The students were uneasy too. I wasn't helping them. The toys (that I planned to use to introduce the lesson) were not working.... It didn't have the dramatic effect I was expecting... "*

Such were the helpless moments of adjustment and anxiety recollected by a student teacher of her first classroom encounter. These feelings may perhaps be quite typical of student teachers undergoing metamorphosis from students to teachers. One common practice for teacher educators is to refrain from visiting student teachers during the first week to give them time to 'acclimatize' themselves to the school, get to know the students and hopefully build up rapport. However, as teacher educators, we could not help asking the questions:

*"Is it a good idea to leave student teachers on their own during the first week? Do they need my help right from the beginning? Are there better ways to support them? Can we help them overcome the feelings of helplessness and insecurity? Can we provide them with greater support during the initial teaching practicum?"*

These were some of the questions in our minds when we contemplated an action research project to provide an alternative practicum experience for student teachers. We were fortunate to be able to find a school principal who was supportive of our idea on first trial. So, after getting consent from the student teachers to take part in the research exercise, the project got off the ground.

### **An Alternative Practicum**

The project reported here involved four full-time chemistry student teachers: Kathy, Gary, Natalie and Melanie and two of us, as supervisors with one to zero year of experience in teaching practicum supervision. The student teachers were all placed in one school as a team so that they could support one another. They were given two Secondary 4 and two Secondary 3 classes. Instead of assigning one student teacher to teach each class, all four were responsible for teaching all four classes.

Before the practicum, we obtained the teaching schedule from the school and as a team, planned the teaching scheme for the whole period of the practicum. The student teachers then prepared their preliminary lesson plans and tried out all the experiments they planned to use in their subsequent teaching. During the practicum, we met the day before any Secondary 4 lesson was to take place, discussed the plan for the lesson and negotiated teaching duties among student teachers. Once the work had been divided up, individual student teachers wrote up the plan of their part of the lesson. In the beginning, a double period was shared amongst all four student teachers, but we soon discovered that this frequent change of teachers was too confusing to the Secondary 4 students. In subsequent lessons, two student teachers at most, shared one session. Later, as they gained in confidence and skill, only one student teacher was involved per session. While one student teacher taught, the rest of us observed. After the lesson, we immediately held a post-lesson conference. Sometimes the class teachers of the school also joined in. During the conferences, we suggested modifications and improvements to the lesson.

As experienced teachers, we know that often we would come out of a class with the feeling , *"If I had the chance of doing this lesson again, I would have done it in a different way, I would . ."*. However, often, we have to live with the regret for a year before we have the chance to teach a similar lesson again. To student teachers, any suggestions for improvement would remain as hypotheses to be tested in the classroom. Very often, post-lesson conferences do not lead to changes in behavior because student teachers are unable to try out the ideas *in the same context* again. We had taken this into consideration when we planned the project. That was why we specifically asked for two Secondary 4 and two Secondary 3 classes. We wished to provide the chance for these student teachers to test out their ideas in improving their lessons as soon as possible by teaching a similar lesson to the other Secondary 4 or Secondary 3 class. We concentrated our collaborative effort on the two Secondary 4 classes only, leaving them entirely on their own for the Secondary 3 classes. This was because we wished to find out whether they would transfer what they had learnt with Secondary 4 to their teaching of Secondary 3 and to adapt the same collaborative method. All lessons were video-recorded and all post-lesson conferences were audio-recorded. Everyone, including the supervisors, wrote a diary to reflect on their experiences. This project turned out to be a revealing learning experience not only for the student teachers, but for us, practicum supervisors as well.

### **The Emotions of Student Teachers During Initial School Experience**

Initially, student teachers tended to be so preoccupied with their own performance that they were happy as long as they could complete their delivery according to plan, all else forgotten. It often came as a shock to them to find out how others viewed their lesson.

*"I was quite satisfied with my performance after the first lesson, but after the post-lesson conference with the group, I found out many parts were not good enough. There were many problems,*



*such as giving a wrong concept. I didn't realize my problems in teaching before...."*

After an intensive input of learning theories and teaching methodologies, student teachers were all eager to try out everything. Having somewhat unrealistic expectations of themselves, these novice teachers tended to think naively that theory could be easily put into practice. The realization that this could not be easily achieved caused considerable frustration and disillusionment. Kathy, who has since developed into a devoted teacher, is a good illustration of such cases. Even today, as a teacher in a secondary school, she keeps coming back to me for advice. With her genuine love for teaching and determination to becoming a teacher, there were moments during teaching practicum when she had doubts about her ability to teach, and was on the verge of giving up. Sometime during the first week of the practicum, I found her very moody. She did not join in our conversations as usual. I suggested that she and I should take a walk. As we strolled among the trees and ferns of the school garden, away from the sights of students and teachers, amid tears, Kathy unfolded to me her story as a teacher.

She already had one year of teaching experience in a school before joining the PCEd programme. Unfortunately, that year seemed like a nightmare to her. She had difficulty managing the discipline of the students, and this was aggravated by the fact that she was rather insecure about her own grasp of subject content knowledge. Her coping strategy was to adopt a didactic teaching style to protect herself from students' questioning. Her relationship with her students deteriorated from unfriendly to hostile. Her determination to become a teacher prompted her to quit her job and take up the full-time PCEd programme. She thought that after taking the programme, she would be able to solve all her problems. However, as she sensed her relationship with students becoming worse each day, she started to question her own suitability as a teacher and was becoming disillusioned about the PCEd programme. I am glad that I was able to give her timely moral support and to identify her problem early so that I could help her deal with it. If she had been left on her own, she

might have adopted a withdrawn attitude or have already given up by the time I paid her the first visit.

### **From Competition to Collaboration**

By putting four student teachers together, we hoped to provide an environment where they could support and help each other. However, collaboration did not seem to occur at the start. There was an initial antagonistic, uneasy moment of competition for performance. Collaboration had to be learnt.

In the first few lessons, instead of trying to learn about their own strengths and weaknesses, they tended to be more interested in comparing their own teaching performance with the rest of the team. They resented unfavourable comments from their peers, sometimes, even from the supervisors. The following quotations were taken from the diaries of the student teachers during the first week of practicum.

*" I was so upset by the others' comments. I have no confidence in teaching now."*

*"If there was anything wrong with the way the lesson went, the supervisors should be able to point it out to us before the lesson. I had shown them the plan beforehand."*

Natalie thought she was always the 'guinea pig' to take either the first lesson or new teaching approaches whenever they were to be tried out. Constructive comments from the team were taken as criticisms. The following is extracted from transcriptions of the feedback session after the practicum.

*"I felt uncomfortable when nobody was bold enough to volunteer to do it (try out new teaching strategies), so I volunteered. But then because I was the first one to try it out, there's bound to be many problems, and I would get all the criticisms on my*

## *Professional Learning Together*

*performance and they would get away with better comments because they had benefited from my mistakes. This did depress me a lot towards the end of the first week"*

However, her feelings were not shared by the rest of the team. They thought that Natalie was always the one to volunteer to try out *their* new ideas and she was in fact the one who gained. Apart from gaining a richer learning experience, they felt that she was possibly also viewed more favorably by the supervisors.

Collaboration gradually developed as we got to know and became more trusting of each other. We all learnt to be more sensitive about the way we gave our comments to avoid generating hurt feelings. We adopted a strategy that during the post-lesson conference, the 'teacher' would always be the first one to speak, to point out his/her own shortcomings, instead of having them pointed out by someone else. The others would follow up on areas in which the 'teacher' had improved compared with his/her last lesson, and to tell us what they liked about the lesson. This seemed to contribute tremendously towards their capacity to reflect on their teaching methods. The subsequent support and encouragement shown by the team served to keep the morale high during this difficult stage of the student teachers' development.

Towards the end of the first half of the school experience, the post-lesson conferences were working so well that all agreed that they were very valuable and that they had learnt much from each other. They were able to turn peer observations into learning experiences for both the 'teacher' and the observers. For example, Kathy, who had always believed that the teacher should look very stern to maintain class control realized that there are alternatives.

*"Comparing Melanie's lesson with my lesson to the same class, the atmosphere of my lesson was so tense and threatening. Students were afraid of asking questions and giving responses. Her lesson gave me a great impact on my teaching."*

## **From Awareness to Practice**

Student teachers did learn to observe and reflect critically about their own teaching. However, it did not necessarily follow that the observed problems in teaching performance would automatically be rectified in subsequent lessons. I will try to illustrate this with two examples.

Natalie recognized that her blackboard work was very untidy. She could very quickly point out that her blackboard was very messy at the end of the lesson. She even tried to plan the finished look of her blackboard before the lesson, but during the lessons, we still found her scribbling everywhere. The ability to stop, reflect and take appropriate action during the course of teaching does not come easily for novice teachers.

Kathy understood that her difficulty in establishing rapport with students was due to her unapproachable attitude towards students. The practicum has changed her belief that a teacher must be stern, authoritative or even hostile to maintain good discipline. Yet, it was not until towards the end of the second teaching practicum that she demonstrated some change in her attitude towards students. I can still remember vividly the day when the second teaching practicum was over. She came to my office to show me a bookmark given to her by one of her students. At the back of the bookmark was written the message,

*" ...I have always failed in my work. Thank you for being so caring (my emphasis) and helped me with my work. This time, I still did not pass but I did not fail so badly. You are the best teacher I have ever met!"*

Recently, she told me that many of her students come and talk to her after class because she is considered to be one of the *most approachable* teachers in the school!

Very often, we feel that the post-lesson conferences are not having an impact on the practice of student teachers. From this project, we learnt that it takes more than awareness to change practice. Yet we can be optimistic that once they become aware of

their own problems and make conscious efforts to improve, they would change one day.

### **Student Teachers' Reaction to this Experience**

Although we did not help them with the Secondary 3 lessons, they collaborated and planned lessons together and held post-lesson conferences on their own as they did with Secondary 4. During the feedback session after the practicum, they all agreed that the experience was very useful to them. The following are some of their comments.

*"I like this team teaching rather than going alone to a school. It really helps me."*

*"The experience was very good for me. It was like being gently led into it rather than if you just threw me into a school, I would have completely lost my confidence.... The whole thing was very pleasant."*

*"I am glad I am doing the PCEd and we went into school experience as a team and the two of you were there most of the time, and when needed. I think I can manage with a lot less during the next teaching practicum."*

*"Post lesson evaluation was very helpful...watching my classmates teach was very useful so that I can learn from their lessons...."*

### **Conclusion**

The initial school experience can be a very stressful period for student teachers, as many of them are in need of moral support. Working with a supportive group became effective once they could

overcome the competitiveness amongst themselves and develop a trusting relationship. Supervisors and peers should exercise sensitivity and tact when making comments during post-lesson conferences. Comments must always be constructive, encouraging and supportive. A conscious effort must be made to help student teachers adopt an open mind when their problems in teaching (or when more tactfully put, suggestions for improving their teaching) are pointed out to them. Being aware of problems in their teaching need not lead to changed practice at once. Even when student teachers are convinced that their practice is problematic, and make a conscious effort to change, to be able to actually change practice takes time.

## Chapter 5

### Probing the Depth of Student Teachers' Reflections

*Elizabeth Cheung and Benny Yung*

#### Introduction

As relative newcomers to this field and with minimal induction, we tended to inherit from our predecessors their practice of teacher education in conducting a group-sharing session after each of the two teaching practice blocks, but felt we should move beyond the existing practice. We decided to ask our student teachers to keep a journal of their teaching practice experience. But we soon found that, in order to understand their experience better, we needed to follow their journals with individual interviews. The following is an account of our experiences and our reflections on some of the unexpected outcomes.

#### Limitation of Journal Writing

In general, student teachers found journal writing a useful exercise to stimulate awareness of their progress. When we first read through the student teachers' journals, however, we were not able to get too deep into their thinking. The following cases illustrate how the inadequacies of journal writing were supplemented by individual interviews, as well as, group-sharing sessions.

#### *Conflicts Between Two Student Teachers*

Tina was placed in the same school as Peggy. Upon reading Tina's journal, we detected some clues about her disagreement with Peggy. When asked to elaborate on this during the individual interview, Tina

pointed out that *"such an arrangement (in placing a pair of student teachers within the same school) was cruel. It led to competition and hurt our relationship. We were no longer friends after school experience...."*

We were surprised to hear the word 'competition' because the first teaching practicum did not carry any assessment at all. Yet, the situation was disappointing. As revealed by Tina: *"Once Peggy got time to plan a lesson together with me, but when she anticipated that my lesson would be observed by the university tutor, she was not willing to do so. She seemed to be concerned that I would benefit from her feedback.... In terms of co-operation, we are a failure case."*

Tina further brought out the cause leading to the above situation.

*"When we drew up lesson plans together, Peggy sometimes could be quite argumentative on certain minor details. Once, she scolded me in front of a colleague just because I had wrongly labelled the axis of a graph in a worksheet.... She always talked to me like a superior."*

Actually their conflict started on the very first day when planning their lesson together. As Tina recalled:

*"In planning a worksheet, I suggested drawing pictures, but Peggy said simply drawing was not serious enough. She suggested looking for diagrams in books. I followed her suggestion. However, the mannerism with which she gave comments became more rude as time went by...."*

Though we did not require student teachers to agree on a common lesson plan, they seemed to feel obliged to achieve that, which led to conflicts. Upon reflection, we realized that the crux of the problem did not lie within the differences in opinions on pedagogical matters. Rather, what matters is the manner in which professional discourse was carried out. Maybe this is an area of interpersonal skills that has not been given due attention in our PCED



programme. Such a need seems apparent in Tina's remarks about dissatisfaction towards Peggy's behaviour.

The above incident has forced us to re-examine our assumption that the 'pairing' arrangement is necessarily a beneficial experience for the student teachers. A harmonious working and learning relationship between student teachers is an important prerequisite for them to share genuine comments, and to learn from each other. When placing student teachers in pairs, we need to pay attention to possible personality clashes between the student teachers and help them with some skills to resolve conflicts if they arise.

### *Incident of Intervention*

As university tutors, we are always aware of the possible harmful effects of external intervention on student teachers during teaching. We were disappointed to hear of a case of intervention reported by a student teacher, Tony, during a group-sharing session:

*"Mr. Chow told me to stop, and then he walked to the front of the class, pointed out to the class the part on which I was considered to have made mistakes. He then taught the class that part again. After that, he asked me to continue."*

Tony was severely hurt by such an intervention:

*"I felt very embarrassed.... I stood still and did not know what to do next. I wished to hide myself somewhere.... What a mortifying experience it was! I really wanted to evaporate at that moment...."*

Tony added that a student repeatedly mentioned his mistake to him after school in order to make him feel embarrassed. This case of intervention could ruin a student teacher's image and undermine his confidence in front of the class. While it is understandable that the teacher tutor was eager to remedy the mistakes for the sake of his student's learning, he might not be aware of the detrimental effect of his intervention on the student teacher's learning. Simply informing

### *Probing the Depth of Student Teachers' Reflections*

teacher tutors not to intervene may not mean much. It will be desirable to share with them the above difficult experience of a student teacher.

#### *Rapport between Student Teachers and Teacher Tutors*

During a group-sharing session, Tony expressed some personal opinions about his teacher tutor:

*"I was so frightened of him.... I did not know why. Maybe I did not have much contact with him...."*

This raised questions concerning the suitability of a teacher being a teacher tutor, and the extent to which he or she can be accepted by a student teacher. In this case, as a professional relationship failed to develop between Tony and Mr. Chow, it was not surprising that Tony could not benefit as much from Mr. Chow's supervision as could be expected.

Another student teacher, Judy, echoed this by recalling an incident when she observed a double-lesson of her teacher tutor.

*"I went in only during the second period.... Once I stepped into the laboratory, several students who were initially doing their experiments rushed towards me to ask me questions instead of asking my teacher tutor. Then I saw the sudden change of the facial expression of my teacher tutor. I felt rather embarrassed...."*

When asked why they did not record the above incidents in their journals, Tony said: *"I felt difficult in expressing this incident in writing...."* Judy, on the other hand, feared that we would tell her teacher tutor about the incident while she was still practising in that school, which would upset her teacher tutor. Did this reflect a lack of personal rapport between the student teachers and us? We believe that the crux of the problem lies in how genuinely we want to help our student teachers (and perceived to be so by them) through reading and responding to their journals. Our timely and sincere responses to

their reflections can mean a great deal to their own judgment about the worthiness of the reflective exercises. These would certainly affect their decisions about the extent to which they might actively develop reflection themselves, and how they might incorporate their reflections into developing practices.

### **Insights Gained and Problems to be Addressed**

#### *How Journals Reflect Student Teachers' Genuine Concerns*

It seems that the extent to which journal writing reflects the genuine concerns of student teachers differs from individual to individual and from incident to incident. The factors affecting the sincerity and depth of student teachers' reflections include the personal rapport between the student teachers and the university tutors, as in the case of Judy, and their English proficiency in expressing feelings in journals, as in the case of Tony. In addition, the question about what constitutes a worthy incident to be recorded in the journal is also problematic. An incident such as the intervention reported by Tony is worthy to be put down from our perspective, but this may not be considered appropriate by the student teacher. As Tony pointed out: "*Sometimes, I needed to think hard before I could write something because there was not much worthy to write on.....*" In fact we did suggest some themes for them to write on. These included: (a) unexpected episodes in the classroom which possibly resulted in embarrassment or confidence building; (b) any new learning that they have developed; and (c) major concerns or problems related to their teaching. Nevertheless, Tony's response alerts us that more detailed guidelines and stimuli to reflection, for example, in the form of questions, might be necessary to facilitate student teachers' reflection. Furthermore, we asked student teachers to write journals, but we did not have a chance to read them until after the teaching practicum. It seems obvious that if we could have responded more promptly to their writings, they might have been facilitated better in the development of their reflective power. In this light, it will make more sense

in the coming academic year that we should ourselves engage in some regular response to student teachers' weekly journals during the teaching practice.

*Group Sharing and Individual Interviews as Support to Stimulate Reflections*

Even if more guidelines and stimulus to reflection are to be provided, and more timely and prompt responses are to be given, we still do not think journal writing *alone* is sufficient as a strategy for helping students to reflect. Instead, we have found group-sharing sessions and individual interviews meaningful occasions for helping student teachers to describe, reflect, discuss and share, during which they can express their feelings better. Besides, during interviews and group-sharing sessions, in contrast to journal writing, student teachers can be probed to elaborate and reflect more fully and more critically. In particular, individual interviews could reveal certain sensitive incidents, like the case of conflicts between student teachers, to enhance our understanding of their practicum which student teachers are unlikely to be willing to share during group-sharing sessions.

*Constraints in the Teaching Practicum*

The incidents described above further reveal the constraints in the arrangement of our teaching practicum. While there is good intention behind the usual practice of placing student teachers in pairs in the same school, the case of conflicts between them remind us that such an arrangement will not necessarily be beneficial for all student teachers. Whether student teachers can really offer some kind of support for each other under such an arrangement is an area which deserves our attention as supervisors of practicum. An early detection of problems would rely on the initiative of university tutors to keep contact with student teachers. It is pertinent to develop professional communications between university tutors and teacher tutors, as well as, the willingness of student teachers to discuss these problems frankly with their teacher tutors and university tutors.

Ideally, we would like to recommend exemplary teachers to be teacher tutors from whom student teachers can learn in the practicum. However, the ways some teacher tutors act in certain incidents, such as intervention, are certainly alarming. Teacher tutors may be expert teachers but they may not be equally expert in helping student teachers. Should they be given a training course before they are qualified to take up the responsibility? Teacher tutors are mostly chosen from a network of university tutors' contacts, on the basis of their teaching experiences and proximity of their schools to the home of student teachers. Faced with a busy teaching life, not many teachers are willing to take up the role of teacher tutoring. Will the requirement for attending a training course further decrease their willingness to participate? How, then, can we control the quality of teacher tutors for the sake of our student teachers? We think some of the problems could be solved only with conjunctive efforts of both school personnel and teacher educators. Our faculty's recent venture into the School-University Partnership Scheme is one response to such a need. It aims to establish collaboration with schools on professional development of teachers and make teaching practicum a richer and more beneficial experience for student teachers. Coping with the constraints in the teaching practicum remains a challenge ahead of us.

## **PART TWO: DILEMMAS IN SUPERVISION**



## Chapter 6

# Pre-lesson Discussion in Supervision: Can it be More Than a Ritual?

*Francis Lopez-Real*

### Introduction

The relationship between supervisor and student teacher is both highly complex and intensely personal. However, despite this complexity, the supervision *process* often falls into three easily definable stages, namely: Pre-lesson Discussion, Lesson Observation, and Post-lesson Discussion. It is the first of these stages that the case studies below will focus on. Although there are various models of supervisory practice, including the involvement of teacher-tutors and/or other student teachers, the context here is restricted to the one-to-one communication between university supervisor and student teacher. The incidents described come from a two-year part-time Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme with most of the student teachers having at least two years of teaching experience.

### Ambiguity in the Function of Pre-lesson Discussion

Lesson-planning is introduced from a generic perspective early in the PCEd programme. This deals with such aspects as setting clear objectives, identifying the teaching strategies to be used and the activities to be undertaken by the students, specifying the time-management for the activities, and describing the appropriate classroom organisation. This generic perspective is then further developed with particular examples and discussion within the student



teachers' major subject area. One of the first assignments in the programme involves producing a detailed lesson plan. Given this early emphasis, the student teacher is likely to assume that great importance is attached to lesson-planning by their lecturers. It is therefore hardly surprising that many student teachers see the *main* purpose of the pre-lesson discussion to be that of the supervisor 'checking up' on preparation to see whether a detailed lesson plan has been written.

However, it is also my impression that for many students this is essentially ritualistic and is not perceived as a genuinely integral element of their actual teaching because, in their day-to-day work as practising teachers they rarely, if ever, write out such a plan. They also perceive the pre-lesson discussion as an opportunity to provide the supervisor with relevant background concerning, for example, the ability level of the students or the language policy of the school. This latter perception is shared by many supervisors who see one of the main purposes of the pre-lesson stage to be that of establishing a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere with the student. This might be described as a 'socialising' function.

From my perspective as a supervisor, the availability of a detailed lesson plan may lie more in facilitating the *post-lesson* discussion with the student teacher, in terms of retrospective analysis of the lesson, rather than the 'checking up' aspect expected by the student. There is therefore a possible dissonance between the expectation of the student teacher and that of the supervisor. Moreover, even if the supervisor does decide to look at the lesson plan, the question arises as to whether this should be merely for information, which is essentially a *passive* role for the supervisor, or whether there is a legitimate place for a more *active* role in the discussion which may even involve a change in the plan. The incidents described below have been selected in order to consider further the possible functions of pre-lesson discussion.

*Case 1: The Dilemma of Seeing 'Trouble Ahead'*

The Mathematics Module from which these examples are taken involves students being divided into small tutorial groups for many sessions. This means that some of the students are relative 'strangers' to me, in the sense that the only previous contact has been during large lecture sessions, whilst other students are very well known to me through our tutorial discussions. This student teacher was one of my 'strangers' and, after some familiarisation with the school background, we focused on his lesson plan. The introduction to the lesson was intended to involve a demonstration of different perspectives of a circle by using a disc. Following this, an ellipse would be defined as a 'deformed circle'. Then there would be a practical activity in which the students would be given a worksheet with two fixed points already marked on it together with a short piece of string. Each student would have to construct an ellipse in the following way: "Fix the 2 ends of the string on the points A and B. Bend the string so that it forms a triangle with side AB. Keeping the string taut, draw the locus of the third point of the triangle". This is a standard way of drawing an ellipse, described in many textbooks.

Since the intention of the lesson was to derive some of the basic properties of an ellipse from the students' drawings, it was clear that the success of the lesson might well hinge on the effectiveness of the introductory activity. Although my normal practice of pre-lesson interaction with an unfamiliar student teacher is to leave detailed discussion of the plan until after the lesson, I felt that here was an aspect that needed to be tackled immediately. I knew from experience that, in practice, it is not easy to draw the locus of an ellipse as described. In particular, the two points marked on the worksheet were quite far apart relative to the length of the cut string, and I knew this would make the process even more difficult. I asked the student if he had actually tried the method out himself, to which the answer was no. At this point I suggested that we try to do it ourselves to see how well it would work. As anticipated, neither of us managed to draw a very accurate ellipse using the method. I then suggested that he might hold the two ends of the string on the points

of the worksheet while I tried again to draw the locus. This time we managed to produce a far better ellipse. After a moment the student remarked "Maybe it would be better if I get them to work in pairs". During the lesson itself this activity then worked very successfully.

What is the significance of this incident? It serves as an example of a situation where the supervisor can see, from the lesson plan, a potential difficulty in the lesson. So the question that arises is: What action, if any, should the supervisor take at this point? In this particular case, I decided that I should bring the difficulty to the student's attention. It should be noted that this was done in an indirect way and that finally the student *himself* made the decision to alter the activity. Nevertheless, having decided to raise the issue, I would certainly have made the final suggestion to him if he had not thought of it. It could be argued that even if I had taken no action the consequences would not have been disastrous. In fact, if the activity had been unsuccessful, this would have given me the opportunity to see how well the student would cope with the situation and to see how flexible he might be in making on-the-spot decisions or alterations to his plan. Thus, in providing the means to avoid such difficulty I may have deprived him of a useful learning situation in his own teaching.

So, what was my reason for taking the action I did? Essentially, it was based on my own previous experiences of *not* having taken action in similar situations. For example, I could vividly recall a student teacher conducting a practical lesson on cutting up a triangle in order to find the sum of the angles. Because she omitted a very simple strategy at the initial stage of the activity, the result was total confusion for the students. This incident completely destroyed her equilibrium which she did not recover for the rest of the lesson. Personally I felt quite guilty afterwards because I had noticed the problem in her plan and I *could* have given her some simple advice before the lesson that would have avoided the difficulty.

From such experiences it seems to me that the student teacher has a *right* to expect help from their supervisor and indeed, that the supervisor has an equal *obligation* to provide such help if the opportunity arises. Thus, although much of our advice and analysis

will inevitably be post hoc and retrospective, this should not preclude the possibility of giving advice in the pre-lesson discussion based on the student's lesson plan. Clearly supervisors do advise students at the University during lectures and tutorials but, inevitably, this cannot have the specificity of advice given in a pre-lesson discussion. Regarding this kind of intervention, it is important to emphasise that each situation is unique and the supervisor has to make a judgement on the appropriateness of giving advice. The above comments should not be taken to imply that changes to a plan should be suggested where this would mean a wholesale re-structuring. Clearly this situation would be wholly unrealistic and quite unfair to a student. However, there *are* situations where a simple piece of advice can greatly help a student and this can be an important element of the pre-lesson discussion. We can and do learn from our own mistakes but equally, we can learn from the experience and mistakes of others.

*Case 2: Student Initiated Change*

This was one of my tutorial group student teachers with whom I had already established a strong rapport and with whom I had discussed example lesson plans previously. According to the plan for this lesson, he would introduce the topic by giving a formal definition of the concept of increasing/decreasing functions at a point, then develop a test for local maxima/minima, followed by some practice exercises in using the test. The structure of the lesson was typical of a highly didactic approach which moved from a general, abstract definition to illustration of its application by the teacher and finally practice of similar cases by the students. In fact, it was a perfect example of a structure that we had spent some time discussing and critically analysing in tutorial sessions, and considering alternative approaches. Accordingly, I asked whether or not he had considered other ways to introduce the concept rather than going straight to the definition. Since at first he seemed quite unsure what I was getting at, I reminded him of our tutorials and suggested that it might be possible to use some real-life examples, or consider the features of a given graph, as a starting point for discussion with the students. His

reaction to this was that he didn't think his students would respond well to that type of introduction. In his own words: "Hong Kong students are not used to that way of working". I emphasised that my interest was in seeing whether or not he had *considered* other alternatives and that we might examine them further in the post-lesson discussion. I made it very clear that I was not expecting him to change his plan in any way.

When the lesson started I was amazed to see that he completely abandoned his original introduction and began by looking at a distance/time graph with discussion and questions about the idea of increase/decrease in an interval etc. There was plenty of response from the students (to my relief) and they were able to come fairly quickly to their own 'informal' definition of the concept. After further discussion, the teacher was able to lead the students to a more rigorous definition and finally to the conventional, formal definition. From this point the lesson followed the original plan so that later, the test for maxima/minima was explained in a very didactic way and without any discussion. After the lesson I asked the student why he had changed his plan and also, since the introduction was obviously successful, why he had not followed through with a similar approach to the later test. It seemed that he was mulling over our discussion while on the way to the classroom and the idea of a distance/time graph struck him as being 'worth a try'. He was obviously pleased about the outcome but had not used the same approach later because first, he had not prepared for it, and second, he did not think his students 'could have worked out that part for themselves.

There are a number of points of interest in this incident. First, it is important to keep in mind the context in which the pre-lesson discussion took place. It was only because this student teacher was very familiar to me that I felt comfortable about raising wider issues relating his plan to our tutorial sessions at the University. Nevertheless, I was still very surprised by his impromptu change, particularly since I had made it clear that I did not expect it. His reasons for not using a similar approach for the second important concept in the lesson are also of interest. The fact that he had not prepared for it is a perfectly valid reason and is also, of course, why I

did not expect any change in the plan. However, his second reason (that his students would not be able to work it out for themselves) suggests an underlying lack of confidence in his students which is somewhat belied by their success in the introductory part of the lesson. The most important feature of the incident is the fact that, despite only thinking through the idea on his way to the class, he had the confidence to try something which was quite new for him and for which he would have no clear expectation of the outcome. In a sense this incident illustrates a form of 'reflection-in-action' in that he was responding to my suggestion in much the same way that he might respond to a student intervention within a lesson. Similarly, just as he eventually displayed a lack of confidence in his students, perhaps my own surprise at his action displayed *my* lack of confidence in him. That is, in his ability to be flexible at a moment's notice. Finally, it should be noted that it was the time allowed for the pre-lesson discussion, and the free interchange of ideas within it, that provided the *opportunity* for the student teacher's action.

### **Developing an Agreement on Mutual Expectations**

The two incidents described and analysed above illustrate situations where the pre-lesson discussion *can* have a more positive impact than simply acting as a 'socialising' role or 'checking up' on preparation. Many supervisors are in favour of keeping the pre-lesson discussion exclusively for its socialising role. According to this view, the very act of looking at the lesson plan suggests a process of assessment which is threatening to the student teacher prior to the lesson. Even reading the plan without verbal comment can be dangerous since it is all too easy to convey one's impressions inadvertently through body language, and if these are negative (e.g. frowns, grimaces etc.) this may have an equally negative effect on the student teacher's state of mind. Ostensibly this argument portrays the supervisor as a sensitive and protective figure, eager to keep the interaction as non-threatening as possible. It is also, to my mind, somewhat patronising and may deny the opportunity for genuine practical support in the pre-lesson

stage. Moreover, given the relative importance placed on lesson-planning in the PCEd programme, there is a strong argument for ensuring that this preparation is *seen to be valued*. What is also clear from the above incidents is that each situation has its own idiosyncratic features, and judgements need to be made based on that particular context. As with teaching, supervision remains an art rather than an exact science. What is required then, is to consider whether or not some general *guiding principles*, rather than hard-and-fast rules, can be established for pre-lesson discussion.

I suggest that one over-riding principle needs to be established, from which other guiding principles can then be developed. That is, a 'negotiation' or understanding between the supervisor and the student teacher concerning their mutual expectations. This could well vary between different students. For example, in the cases discussed above, there could certainly be different agreements that I, as supervisor, might reach with familiar and unfamiliar students. In the former case, this could include the detailed discussion of the lesson plan with a pre-arranged and specific focus on aspects that have been considered in the tutorial sessions. Even among such students there may be different agreements which are based on the relative experience of the individual. For example, a student teacher with ten years experience may have quite different needs to one with only two years experience, particularly in terms of being able to reflect critically on their own performance. Another factor to be considered is whether or not the student teacher has been visited before by the same supervisor. In this case, the agenda can, and probably should, include relating the previous comments and discussion to the present situation.

The personality characteristics of particular student teachers may also be considered in coming to an agreement of expectations. What is appropriate for a confident, extrovert personality may well be inappropriate for a diffident person who is lacking in confidence. Clearly, such considerations pre-suppose a fairly intimate knowledge of one's students and also imply that the agreements reached are not static. In the case of unfamiliar students, the agreement may or may not include looking at the lesson plan, but if it does then the reasons should be clearly identified beforehand. For example, to see if there

### *Pre-lesson Discussion in Supervision*

are any potential pitfalls that could easily be avoided. Such agreements would, of course, also include matters relating to the supervisor's function and actions both during and after the lesson but that is outside the context of the present discussion. Establishing agreements of this sort would in no way alter the fact that the supervisor will still be called upon to make specific judgements according to the prevailing circumstances of a given context. They would however, serve to greatly clarify the parameters under which both the supervisor and the student are operating and thus help to reduce the ad hoc nature of much of the supervision process.



## Chapter 7

### **Taking Over a Class from Student Teachers: A Decision About Intervention**

*Lo Mun-Ling*

This chapter discusses an instance of intervention during teaching practicum for a group of four chemistry student teachers in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme. All four student teachers were teaching in the same school as a team. They took turns to teach two classes of Secondary 4 (4B and 4A) as part of an action research project (see Chapter 4). After they had taught for about four periods, we found that most students in 4B, the weaker class, were unable to achieve the intended learning objectives. This was mainly due to the lack of experience of the student teachers in carrying out their planned teaching strategies. The 4B students were getting impatient because these student teachers were unable to meet their expectations in helping them to learn, with their disappointment manifested in increasing classroom noise. The four student teachers were slowly losing confidence, as well as, control of the class. They started to query what they had learnt in the programme.

One of the student teachers, Gary, was especially weak in his delivery. He was unable to deliver an articulate explanation of the concepts to be taught. At the beginning, I attributed it to poor lesson planning. I therefore spent a great deal of time to help him plan his lessons. In a lesson with 4A, the better class, after planning and writing up the lesson plan, I even helped him to rehearse step by step what he should do in the lesson, including the wording of the leading questions he might ask. Yet, it still did not work. He did not use the questions we planned and he did not follow the plan. Very little learning was achieved, if any, during the lesson. The students were

## *Taking Over a Class from Student Teachers*

unable to follow his lesson, which to me, was not developed on logical lines based on a recognition of students' previous knowledge. As usual, when he was asked why he thought the lesson did not work, he could only see the problem as coming from the students and the laboratory setting.

*"You cannot teach these students by questioning...You cannot carry out a discussion in the laboratory, you need a classroom to do it....The seating arrangement is a cause for the trouble, when students sit in a semi-circle around the teacher's bench in the laboratory, they had to talk to each other, and do not pay attention."*

To address his viewpoints, I decided that I should intervene. The students need to consolidate what they had learnt. It was obvious that these student teachers could not do it effectively. Also, I needed to show them that what they had learnt in their PCEd programme could in fact be put into practice. My goal was to help them to regain their confidence and try again. So, I decided that I would use exactly the same lesson plan, the same laboratory setting, the same seating arrangement, but teach it to 4B, which was less motivated and more passive than 4A, the class Gary had taken. I was fully aware that there was a danger that student teachers might take my demonstration as a model of teaching that I expected them to copy. Therefore, before the lesson, I stressed the point that this was not a demonstration of a model lesson. In our programme, I had often stressed that they should each develop their own teaching style according to their own personality. I was not trying to demonstrate to them what chemistry teaching should be like. Rather, I was trying to show them the possibilities.

### **Insights**

The lesson to 4B that I taught was video-recorded. The post-lesson conference was audio-recorded. The intervention did accomplish

## *Professional Learning Together*

what I had planned and helped me further, to gain insight into aspects that I had not foreseen.

*1. Before the lesson, student teachers did not believe that active participation of students was possible.*

They generally held the belief that *"You just cannot change the students' habits overnight because they were so used to being told."* During the class, apart from the first ten minutes or so when students were a bit tense, students were, in general, willing to participate in discussions. As they were genuinely interested, they became very active towards the end of the lesson. The following are some of the comments made by these student teachers.

*"...because you were relaxed, and enjoying the class, the positive emotions could be conveyed to relax the students. Once they were relaxed, they naturally took part in the lesson."*

*"...they were raising their hands and I couldn't believe they were actually talking. I said, gosh, they were really talking — it is possible!"*

*2. Before the lesson, student teachers could not believe that students would accept a teacher who does not tell them everything.*

These student teachers believed that students were so used to being spoon-fed that they would not accept a teacher who used teaching methods that deviated from their expectations. However, after the lesson, their ideas had changed. The following are some of the comments made by them.

*"I like the way you allowed the students to find out the answers by themselves rather than telling them the answer, whereas I always tell them the answers. I have no patience to wait. But you waited for the students to answer rather than telling them everything. It is very good, I think. You also involved many*

## *Taking Over a Class from Student Teachers*

*more students in your teaching, not only those in front, but also those at the back, and in fact all of them!"*

*"I think what I wanted to learn is the questioning technique. Your questioning is good, structured and full of imagination. Yes, ha, ha. (He could not help laughing at the memory of what had happened. We were discussing the set up for a simple electrochemical cell. I did not show students the whole diagram at the beginning. By starting with a piece of copper in a beaker of water, we slowly, through questioning, developed and modified the diagram into the more complicated set up using separate half-cells and a salt bridge. He found our efforts to finding a 'bridge' between the two half-cells amusing, because on the one hand, it has to allow ions to move between the two beakers, while on the other hand, it must not allow mixing to take place.) I remember...ha...ha, it is quite imaginative and creative. I enjoyed the lesson myself very much."*

*"I also found you pretended to be the one who knew the least rather than the one who knew everything. I always thought that the teacher is the person who knows everything, and can explain everything, and solve all the problems for the students. But you told them...'I have a problem. Can you help me to figure this out?' This is stimulating, as the students were encouraged to answer the questions, and you were not threatening to them. It didn't matter if they gave the wrong answer, because you were not there as the authority to judge them. I think it is very good,"*

*"The way you dealt with the wrong answers was in no way insulting to them. I would really like to be able to handle answers like that!"*

3. *Before the lesson, they did not believe that a teacher can be friendly to the class and yet maintain good discipline in learning.*

Kathy had taught for a year before joining the PCEd programme. Her unhappy encounters caused her to believe firmly that, unless adopting a very strict and authoritative style, she was bound to suffer from disciplinary problems. She firmly believed that a teacher cannot be friendly, and her relationship with students was slowly going from unfriendly to hostile. However, the following transcription of her comment showed that a change had taken place in her.

*"...there was no disciplinary problem in this lesson, which is contrary to what I have expected. Now I believe that the teacher does not have to take the role of an authoritative figure to avoid disciplinary problems. What the teacher must do instead is to keep students interested and on task."*

4. *Before the lesson, they thought they must follow the lesson plan strictly like a script in a play.*

*"I like the way you are so flexible in carrying out your lesson, but we tend to stick to our plan. We then felt like machines implementing a programme. I like the way you dealt with unexpected answers. One boy said you could use crystals and the way you dealt with it was excellent. (The lesson was on electrochemical cells. We had to solve the problem of keeping two different chemicals from mixing with each other, yet ions must be able to pass from one chemical to another. I asked them if it is possible to put two different solutions into the same beaker, and yet prevent the solutions from mixing. One boy suggested that I should put solid crystals instead of solutions. I replied that it was a brilliant idea except that ions cannot move in solids, but if we can somehow make it into something like a jelly, perhaps it would work. The student teachers found the idea of using a jelly amusing.) We wouldn't have thought of a response like that. We'd have expected something else, and so if somebody came up with an answer like that we might have told him it was wrong, which would have discouraged him from taking part any more."*

## *Taking Over a Class from Student Teachers*

*"Your approach in trying to squeeze yourself amongst students causing them to jump away from you was a very good idea. It demonstrated the idea of repulsion so well. I guess that it really just came to your mind at that moment: you managed to grasp the chance, and acted on the circumstance to produce the desirable effect. We would have stuck to our plan."*

They realized that flexibility helped to make the lesson a success. Natalie told me afterwards that she would very much like to teach in the way I did, but she realized that it would not have worked for her because of her personality. She considered herself a serious type. If she tried to imitate what I said and did, it just would not have come out naturally. Gary also confessed that he was unhappy when I helped him to plan his last lesson because he thought he was being given a script to follow. While he had accepted the idea that every teacher should develop his/her own teaching style, he could not stand being required to teach in a prescribed way. That partly explained why my efforts to help him had failed. He was reluctant to carry out the lesson plans I helped him to prepare because he had misunderstood my intentions. But now he realized that, although we used the same lesson plan, the lesson turned out to be very different. There was still a lot of room for the teacher to express himself or herself and it was the personality of a teacher that shaped a lesson. They had come to a better understanding of what I meant by finding their own teaching style that fits their personality.

In this case, the intervention was successful. Student teachers were learning much more than I had anticipated. They each were observing the lesson with different focus, and picking up ideas that were of value to them, totally unplanned for before the conference. For example, Kathy, who always had problem building up a warm and cordial rapport with students, and was always strict and hostile towards students now learnt something about class control. She was more willing to try to be friendly in order to cultivate a happier classroom atmosphere. She realized that class control does not lie in being threatening, but rests in keeping students on task and interested. Natalie, on the other hand, who was already a very competent

teacher, but who tended to be too serious looking and sometimes appeared threatening to students realized why she was unable to get active responses from students. She realized that she had discouraged students from answering questions because of her obsession with the correct answers. She then concluded that she needed to develop a more relaxed manner. Melanie, who always had a relaxed and warm manner in class, however, noticed the need for flexibility. She pointed out my spontaneous reactions in the classroom, and wanted to develop her competence along that track. Gary was very much interested in how the teacher could teach through questioning. All of them gained something that they personally valued, and the lesson I taught, and our conference afterwards succeeded in provoking student teachers to re-examine their beliefs.

### **Dilemma: To Intervene or Not to Intervene**

There were times when we really wanted to intervene to prevent a disaster, or to catch an opportune moment to demonstrate what we have been advocating in context, but many times, as supervisors, we refrained from doing so and held ourselves back. Many questions must have shot through our minds at that moment....

Before we decide to intervene, we should consider very carefully the possible effects of our intervention on the student teacher's self image. Not everyone can take criticism, especially when it is in front of a whole class. Being taken over by a supervisor is probably perceived as an instance of the lesson not going well, that the supervisor cannot stand it anymore but has to demonstrate a 'proper performance'. The student teacher may feel that the supervisor has caused him/her to "lose face" in front of his/her students. However, this case indicates that the intervention can be well planned while reminding us that students in the class should be informed beforehand of positive reasons for the decision.

In fact, one of my student teachers, Melanie, had a miserable experience during her subsequent teaching practice because the class teacher sat in almost every one of her lessons, pointing out her

'mistakes' right in front of the class. She said she was extremely nervous during every lesson. Sometimes the class teacher, during a lesson, would tell her that the way she was approaching the lesson was not right, and would expect her to alter her approach radically and immediately. In response to such demands, Melanie's confidence was completely shaken. Such insensitive intervention is likely to produce more harm than benefits. Therefore careful consideration about the impact of any intervention must be made before taking any action.

### **What Risks are Being Taken by the Supervisor?**

Was I taking a great risk when I decided to intervene? There was always the possibility that the lesson would not work out as I had anticipated. What if I could not control the discipline of the students? After all, I had no backup measures to support me in disciplining students. I could only rely on them to co-operate and listen to me. Of course, if they would listen, then I could get them involved and stimulate their interest. But, there was always the chance that they would not even give me the opportunity to do so, thinking that it would be another of those boring lessons which they could dismiss.

In this particular case, as one member of the team, I was with them through every lesson, planning, observing and holding post lesson conferences together. Student teachers took turns to teach. So, it was not unnatural for me to teach a lesson. Most importantly, a trusting relationship had been built up amongst us before my intervention, and the student teachers fully understood its purpose. Still, I struggled with myself over the idea of intervention for quite a while before I took the step. If it did not work out, it might further reinforce student teachers' idea that the strategies cannot work in the actual school setting. I might be putting my reputation on the line, but I also knew that I had to do it. It was a risk worth taking. My many years of teaching experience and my knowledge of the students from my observations of them during previous lessons gave me the confidence to act. Intuitively, I knew I had a high chance of being



successful. On the other hand, why must the supervisor be regarded as the 'perfect' teacher? Taking risks is always a part of teaching even for very good and experienced teachers. We all learn from our mistakes. It is through taking risks and reflecting on our mistakes that we achieved professional growth. If it did not work out, it would still be a valuable lesson for both my student teachers and myself. It worked and the morale was so much better after the class. They were all willing to try harder, and moved on with further insights and understanding about teaching and learning.

### **What Could be Achieved?**

I always believe that the experience of learning to teach is more meaningful when effective teaching can be demonstrated in context. Student teachers are used to the rhetoric of student-centred learning, teaching by questioning, enquiry or problem-solving approach, however, few can actually visualize what they mean in practice. It is important for them to see how theory can actually be put into practice in the classroom. Attitudes and beliefs are difficult to change. Only when they are exposed to the experiences which can challenge their old beliefs and give them a taste of success in their attempt to try out new strategies would there be a possibility for change. Intervention that challenges their belief, when conducted with careful assessment of the positive impact it will have on student teachers, is a good starting point for behavioral changes.

Intervention is like a knife: we can use it to carve out beautiful patterns, but if we are not using it properly, it can cut both ways — both supervisor and student teachers may be hurt. This knife must be handled with care!

## Chapter 8

# Assessing the Teaching Practicum at the Pass/Fail Borderline

*David Bunton*

I remembered Dolores Ma more clearly than most of the prospective English majors in the pre-course selection interviews for the full-time Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PCEd) programme. She was an outgoing, cheerful type and had already taught for five years in one secondary school. Some teachers in that position might be applying to do the programme simply in order to pass the bar on the pay scale that requires a teaching qualification, but Dolores seemed genuinely enthusiastic about coming on the programme. The one thing that did concern us was her language proficiency. Some aspects of her speech and the short piece of writing we asked for indicated there might be problems. But she passed the official language entrance test at about the lowest level we accept for English majors, so we decided to accept her, keeping that cheerful enthusiasm in mind.

### **Initial Teaching Practice**

As the programme got under way, there was no particular cause for concern. After six weeks at the University, covering core educational issues, methods of teaching and subject specialisations, our students spend three weeks full-time in co-operating schools, teaching about a third of a normal teaching load. Two or three student teachers are usually placed together, and these 'teaching partners' are encouraged to engage in peer coaching: helping each other plan lessons, observing each other teach and sharing insights and reflections on lessons and the whole teaching-learning process.

Dolores was teaching a class of Secondary 6 boys and girls. The lesson I observed involved lots of group discussion and then reporting back views to the whole class. As a communicative activity with meaningful language use and the focus more on the students than the teacher, it was quite effective. There was a written product at the end that drew on what had been discussed in the lesson. Her classroom management was effective and she seemed to have a good rapport with the students — they laughed at her jokes! There were certainly issues and incidents where I invited her reflection, and one or two issues of pronunciation and grammar, but these were no more than would happen with any other student teacher at this stage in the programme.

In their reports after this part of the practicum, I found one of Dolores' two teaching partners was very critical of the way she left school as soon as the bell rang at the end of the afternoon, and had co-operated very little with her over the whole period — despite the emphasis we put on peer coaching. After this, back at university, I noticed that in our classes Dolores would often sit at a table on her own, while the others sat in working groups of four and five. She would only join her assigned group when specific activities required it.

Then came a lesson-planning assignment which counted towards the final assessment. What Dolores handed in bore little resemblance to a lesson plan. It was more like a scheme of work for a longer period of time without any focus on one particular lesson. It consisted of general topics and activity-types, enough for a week or two rather than a lesson or two, but there were no specific steps for putting them into action in the classroom. A number of language structures and functions were listed, but there was no indication of how they would be presented, practised, and used in activities.

### **Main Teaching Practice**

In planning who should be Dolores' teaching partner for their second, seven-week teaching practice period, we chose one of the best student teachers on the programme — one who also had a resilient

personality and we felt would be a real help in planning and observing lessons. But as we were deciding the geographic location of her school placement, Dolores made a special request for a school near her home, and we then discovered why she had been leaving the previous school as soon as the bell rang each afternoon. There were serious health problems with two of her family members and she was having to take one or both of them to and from day-care immediately before and after school every day. Clearly she hadn't talked to others about this and, once explained, she had a lot more understanding from her teaching partner. Although a very different personality, the teaching partner developed a real concern for Dolores and a warm rapport with her.

In this main teaching practice period, more of a problem became evident as Dolores had to teach younger students (Secondary 1 and 3 boys), needing more basic presentation of language forms and functions, with lessons structured to move from controlled to free language use. Above all, they needed a good model, from their teacher, of spoken and written English. Dolores was still her enthusiastic, outgoing self. She had a good rapport with the boys, if slightly idiosyncratic ("Now remember what Aunty Ma told you yesterday?"). She managed the classroom well and covered the textbook efficiently, if routinely.

However, there was an absence of prior thought about the language to be taught. When teaching a language structure, she would repeat a student's answer that was grammatically wrong — giving the impression that it was right. Talking after the lesson, it became apparent that she was not accustomed to writing down *exactly* how she would explain the language structure that was to be the main focus of the lesson. Whatever was in the book would be read out and expanded on, ad lib. It was this lack of prior thought — for example, about exceptions to a rule and the circumstances in which a rule applied — that led to statements that were wrong or misleading. The repetitions that endorsed student errors could have been because she wasn't quick enough on her feet to put it right, implicitly or explicitly, or it could have been a deeper lack of certainty about the language. Coupled with this were unusual

pronunciations that were not a desirable model. I suggested specific work on pronunciation at the university's language laboratories.

From a methodological point of view, she relied entirely on the exercises in the textbook and there was no attempt to move from *manipulating* the structures to freer *use* of the target language in a context that would make it more meaningful. There was no planning for pair or group work. Looking back, the higher language proficiency of the Secondary 6 students in her initial teaching practice had allowed her to get away without explanations of language forms or functions whilst the students quite happily got on with holistic use of language in discussions.

### **Growing Concern**

I asked Dolores to fax me a lesson plan before the next observation visit. I had to ask a lot of questions about what would be happening when, and how, as the plan simply wasn't clear. She was still vague about how she would 'teach adverbs' and how students would 'learn the use of adverbs with the specific tense'. In fact, very little in the plan was specific. There was another exchange of faxes and in the end I did make one fairly general suggestion of how a worksheet might be devised to help the students *use* the adverbs and tenses in pair or group work.

When she taught the lesson, it was clear she had made a concerted effort on pronunciation and it was greatly improved. But her grammatical explanations were not thought through and some of the 'standard' combinations of tense with adverbs she wrote on the board were wrong. Also, she accepted a student's answer in which unthinking manipulation of the grammar produced the wrong meaning. Admittedly, it was a poorly devised question from the textbook, but if a teacher is going to rely on a textbook there should at least be some critical forethought — and language teachers still need to be able to think quickly and pay attention to meaning. She did get on to one of the two planned group activities in the last ten minutes. However, the group work involved little more than my

sketchy general suggestion, and left me uncertain whether she would be able, or willing, to develop such activities herself in future.

It was now the second last week of the final teaching practice and I felt we were approaching what Clark (1995) calls 'the gatekeeper's dilemma': whether or not to fail a student teacher. Whilst appreciating the progress she had made, I told Dolores that we weren't sure she was yet at the stage where we could give her a pass in teaching practice. In my observation notes, I summed up what I felt her lesson planning needed:

- (a) *to consider very carefully any grammatical points you're going to teach: are they accurate and unambiguous? what words will you use to explain them?*
- (b) *to go beyond grammar and exercises on grammatical forms to tasks that give students a chance to use language to do real-life type things. Such tasks allow students choice of language. If we don't allow them choice and freer use of language in the classroom, they'll never be able to use language in real life outside class;*
- (c) *to think out each step of your teaching more precisely - from what you want students to do, then back to what you need to say and do to enable them to do it.*

It was at this point that Dolores said *she had never before thought a lesson needed planning*. In her previous school she would walk into a class with the textbook and 'teach the book', in whatever order and manner things came.

I told Dolores I would be consulting with the other supervisor and might need to return the following week, possibly with the Chief Examiner<sup>1</sup>. At this, Dolores was suddenly very concerned about what more she could do. I said that we (her supervisors and teaching partner) would be more than happy to help in any way we could based on our observations of her lessons.

---

<sup>1</sup> One of the regulations of the PCEd programme is that the Chief Examiner must observe any student teacher considered at risk of failure.

We also decided to ask the Panel Chair<sup>2</sup> at Dolores' school what he felt about her teaching. He had already seen one of her lessons and immediately volunteered to observe another. We made clear that we were not asking him to decide on whether she deserved a pass or a fail, but that we would value his judgement as the sort of person who could be employing her next year. He rang back a few days later saying he felt she had made some progress, but that she was not clear on her objectives in each lesson and that she had problems relating objectives to activities. He had specific suggestions of how she could improve the teaching of that grammatical item and how she could improve the related activities. He commented that she sometimes mixed up her instructions, and sometimes asked questions that were too general for students to understand what was required. She did, on the other hand, have plenty of confidence and a good rapport with the students.

I then asked him what he would think if she arrived in his school as a new teacher with a PCEd from our university. He replied diplomatically that some new teachers are like this — then added that they were ones who weren't qualified! This last point was important. Would we be justified in giving a professional qualification to someone who gave every appearance of not having had a professional training? The answer had to be 'No'.

### **The Final Assessment**

I confirmed to Dolores that I would be coming the following Friday with the Chief Examiner to see another lesson. I pointed out that the Chief Examiner was coming to monitor our supervision and assessment standards — to see if we, as English language supervisors, were being more strict or lenient than supervisors in other subject areas.

The day arrived and it was clear Dolores was very nervous. The lesson, however, was dramatically different. Nothing was taken from the textbook. There was a very interesting presentation of a story

---

<sup>2</sup> i.e., Head of the English Department

with lots of student involvement, and beautifully drawn visual aids — we had never seen any visual aids in her previous lessons! She praised students' contributions and responded quickly to unexpected ones. She appeared to have thought the grammatical presentation through clearly and what she wrote on the board was clear and accurate. This all then led on to group work where the boys made meaningful use of the ideas and language covered in the lesson. Finally, the results were shared in class. It was a lively lesson, thoroughly enjoyed by the class. Although some problems were still evident, it was clear that the students were actively engaged in the learning process.

This lesson certainly deserved well above a passing grade. Our only concern was where it all came from, as it was so unlike anything she'd done before. Even the lesson plan was not in her own writing! We asked her about that in the corridor and she said she had asked her sister to write it out, knowing how messy her own handwriting was. The Chief Examiner and I conferred and both felt there was no doubt she *could* teach in a way that promoted learning and on that basis, she deserved a pass. Whether she chose to teach that way in future was out of our hands.

In our post-lesson discussion, then, we told Dolores she had passed and discussed the lesson more. But above all, we stressed that this was the way we expected her to teach *all* the time, and not revert to her previous unplanned work. We asked her to think hard about why it took her so long to respond to all the programme was suggesting and change her teaching style.

### **Back on Campus**

Back at University, after the practicum, Dolores' relationships with the others were quite different. She would sit with her group much more often. They had all missed each other over the seven weeks and were glad to be together again. Dolores was extremely grateful for all the help given over the practicum. She commented that this was a completely different style of teaching from anything she had



experienced in her first five years of work. She realised that she had spent a lot of time in class on things the students could do on their own, and that her concern should be to help the students learn effectively.

## **Reflections**

We felt there were a number of issues Dolores' case raised. One was why it had taken her so long to change her classroom practices. Another, of course, was why she had changed so dramatically in the last lesson. We soon concluded that the answer to the second question was the threat of failure. If we had not had that threat available — that we might withhold a professional qualification from her — she would almost certainly have finished her practicum a long way short of the sort of teaching the programme promoted. The threat alone is not sufficient. Supervisory support is essential and in many cases sufficient. But in this case, until the threat was made, supervisory support was not taken seriously enough.

In general, we felt these issues were likely to arise if other experienced teachers came on the programme primarily to gain the qualification but were either unwilling or unable to learn from the programme and develop professionally. Such a situation could become more common with the Education Commission's recent recommendation (Education Commission, 1995: 49-51) that all language teachers should attain 'benchmark' qualifications of a minimum language proficiency standard, satisfactory completion of professional training in the teaching of Chinese or English as a subject, and a high level of academic attainment in Chinese or English as a subject.

We posed this question for our staff discussion group:

*Should we pass or fail someone who teaches 'by the book' but seems incapable of doing anything more?*

### *Assessing the Teaching Practicum at the Pass/Fail Borderline*

- *s/he is perfectly capable of managing the class and going through the textbook in a mechanical way, teaching by transmission and drilling, and eventually exam practice; but*
- *s/he has no sense of individual students' needs (even of whether they are learning), or of relating 'the book' to students' interests, or to the real world around them in which they will eventually use the knowledge and skills being taught;*
- *planning (for lessons and in the scheme of work) is only a matter of deciding which sections of the textbook(s) to do when and what homework to set;*
- *s/he seems incapable of absorbing and implementing new ideas from the programme;*
- *her/his good students will still get through (but not achieve their full potential) and poorer students may fail where they could have been helped by a more imaginative, reflective teacher.*

This prompted quite a lot of discussion. Some felt teachers had to show they had gained something from the programme in order to pass. One felt the 'uninspired plodder' should have a D grade pass if s/he were a practising teacher on the part-time programme, but that more would be expected of a full-time student teacher at the beginning of his/her career. Others argued the criteria should be the same for full-time and part-time students, for novices and experienced teachers. We were glad that by the end, Dolores no longer fitted this description.

**References**

- Clark, C.M. (1995). *Thoughtful Teaching*. London: Cassell.
- Education Commission, The (1995). *Education Commission Report No. 6*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.

## Chapter 9

# **Tensions Between School Expectations and the Need for Professional Learning**

*Tse Shek-Kam*

This report examines the developmental experiences of a student teacher, as observed through personal interviews and classroom observation. This experience was contextualised in a setting where the student teacher's excitement about professional learning was in contrast to the traditional school climate which was not conducive to innovative teaching. The resulting conflicts and stress were provocative for teacher educators.

### **Towards Innovative Teaching**

Chan is a Chinese Language teacher in his mid-thirties, with over ten years of teaching experience. After obtaining a first degree in Chinese Linguistics, he began his teaching career in a private secondary school for five years. Most students there came from poor families, with weak academic performance records. As a devoted teacher, Chan tried to help them improve their academic performance. He believed that giving students lots of assignments could enhance their attainment levels. Consequently, he had to spend a lot of time marking students' assignments. He also devoted considerable effort to counselling students who had learning difficulties or family problems. His diligence and dedication were much appreciated by his students.

In his sixth year of teaching, Chan moved to a famous co-educational school. The students there were bright and eager to

learn. Most of them came from well-off families. They were under a lot of pressure to get good results in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE)<sup>1</sup>. Teaching students with higher achievement levels, Chan found that his work load was not as heavy as it had been in the private school. He could find time to enrol in the part-time Postgraduate Certificate of Education Programme. His major subject in professional studies was Chinese Language teaching. In the beginning, he was rather quiet during class discussions, but he often stayed behind to talk with me about his personal thoughts on teaching issues.

As a supervisor of Chan's practicum, I had observed Chan's teaching several times. At first, his teaching methods were very conventional and teacher-centred. He spent a lot of lesson time lecturing, and relied heavily on textbooks. He gave his students many tests. However, he seemed to be able to respond to the PCEd programme work with new awareness of his teaching approaches. He told me that he felt concerned about his students' dull response in class, and he was dissatisfied with his own teaching. He became interested in more innovative teaching methods, especially in the teaching of writing. He began to try out new teaching methods in his classroom. In order to encourage my group of students to share experiences about teaching methods, I invited him, amongst others, to report on attempts in trying out innovative ideas in teaching. The lively response to his presentation was most encouraging for him, and he became more confident and increasingly active in class. I was very pleased to find receptivity of our student teachers to new effective approaches to teaching.

### **Liberating the Spirit of Experimentation**

Chan had said at the beginning of our programme that he was rather

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the public examination all Hong Kong school students have to pass at the end of Secondary 5, as a minimum academic qualification for most jobs or for further studies.

sceptical about our teaching methods, many of which he had never heard of before. As the programme was in progress, Chan seemed to have intellectually developed his understanding and receptivity towards alternative teaching approaches. Yet, he was still worried about breaking with the traditional mould in the real classroom. He had used traditional methods for ten years. All these new approaches were in complete contrast to the way that Chan had earlier been socialised to teach. It was not easy to just slip out of old habits, and suddenly adopt a new approach. He also felt quite insecure about experimenting in a new environment, as he had no idea what reaction to expect from his students. What would he do if he could not answer students' questions? Would he be able to control the class when adopting a more open interactive approach? Would the students respect him for being less authoritarian, or would they think of him as weak and not deserving of respect? Would he fail to use the methods appropriately and waste students' learning opportunities? Why should he put aside all his years of experience and risk his reputation by experimenting with new teaching ideas that pose difficulties for implementation? So many questions raced through Chan's mind, making him very insecure at the point of critical transition, when he sensed no guarantee of success. It would have been a lot less stressful to steer himself away from the possibility of failure, and simply carry on as he had always done.

However, Chan was enthused by the teaching methods advocated in the PCEd programme. They were more student-centred, involving task-based learning, action research and peer coaching. He found it appealing to focus on the cognitive and communicative aspects of language learning. Multi-media software can provide interesting ways to assist learning. Furthermore, student teachers were discouraged from using tests and examinations as the only mechanisms of assessment or motivation for learning. Chan was especially inspired by certain video recordings showing how some of the previous graduates had used student-centred teaching methods successfully in their classes. It was apparent from these videos that the recommended teaching methods were effective in helping

students to achieve learning objectives in the lesson. These methods also helped to create a delightful learning atmosphere in the classroom. The teacher and the students could be seen actually enjoying the interactive time together. Chan found the video-recorded lessons provocative. The innovative teaching approaches suddenly became vividly comprehensible, and very much within his reach. Despite all his worries, Chan was motivated enough to take the risk of trying out the new teaching approaches in his classes. His new endeavours, however, met with both success and difficulties.

### **Survival as an Isolated Force in the Teaching Environment**

In the Chinese Language Department of the school that Chan joined, there had been a long tradition of teacher-centred teaching methods and frequent testing schedules. Also all Chinese Language teachers were expected to use certain standard material, such as sets of topics for composition. The climate of inertia had prevailed over many years. The school practice, while implementing the current subject syllabus for Chinese Language, was rather remote from recommendations by the Education Commission on strengthening teaching resources (see Education Commission Report No. 6, Section G1, p.22). It was easier for a teacher to play safe and follow the detailed guidelines than to venture into innovative teaching. Furthermore, the clockwork management of the immense workload made it most difficult for teachers to deal with changes. The set routines in teaching and testing, therefore, were being followed quite consistently by teachers in general, with the impact of the routinized practice being rarely in question. As a result of his professional learning, Chan started to take some unconventional steps to ensure that student learning took priority over the administrative procedures. The challenge came not only from the programme of his experimentation, but also from the opposition pressures at various fronts.

For instance, Chan managed to develop his own teaching material and adapted some interesting writing topics from other schools. He also encouraged his students to create themes that they would be interested in writing about. His students loved the new topics for writing, and appreciated being given a choice. However, Chan's colleagues were not pleased about his upset of standard practice, and criticized him for disregarding the prescribed procedures set by the panel chairperson. The panel chairperson was particularly critical of Chan for using peer correction and evaluation methods in marking assignments, which were intended to help his students learn about processes of writing, and strategies of revision. Chan was reproached for not marking students' assignments himself, and for breaking school tradition and neglecting the Education Department Guidelines.<sup>2</sup>

### **Further Tensions and Conflicts with Peers**

Chan was constantly concerned about the fact that his colleagues on the panel did not approve of his use of unconventional approaches to teaching. Their disagreement and discomfort with Chan was natural in a culture which was not conducive to change or variation in practice. As teachers were generally comfortable with set routines, Chan was seen to be rocking the boat, and was often called upon to justify his teaching methods in panel meetings. Some colleagues pointed out that his teaching methods and materials were not examination-oriented, and that he should have concentrated on the textbooks and recommended materials in preparation of students for the public examination. They were concerned that his students could not attain good performances as a result of the risks he was taking.

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Guide to the Secondary 1-6 Curriculum* issued by the Education Department sets out detailed instructions that teachers are expected to follow for assessment and marking. There was no mention of methods like peer correction, or even letting the students read each others' papers.



The implied allegation might even be that he was evading his teaching responsibilities. Throughout the struggle in implementing innovative approaches, Chan had to justify his teaching decisions and consider the validity of his colleagues' comments.

His popularity amongst students because of his caring attitudes and the enjoyable classroom atmosphere he created might also have been a cause for jealousy among some of his colleagues, which added tension to the otherwise routine clockwork approach of the rest of the panel. Chan's colleagues openly complained about the noise and laughter caused by active student participation in class. The principal soon reminded all teaching staff that students should refrain from making too much noise in classrooms. Without winning the support of his colleagues, and with growing conflicts in challenging the teaching staff's beliefs of teaching and learning, Chan became quite unpopular in the school. Intervention from the principal nearly extinguished his desire to practise innovative teaching methods.

### **Mixed Responses from Students**

Chan also met with resistance from students in some of his classes. Students in Secondary 1 and 2 welcomed new teaching methods because they had a short history of passive learning, and were quite receptive and responsive to Chan without questioning the relevance of his approaches to the set syllabus or examination. At the junior level, there was a considerable scope for lively experimentation, change and active learning.

Students from Secondary 5 also liked Chan's interactive style in teaching, despite their having been for a long time moulded to conform passively to the teachers' expectations. However, some complained that Chan did not follow the textbooks or explain texts in as much detail as the other teachers did. They were confused with conflicting expectations from different teachers. Above all, there was the pressure of the public examination, or rather the myth about the

pressure of the public examination. Many students who had become used to passive learning and mindless practice drills were worried about whether Chan's unconventional teaching methods would help them get good results in the public examination.

### **The Painful Decision**

As Chan reviewed the effectiveness of his teaching, he was encouraged to find improvement in his students' language proficiency and their developing interest in learning the Chinese Language. He found that his earlier belief in extensive drills as effective preparation for examinations was actually unfounded. He felt that much of his former practice had been a waste of time. He was convinced that his students could face the public examination as strong candidates. He was, however, not yet able to convince his peers and some of his senior students of his teaching approaches. The lack of collegial acceptance and the negative reactions from peers continually drove Chan into isolation, which made his school life very unpleasant. From time to time, he suffered from self-doubt, and questioned the credibility of his new beliefs and the significance of his own professional learning.

The support to Chan in the PCEd programme was evidently not enough for him to get beyond the painful struggle in choosing between the conflicting messages from his school and the university. And yet, the curriculum inputs of the PCEd programme were sufficiently inspiring for him to choose to follow his new path in professional learning. Because of the prolonged agony, Chan considered resigning from the school.

Despite the painful choice, Chan told me that he would wait for his Secondary 5 students to complete the School Certificate Examination. He was curious to find out how his teaching methods might have influenced their examination results. When the School Certificate Examination results were known, Chan was thrilled that his students generally achieved higher scores in Chinese Language than students taught by other teachers. He felt most encouraged that

innovative teaching methods could stimulate motivation in learning, which in turn, led to desirable examination results. Alongside this personal victory, however, Chan was exhausted by the constant fights for peer approval and recognition in the school. The isolation was too much to bear, and he determinedly resigned from the school.

### **Reflections on the Role of Teacher Education**

When I heard that Chan had to leave the school, I was deeply disturbed. It was apparent that the reforms being recommended at the macro level by the Education Commission and the ensuing projects sponsored by the development grants from the Language Fund<sup>3</sup> were not taking place in or influencing the reality of the classroom. I felt that I, as Chan's university supervisor, could have been partly responsible for his dilemmas and conflicts with the teaching staff in his school.

Chan had learnt about exciting new teaching ideas during the PCEd programme. He had also been constantly encouraged to reflect, evaluate and re-evaluate his objectives and attitudes, while actively experimenting with new teaching methods. I saw my function as his supervisor in facilitating this reflection and evaluation, in order to help him promote active learning within the classroom. But there was no agenda in our curriculum to help teachers like Chan to cope with constraints in the broader teaching context outside the classroom. Without some parallel guidance on how our student teachers can manage survival and gain collegial acceptance, teachers like Chan might be overwhelmed with the chasm between their

---

<sup>3</sup> The Language Fund was set up in March 1994 and the initial allocation of \$300 million was held in trust under the Director of Education Incorporations Ordinance. The objectives of the Fund are to enhance language proficiency in Chinese (including Putonghua) and English, by drawing upon expertise and experience of language specialists and the community at large, and addressing a wide range of language issues.

converted beliefs and the practical implementation in the reality of the schools which emphasise orderly routines. Chan found himself alone and up against a lot of active resistance to his exciting new ideas. It was a losing battle. Team work is an important aspect of learning to teach. It is extremely difficult for one teacher, without the necessary support, to attempt to change teaching which demands a breakthrough of the habits of an entire team.

When teachers join a new school, they need to be aware of the prevailing school culture, whether it allows for changes, and whether the school is a favourable environment for pursuing professional development. Innovative teaching can be threatening, and should be introduced with sensitivity and understanding of the context. Amidst reform movements, top-down changes are never easy to implement, especially when teachers have become habituated to certain routines that seem to have worked for them. Bottom-up changes are even harder, and are unlikely to take off unless there is a strong enough force that drives and at the same time, supports the pioneers. For inservice teachers who have already been teaching, the challenge is to discover, or create, effective ways to tackle the traditional climate of the school constructively so that new possibilities can be realised in their classrooms.

Although it was extraordinary that Chan could thrive through an adverse context, his encounters of tension and peer disapproval could in fact be alarmingly common among many teachers undergoing professional training. Student teachers in our inservice programmes have often said that they have difficulty trying out new ideas in their schools. An important focus for teachers education should lie in helping student teachers to apply their new approaches within their school reality. It seems pertinent that teacher educators should consider the school environment where professional learning is to take place, and help student teachers support each other in stepping out of the routines, taking risks in experimentation with new approaches. The outcomes, in both positive and negative aspects, can be valued as learning experiences rather than merely taken as victories or losses. The danger of teachers working in isolation is that

they may invariably be tempted or forced to fall back on traditional routines without seeing the potential for their professional development.

***Acknowledgement***

*I am extremely grateful to Ora Kwo's perceptive insights and sensitive editing which have helped considerably in improving this chapter.*

## **CONCLUSION**



## Chapter 10

# **Towards Improved Understanding of Professional Learning: Future Perspectives and Actions**

*Ora Kwo*

This book has addressed the student teachers' teaching practicum as a critical period during which the integration of theory and practice is expected to take place under the guidance of university supervisors. Through illustrations of learning relationships in various contexts, the cases have highlighted possibilities and constraints in the infrequent supervisory visits, as discussed earlier by teacher educators (e.g. Stones, 1987; Calderhead, 1987; Alexander et al., 1992). To conclude, this chapter will present major insights derived from the contributors' reflections, which have improved our understanding of professional learning. On the basis of this understanding, this chapter will outline future perspectives, and suggest positive actions to be followed.

### **Insights into Professional Learning**

#### *The Practicum as an Emotional Experience for Student Teachers and Supervisors*

Much research literature on learning to teach focuses on the intellectual dimension, leaving the emotional experiences implicit in the process. Case reports presented in this book have enriched understanding of the emotional process in learning to teach, not only on the part of student teachers, but also amongst supervisors.



In the case of a successful intervention presented by Lo Mun-Ling, dilemma of the supervisor were made explicit with parallel awareness of the changing emotional states of the student teachers, Gary and Natalie. From another angle, Fran Lopez-Real highlighted the personal nature of the supervisory relationship and how the supervisor weighed dilemmas in making decisions about what and how to advise student teachers with emotional sensitivity in building the relationship. Along a similar vein, Bob Adamson described the complex chemistry of human relationships by outlining the changing impression of the supervisor and the student teacher about each other.

In contrast, Elizabeth Cheung, Benny Yung, Lo Mun-Ling and Lee Chi-Kin reported on relationships between student teachers. The cases revealed difficult feelings accompanying student teachers' disagreement over teaching decisions. Moving towards collaboration seemed to be a part of professional learning which required considerable emotional adjustments to occasional shocks. David Bunton portrayed another case of the supervisor's dilemmas, commenting on Dolores' changing relationships with her peer student teachers and how her practicum culminated in the threat of failing assessment. In the case reported by Tse Shek-Kam, underlying Chan's experience was considerable excitement about professional learning, which contrasted with the sad consequence of his feelings of isolation and being rejected by the school, ironically, due to his professional development.

All cases vividly capture the emotional demands in the teaching practicum, which is a special period of learning that campus-based work cannot offer. During this period, authentic classroom experiences provide student teachers with multi-faceted challenges in teaching. These challenges are necessary hurdles to mark learning progress, through which student teachers become self-empowering in solving problems. Apart from having to make teaching decisions in relating subject matter to facilitation of learning, student teachers are constantly engaged in interpersonal relationships: with their own students, class teachers, peer partners, colleagues (in the case of part-time inservice teachers), and university supervisors. The cases remind us that learning in the practicum can be a stressful process, as student teachers are

## *Towards Improved Understanding of Professional Learning*

adopting a new teaching role in contrast to the familiar role in learning. It is also a process of personal maturation, as student teachers are learning to take responsibilities and to help others to develop their own sense of responsibility. For part-time student teachers who have already been teaching, the challenge is to realize new possibilities in ways that likely conflict with the traditional school climate. Just as much as the facilitating nature of a teacher's role in classroom teaching, practicum supervision necessarily requires the supervisor to be sensitive to the emotional states of the student teacher, as well as, being aware of their own emotions when interacting with student teachers.

### *Supervision as Facilitating Development Through Challenges*

In addition to shedding light on the emotional aspects of professional learning for which the supportive role of supervision becomes apparent, the cases emphasise the intellectual challenges in the learning process. Collectively, the cases have given a rich array of critical points in the change process during which cognitive challenges play a significant part.

As pointed out by Margaret Taplin, although professional development depends on teachers' willingness to examine their own practice, the reluctance to undertake self-review is common among teachers. Her creation of disequilibrium through assessment was an endeavour to address this phenomenon. Her success in helping students to change their beliefs came primarily from the cognitive challenge in the assignment which 'forced' them to experiment with different approaches to teaching and examine the effects. Her case demonstrated that students can be helped to face new challenges successfully, and that it is important to keep a balance between challenge and support. Attention to such a balance was also given by Lo Mun-Ling, who identified a list of student teachers' changing beliefs through her intervention in classroom teaching. The case did not conclude by advocating intervention, but nevertheless emphasised the need to expose student teachers to experiences which challenged their old beliefs.

Challenges may also be subtle, as exemplified by Francis Lopez-Real in his approach to part-time inservice student teachers. His two incidents of pre-lesson discussion illustrated the extent to which student teachers can initiate changes of their plans with prompt decisions on alternative actions. Instead of direct confrontation of perceived problems and explicit suggestions, the supervisor managed to offer subtle challenges which resulted in receptive responses from the recipients. From another angle, this report indicated that challenge is a significant way to induce change, and can be provided in non-threatening ways.

Also relating to part-time inservice student teachers, Bob Adamson highlighted another dimension to the significance of challenges. In addition to challenging student teachers, teacher educators should be ready to engage in their own self-challenges. By examining his own pre-formed beliefs about supervision, Bob Adamson was able to engage in internal dialogues about his expectation and prejudices about teacher images. This consequently brought him to new understanding about developing rapport with Barbara, thus helping her to change. It was through self-confrontation of the challenge to move beyond stereotyping that the supervisor managed to enable the student teacher to give up a teacher's defence for a more student-centred approach. This case portrays a lively example of how the supervisor can learn about effective supervision alongside the student teacher's learning about effective teaching with the willingness to cope with the challenges of uncertainty about human relationships.

#### *Change as Engagement in Cycles of Action and Reflection*

Whilst the cases have suggested that student teachers' attitudinal change is primary to their behavioural change, they also reveal the cognitive aspects of their learning experiences. It was through reflection on action at critical points that change took place, as student teachers learned about the impact of their practice, and became aware of the context in which the practice was actualized. Underlying the cases are various forms of reflection which trigger cycles of change amidst

student teachers' actions. It is worth examining how supervision can facilitate reflection.

To enhance reflective teaching, one approach to supervision can be built upon a curriculum structure that requires student teachers to keep reflective journals of their practicum experience, as described by Elizabeth Cheung and Benny Yung. However, their experience in supervision revealed to them the limitation of relying solely on this curriculum requirement to facilitate reflection. Critical aspects of student teachers' practicum experience were not readily put into reflection as intended by the journal-writing. Problems and sensitive issues were supposed to provide the most genuine opportunities to facilitate student teachers' learning about their practical experience, but most often were avoided in the journals. Could it be the complexity behind the experience that demanded too much from student teachers in the writing exercise? Alternatively, could it be a lack of trust in the supervisors that put student teachers off from a genuine attempt to explore their thinking? While both reasons may be possible, the case demonstrated the possibilities for probing the depth of student teachers' reflections through group-sharing sessions and interviews with individuals. In parallel to the attempts to trigger reflection, the case concluded with clear insights by the supervisors into their supervisory practice. The supervisors' own commitments to reflection helped to develop a climate which was congenial to reflective teaching.

Another approach to enhancement of reflection is through the provision of stimulus and encouragement in supervision. Chan, an inservice teacher under the supervision of Tse Shek-Kam, was receptive to such stimulus and support, and went through a dynamic process of change. The impetus came from his engagement in reflection, as he was exposed to the course experience in video-review of lively and enjoyable lessons taught by other teachers. Such exposure triggered Chan's active reflection, though his participation appeared to be not as active. His reflective practice was further enhanced through the supervisory inputs from Tse Shek-Kam. Through his professional development, however, he had to meet new challenges emerging from the incongruence between his innovative spirit and the broader teaching context beyond his classroom. The case concluded with a mixture of

pains and joy for the supervisor in viewing the success and failure of a teacher in coping with conflicting demands of professional development. This was a significant case of teacher change attributed to engagement in cycles of actions and reflection.

Effective supervision that can lead to developmental change has to rely on engaging student teachers in cycles of meaningful connections between theory, practice, and reflection. Such cycles are essential to help student teachers in the development of expertise in their different tracks of professional learning. Over a substantial period, such cycles are repeated, and student teachers not only stabilize their performance in a workable routine but also get ready to move into variation of practices. From a developmental perspective, upon completion of a professional education programme, all student teachers may have come to different stages of their professional development; but it is most important that all continue to strive for further professional development. The capacity to reflect on one's practice is a critical prerequisite to improvement, without which the end of practicum in formal professional training would offer student teachers little more than the credential to teach, but likely denote a beginning of 'fossilization' of teaching behaviour.

### **A Review of Practicum Structure: Questions to be Addressed**

Whilst the cases have shown the capacity for student teachers and supervisors to change through professional learning together, aspects of the practicum structure need to be queried if professional teaching is to become truly significant in schools.

#### *The Push for Changes and the Pull from Former Experiences*

Given the encouraging evidence of developmental changes of both preservice and inservice student teachers, it is important to address the broader reality in schools in which the professional life of teachers beyond the supervised practicum takes place. Assuming that the practicum experience is successful in enabling student teachers to

develop capability in professional teaching, teacher educators should also consider the receptivity of schools to accommodate the types of innovative teaching advocated in teacher education programmes.

Teacher education should be concerned with the link between the student teachers' teaching practicum and their subsequent experience as initial teachers. Against many teacher educators' best intentions and efforts in training student teachers to adopt student-centred teaching methods, novice teachers tend to adopt the didactic teacher-centred methods by which they were taught during their early school years. Much of the teacher educators' input then becomes impracticable idealism, even when their recommendations are rationally convincing. At the same time, a teacher who can turn idealism into reality by successful classroom practice may also be entangled in the dilemmas of how to thrive in isolation in a school climate which is not conducive to innovations. Tse Shek-Kam's case has acutely revealed such a problem in one particular teacher's professional development.

There seem to be conflicting forces in the push for changes in teacher education and the pull from former experiences in practical teaching in schools. Such conflicting forces have been discussed by Hargreaves and Jacka (1995, p.62):

"As long as new teachers entering their first positions have to confront conditions of physical isolation, teacher cultures of non-interference and individualism, absence of administrative or collegial support, and school staffs who are unreceptive to the new methods that beginning teachers can bring, then no amount of tinkering with teacher preparation is likely to work."

To prepare teachers to become a refreshing professional force in the reality of schools, teacher education should help students to develop their ownership of theories through thoughtful practice. Such theories should extend beyond the boundary of teaching methodology. Student teachers also need to be adequately prepared to develop what Fullan (1995, p.7) identified as 'context expertise' which is needed for relating to and taking into account parents and communities. Within the

changing social context, teacher education will be a futile endeavour if student teachers' competence in bridging the gap between the world of professional training and the reality in schools remains a wishful assumption.

In bridging such a gap, teacher education should also attend to wider agendas of school improvement and professional development. A question about teacher education reform posed by Hargreaves and Jacka (1995, p.63) was "what unique and distinctive role faculties of education can play to help transform the conditions and cultures of schooling in general". In spite of the implied suggestion that schools should look to universities for leadership for development of professional cultures, the credibility of education faculties in taking the superior status should also be assessed. Universities are not necessarily places with model professional cultures. Positive changes are more likely to be inspired by mutual learning between universities and schools. A promising start for a venture into bridging the gap should lie in building a mechanism to ensure mutual learning.

#### *Supervision and Guarding the Gates of the Profession*

Supervision of the teaching practicum, from an administrative perspective, carries resource implications in calculation of work distribution in terms of frequency of supervisory visits. The underlying assumption is that the supervisory visits are a necessary and effective means in preparing student teachers to become professionals. A focus on staff resources within the existing structure of practicum has to rely on the validity of such an assumption. Although it seems convenient to separate professional considerations from administrative decisions in practicum arrangements, the effectiveness of arrangements which heavily rely on the infrequent supervisory visits has to be examined. The cases presented in this book, whilst having described issues related to the effects of supervisory efforts, also shed light on the importance of the teacher education curriculum as a holistic experience for student teachers. Student teachers need to develop a sense of coherence between professional studies and practical teaching.

## *Towards Improved Understanding of Professional Learning*

The case presented by David Bunton raised concerns about paradoxes in the supervisor's dual roles in guidance and assessment. Dolores finally achieved a pass in her practicum, but the decision process also prompted the assessors to reflect on critical issues about guarding the professional gate. With an aim of looking at student teachers' problems sympathetically, and helping them explore ways to move forward, supervision eventually leads to difficult decisions of assessment especially when it comes to a pass/fail borderline. Emerging from the rich description of the case of Dolores are further questions about guarding the gates of the teaching profession:

*Recruitment:* In recruitment of teacher education candidates, can policy be made to ensure the quality of intake so that places can be offered to those who can best benefit from the programme, and those who can consequently contribute to education as professional teachers?

*Meaning of Failure:* Despite careful recruitment, we may still have to cope with weak candidates. To what extent should we bear responsibility for candidates' failure? To what extent should we offer extra assistance to help poor candidates to get through?

*Samples, Criteria and Moderation:* What should be valid samples for assessment that can encourage continuity of experimentation and discourage a tendency for student teachers to put on 'shows' for supervisory visits? What are the criteria for assessment? Should the criteria include the recognition of students' experimentation, in addition to a focus on their teaching performance? How should monitoring of grades across students be conducted?

*Perceptions of Supervision and Assessment:* How do supervisors understand student teachers' perceptions of supervision and assessment? How can it be ensured that student teachers understand and benefit from supervisory functions of each visit, rather than being heavily concerned with the pending assessment?



Given the constraint in staff resources, which allows for limited supervisory visits for each student, how can student teachers maintain their focus on the needs of the learners rather than the impression they make on the supervisor-assessor?

Supervisors may begin to tackle these questions by clarifying the admission criteria and making them explicit to applicants, in order to weed out candidates who are not ready to benefit from teacher education programmes. Teaching, in addition to the intellectual demands, also requires moral commitments to education. The selection process should involve a balanced consideration of different aspects of applicants' personal prerequisites. However, recruitment tends to be more complex than a professional decision, as market mechanisms in supply and demand of teachers can influence admission policy. Careful orientation of student teachers into teacher education programme becomes critical.

No matter how carefully student teachers may have been selected, it is still important to recognize the diversity of their background in terms of their potential competence in teaching, and commitment to the teaching career. In some cases, student teachers' understanding of the dual roles of supervisors in supervision and assessment may be acutely different from that of their supervisors. At times, both supervisors and student teachers may be working very hard, yet with minimal effect. The blockage may seem mysterious, but perhaps can be tackled from a broader view of the scenario in order to realize that both parties may not be sharing a similar perception of their working relationship. In order to approach such a problem, supervisors and student teachers need to build up a common frame at the very beginning of the programme with a two-way communication about the meaning of practicum, supervision and assessment. In this light, it seems important that we should look at practicum arrangements as a system extended to campus work before, during and after the practicum period by addressing to the difficulties outlined in the cases of this book.

### **Beyond Initial Changes: Future Perspectives and Actions**

With an improved understanding of the different dimensions of professional learning, it is important to consider the continuity of student teachers' development even if initial changes have taken place in the teaching practicum. The discussion now turns to future perspectives and actions.

#### *From Judgemental Threat to a Culture of Collaborative Learning*

Emerging from the cases is an assertion that change and development in the teaching practicum is not a matter of strategic compliance to what the student teachers think that the supervisor might want to see. Change occurs when supervision is no longer a judgemental threat but a process of facilitation of learning from risk-taking and learning from mistakes, as the focus turns to the effects of teaching decisions and acts. Through this open and constructive process, student teachers can more likely develop into confident and competent classroom practitioners. Equally, supervisors' competence in facilitating such development has to rely on their awareness of the effects of their communication with student teachers. Effective supervision requires a sensitive response to student teachers' needs for challenges and support. There should be adequate challenges within a support structure to help student teachers to make sense of their experience. This support structure necessitates development of a learning community which encourages continual discussion and reflection on the impacts of practices in teaching. Building up such a supportive network goes beyond procedural considerations, and requires attention to nurturing new cultures in collaborative learning within which professional development becomes a common concern for university supervisors, school teachers and student teachers together.

The global accountability movement has demanded increasing sophistication of appraisal systems for different sectors of professionals. The broader political structures within which the teaching profession is contextualised tend to induce pressures and judgemental threats on institutions and individuals. Underlying the appraisal systems are

expectations of professional development. However, genuine development does not often take place as a logical response to well-intended policies in promoting professional development. Arguably, it is especially because the external climate is conducive to competition that educators should find ways to survive and thrive through collaboration. Building a supportive network and nurturing a sharing culture is not a natural activity, but requires evidence of viable strategies. The professional discourse started in this book has demonstrated the power of collective reflection, as a cultural force in developing supportive networks for this era of change.

Accompanying the changing modes of teacher education to partnerships with schools from the academic traditional base in universities or institutions, there have been growing concerns about how partnerships can take place effectively (Allegra-Snyder et al, 1995; Fidler, 1994; Kagan et al, 1993; Glickman et al, 1995; Yeatman, 1996). Division of labour and co-ordination between institutionally-based and school-based teacher educators needs to be refined. Teacher educators and school teachers collectively need to become alert to new roles in the changing contexts of professional work. Such roles cannot be defined externally, and alertness can only be sharpened through a continual process of learning together. This is in essence a process of teacher development, which has been described by Fullan (1995, p.5) as a wholesale transformation for the teaching profession:

"Quality learning for all students depend on quality learning for all teachers. Quality learning for teachers in turn depends on the development of the six interrelated domains of teaching and learning, collegiality, context expertise, continuous learning, change process, and moral purpose."

Collegiality and continuous learning are two important dimensions which tend to be assumed but rarely practised for enhancement of professional learning. The cases reported in this book have revealed processes through which collegiality can be enhanced and can be used to generate further dialogues to engage professionals in a continuous learning process.

## *Towards Improved Understanding of Professional Learning*

### *A Joint Construction and Development of a Map for Professional Development in Teaching*

A positive way forward to enhance a genuine process of professional learning seems to lie in breaking the isolation of teaching, and opening the classroom door within a support structure for joint experimentation. This learning community includes student teachers as peer partners for each other, as well as, university supervisors and school teachers. Problems should be addressed as opportunities for learning. The professional learning dialogues should emphasise open sharing, and de-emphasise overall judgements of teaching behaviours. On the basis of recognition of individual differences in pace of development, the focus on teaching improvement should be directed to the process rather than a standard target for all.

To turn stress into constructive moves, student teachers should be helped to take charge of their individual pursuits with awareness of their state of progress. A tentative 'map', as interpreted by university supervisors from research literature on professional development in teaching, may help student teachers to develop their own vision of moving targets in professional learning. Such a map can take away the mystery about what the supervisor is looking for, and make explicit broad directions for professional learning. It can also generate a start for a collective reflection on professional teaching while encouraging individuals to examine the development of their personal theories on teaching and learning. A joint construction and development of a 'map' for professional development in teaching is a promising future action that will continually promote a collaborative learning culture.

The highlights of this new culture can be summarized with the acronym '**POND**'.

- \* **P**roblem-based in the learning process.
- \* **O**pen sharing with the ground rule of mutual support.
- \* **N**on-judgemental in an overall sense.
- \* **D**irection-oriented with recognition of individual pace of development.

During the teaching practicum, to ensure continuity in the process of learning, student teachers as peers to each other provide a valuable source of on-site support. This dimension of support should be further explored as a strategic resource for the teaching practicum, in addition to support from experienced school teachers and university supervisors. Although this book has come to an end, we anticipate further work in developing a professional learning force and relating the enhancement of the teaching practicum to fundamental cultural changes in the teaching profession!

## References

- Alexander, D., Muir, D. & Chant, D. (1992). Interrogating stories: How student teachers think they learned to teach. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 8 (1), 59-68.
- Allexsaht-Snider, M., Deegan, J.G. & White, C.S. (1995). Educational renewal in an alternative teacher education program: Evolution of a school-university partnership. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11 (5), 519-530.
- Calderhead, J. (1987). The quality of reflection in student teachers' professional learning. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 10 (3), 269-78.
- Fidler, B. (1994). Partnership in teacher education: Partnership, integration and funding implications, in M. McCulloch and B. Fidler (Eds.). *Improving Initial Teacher Training? New Roles for Teachers, Schools and Higher Education*. Essex: Longman.
- Fullan, M. (1995). Context: Overview and framework (Division 1: Contexts for leadership and change), in M.J. O'Hair & S.J. Odell (Eds.) *Educating Teachers for Leadership and Change* (Teacher Education Yearbook III). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Glickman, C.D., Lunsford, B.F. & Szuminski, K.A. (1995). Co-reform as an approach to change in education: The origin of revolution, in M.J. O'Hair & S.J. Odell (Eds.) *Educating Teachers for Leadership and Change* (Teacher Education Yearbook III). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.

*Towards Improved Understanding of Professional Learning*

- Hargreaves, A. & Jacka, N. (1995). Induction or seduction? Postmodern patterns of preparing to teach. *The Peabody Journal of Education*, 70 (3), 41-63.
- Kagan, D.M., Freeman, L.E., Horton, C.E. & Rountree, B.S. (1993). Personal perspectives on a school-university partnership. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9 (5/6), 499-509.
- Stones, E. (1987). Student (practice) teaching, in M.J. Dunkin (Ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Education*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Yeatman, A. (1996). Building effective university-school partnerships: Issues and possibilities, *Forum of Education*, 51 (2), 21-32.

X11389960

