

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

Mentoring Preservice Teachers – Demands of Participation in a Partnership of Mutual Benefit

Jackie Walkington, University of Canberra

Abstract

Future teacher shortage is a well-publicised phenomenon in Australia. The pressure is on all stakeholders to provide a solution, and it is suggested that teacher preparation courses take larger numbers into their programs. The professional experience/practicum components of teacher preparation courses are already having difficulty finding sufficient quality placements to meet current needs. It is difficult to see how more can be accommodated. Data gathered from stakeholders in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) reveal an array of factors that typify the problem Australia-wide – issues of mentoring teachers' experience, confidence, workload and incentives are uppermost for many participants. The challenge is for all stakeholders in the education of pre-service teachers to feel they are growing and benefiting from the relationship. There is a need for greater recognition and support to develop the partnerships further.

The demand for more new teachers to meet the needs of Australian schools in the next decade has been widely discussed and reported. The exodus of greying 'baby boomers' leaving the teacher workforce is purported to be without precedent. Maintaining career advancement opportunities are a challenge for the employing authorities (DEST, 2003). The shortage of teachers in particular areas of study continues, and the challenge to staff schools in remote areas a constant concern. The Australian Government's reform package *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* proposes incentives for people to enrol in teacher education programs as a national priority (DEST, 2003). The focus therefore falls on the ability of university teacher education courses to attract and adequately prepare for current and future needs. However, the universities are only part of the partnership that prepares beginning teachers. The government and school sectors have integral roles to play.

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

With a higher and more diverse intake into teacher preparation courses, an area that is feeling a distinct stress is the provision of appropriate professional experience (practicum) placements for pre-service teachers during their courses. Large numbers of experienced and committed teachers offer their mentoring support annually around the country. However, it is always a struggle to find enough places. It is not only numbers, but also matching the subject or contextual needs to provide appropriate, varied and quality experiences.

From the perspective of one who is responsible for overseeing the regular search for sufficient offers of appropriate placements, it is an on-going frustration. There is a tension between the obligation to provide a rich and rewarding professional experience for the pre-service teachers, and the opportunity to provide preparation and support for quality mentors of pre-service teachers. The result of the tension is a less than satisfactory outcome from both perspectives. The sheer demand for numbers at times reduces the process to one of 'begging' teachers to participate in the professional experience program.

A rewarding experience

There is wide acknowledgement that professional experience is an essential element of teacher education programs and a positive way to create important links between university students and staff and professionals in the field (Ramsay, 2000; ACDE, 2003). However the way professional experience has been conducted in the past is not necessarily meeting the needs of stakeholders today. *An Ethic of Care* (DEST, 2000) summarises a range of challenges for future teacher education programs based upon extensive data collection from the higher education sector and the broader teaching profession that constructively critiques past and current practice.

It is positive to note that the nature of the relationship between pre-service teacher and mentoring teacher is changing. There is recognition that in-school learning is the focus of professional experience, rather than mere enculturation and assessment of the pre-service teacher's skills. This creates a very different environment from traditional supervision

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

practices – an environment that embraces both knowledge/skills development AND the growth of the well rounded educator in the school context. The experience provides learning and enrichment for all involved (Digh, 1999).

For pre-service teachers, being welcomed into a school community leads to learning and professional growth that cannot be simulated or addressed in the university setting. The experience allows them to observe teachers in all aspects of their role, experiment with pedagogical practice and begin to understand how supportive learning environments are established. It develops a sense of commitment and responsibility to the teaching profession.

Feedback from teachers who take on the mentoring role is overwhelmingly positive (Churchill & Walkington, 2002). They speak of the satisfaction they receive from fostering a future teacher, of the enriched environment for their students through having another perspective in the classroom. Learning is certainly not the domain only of the pre-service teacher. Through a collaborative relationship, mentors speak of what they learn from the pre-service teacher, and about how they are challenged to reflect on their own practice as they encourage reflection by the pre-service teacher. It is a relationship of mutual benefits.

Undeniably, there are 'difficult' pre-service teachers from time to time, and there are ineffective pre-service teacher/mentoring teacher relationships in some instances. However they really are a very small number in the big picture. It is the supportive partnership that involves both university and school that helps to meet these challenges. Because of the intense time together, it is a mentoring teacher in many cases, who assists the pre-service teacher to make vital decisions about the appropriateness of continuing to pursue a career in teaching.

The partnership is such a valuable one... so what is preventing many experienced teachers from becoming mentors for pre-service teachers? The answer is embedded in a complex array of factors.

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

Limited participation – impediments and potential solutions

During the past twelve months, teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) have been asked to respond to questions of this kind during meetings across all sectors, and a range of responses have been elicited - responses that are governed by a variety of personal, professional and contextual perspectives. Statistically, there are many more teachers employed than there are pre-service teachers. Realistically, many factors inhibit participation, greatly reducing the availability.

One group of responses relates to the workload of the teacher. Mentoring a pre-service teacher requires dedication of energy and time to ensure a productive relationship – to collaboratively plan, model and reflect on practice and educational philosophy, and assist professional growth. Many teachers feel that the demands on them are already overwhelming and find it difficult to see how they could take on the responsibility of satisfactorily mentoring a pre-service teacher. Understandably, others prefer to dedicate their energies to other pursuits. This is a case of individual teachers needing to make individual decisions about their role.

Through being involved in overseeing placement procedures and speaking with teachers and principals, it is evident that there is a culture in many schools that strongly supports pre-service teacher programs as an integral part of their commitment to development of the profession. The regularly high number of pre-service teachers supported is evidence of this commitment. It is openly valued. This culture acknowledges the benefits that result for the pre-service teacher, the profession and the specific school. It is not uncommon for a school to target an outstanding pre-service teacher for future employment at that school.

Other schools also value the role, but dedicate fewer of their resources to supporting professional experience programs as other demands impinge on their capacity to be involved. Unfortunately, some schools take no, or very few, pre-service teachers. There is a challenge here for universities, employing authorities and regulatory bodies to better

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

promote the benefits of this form of developing the profession and to assist schools in ways necessary to provide wider and more mentoring opportunities.

Another related group of responses related to the perceived lack of reward or incentive to participate as a mentor. This is quite a divisive issue as there is a wide range of opinions ranging from that opinion which states that extrinsic rewards should not be an issue, to the expressed need for some monetary acknowledgment or recognition of the effort. Remuneration for mentoring varies from non-existent in some places, to direct teacher payments or contributions to professional development funds in others. Payment is small to the individual, yet a huge expense for the universities. Remuneration is not a reason in itself for non-participation, but the request for this kind of recognition is symptomatic of teachers' need for acknowledgement of their effort and expertise.

While monetary remuneration is often the subject of EBA bargaining, so are other forms of incentive. Being an issue that is personal as well as professional, means that there is no straightforward answer. However remuneration/recognition is important because it does influence the propensity of teachers to take on an added responsibility in an already busy professional life.

School settings that are a considerable distance from the universities are used rarely to accommodate professional experience programs. In particular, rural areas are not easy to access financially for pre-service teachers. While some specific rural programs are offered (eg NSW DET Rural Professional Experience Pilot), a rich placement resource is under utilised. Offering unique contextual experiences would potentially attract graduate teachers to rural schools and allow these schools to share their uniqueness in the development of future teachers. The Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA) is one body actively promoting quality education in rural and remote areas. As part of its mission, it advocates the utilisation of rural placements in pre-service teacher programs as a means of achieving this. There is a need for greater resourcing on the behalf of universities and employers to place pre-service teachers in remote settings – an associated benefit being the easing of demand in more populated areas.

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

A 'quality' experience

A dilemma for university staff arranging places for professional experience is that teachers in schools often feel ill-prepared or lacking in confidence to take on the role of mentor. As universities usually work with a large number of schools it is difficult to have a direct role in encouraging participation and developing mentoring skills and confidence – usually a handful of university staff and thousands of pre-service teachers and mentoring teachers. Initiatives evident include providing mentoring professional development sessions, materials in hard copy and on-line, and through related programs focused on educational leadership (for example, current joint project between the University of Canberra and the ACT Department of Education that includes mentoring as a subject option). While this goes some way to providing assistance, it is almost tokenistic in the big picture. It is an area that requires much greater attention to build upon the good work being carried out as pilot programs and small-scale initiatives. The responsibility rests with both university and employer authorities to support the professional development required. Under current resourcing, more extensive support programs are impossible.

Developing a culture of mentoring is not isolated to the support of pre-service teachers. It can be argued that being a mentor and promoting mentoring is an important attribute of the effective school leader (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). Opportunities to support beginning and new teachers, and teachers seeking promotion are complementary to the mentoring of pre-service teachers.

'Meeting these challenges will require vast reserves of creativity, innovation, determination, political will and political leadership' (Lovat, 2003, p.31). Responding to interim findings of a review of teaching and teacher education, an Australian Government reform package has proposed a considerable funding boost in recognition of the costs associated with professional experience. What is unclear is how such an injection of funds might be used. Firstly there is the question of how much of funding would actually reach the faculties and schools of education that manage professional experience

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

programs. How it should be spent will likely be the topic of much debate. It is suggested in the light of this discussion, that an appropriate direction would be to enhance the quality and range of professional experience placements through professional development, research and support for remote placements.

In an environment where there are insufficient numbers of teachers offering to mentor pre-service teachers, the issue of appropriate mentor quality is not easily addressed. Common practice is for the university to ask schools to offer places – that is – nominate teachers willing to take on the pre-service teachers. Schools have the ability to select, or not – to recommend, or not. Discussions with staff in schools as part of a regular professional experience evaluation program, indicates that some school executive staff actively encourage particular staff to participate; others play little or no role in selection but leave it to individuals to commit. The implication of this is that the quality of the learning during professional experience can be extremely variable.

If the placements are made more on the grounds of convenience or under pressure of the need to participate, rather than the provision of quality experience, then the levels of learning are potentially compromised (Goodlad, 1990). A quality sound working partnership (DEST, 2003) relies upon a shared understanding of expectations, common goals and a negotiated approach (Hudson, Bergin & Chayst, 1993). If these are not evident, the professional experience may only provide the perpetuation of the mentoring teacher's practice, rather than a constructive learning experience personally related to the development of the Pre-service Teacher (Witinsky, Stoddart & O'Keefe 1992). There is the danger that the relationship will revert to/remains one of supervision only as there is no opportunity to support the development of professional mentoring relationships.

Shared responsibility: Shared benefits

In addition to the need for enhanced professional development for those involved in the professional experience program, the expansion and enhancement of the links between teacher education institutions and the schools are required. So often, whilst cooperating for professional experience placements and recruitment purposes, they exist in isolation

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

of one another (Lovat, 2003). Improved communication, greater resourcing of a variety of joint activities and more opportunities for action research underpins a way forward. Mentoring Preservice Teachers would become a part of the potentially broader collegial package. Examples of this can be identified (eg the Knowledge Building Community at University of Woollongong) but these are the exception rather than the norm. Without greater resources, such partnership initiatives will likely remain as small one-off examples rather than exploiting the potential to inform successful practice on a wider scale.

The vast majority of professional experience relationships are positive and fruitful. However it would be false to say that all are as would be desired. Poor experiences are not intentional, but the result of many factors discussed here. Lack of time to dedicate to effective mentoring, lack of opportunity to develop mentoring skills and confidence, and lack of incentive and a supportive culture all play a role in potentially unsatisfactory professional experience partnerships. These deserve greater attention to ensure quality teachers for the future. 'Whichever way they are configured, genuine partnerships between higher education institutions, governments, education authorities and schools are essential to making teacher preparation courses, and particularly the professional experience component, as effective as possible' (DEST, 2003).

WALKINGTON, J.A. (2003) 'Mentoring Preservice teachers – Demands of participation in a partnership of mutual benefit', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* No 28. Australian College of Educators, Canberra.

References

- Australian Council of Deans of Education Inc. (ACDE), 2003, Response to the Commonwealth review of Teaching and Teacher Education Discussion paper: Young People, Schools and Innovation: Towards an action plan for the school sector, ACDE, Canberra, May.
- Casavant, M. & Cherkowski, S, 2001, 'Effective leadership: Bringing mentoring and creativity to the principalship', *NASSP Bulletin*, 85 (624) April, pp. 71-81.
- Churchill, R, & Walkington J. 2002, 'Preparation, transition and induction: A longitudinal study of beginning teachers' learning', proceedings of the 30th Annual Australian Teacher Education Association Conference, Brisbane, July.
- Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), 2003, *Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future, Advancing Innovation, Science, Technology and Mathematics*, Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, Canberra, October.
- Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), 2002, *An Ethic of Care: Effective Programmes for Beginning Teachers*, Project through the Quality Teacher Programme, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, October.
- Digh, P. 1999, 'Mentoring is about developing people', *Training and Development in Australia*, 25, (5) October, pp 6-7.
- Goodlad, J. 1990, *Teachers for our Nation's Schools*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Hudson, L. Bergin, D. & Chayst, C. 1993, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 20 (3), 5-17.
- Lovat, T.J. 2003, *The Role of the 'Teacher' Coming of Age?* Discussion Paper, Australian Council of Deans of Education, June.
- Ramsey, G. 2000, *Quality matters: Revitalizing teaching: Critical times, critical choices*, Ministry of Education and Training, Sydney.
- Sikula, J., Butlery, T.J. & Guyton, E. 1996, *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, 2nd edn, Simon and Schuster Macmillan, New York.
- Witinsky, N., Stoddart, T. & O'Keefe, P. 1992, 'Great expectations: Emergent professional development schools', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 43, (1), 3-18.