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Unsung Heroes: exploring the roles of school-based professional experience coordinators in Australian preservice teacher education

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ABSTRACT *The literature on practicum in preservice teacher education provides varied and detailed accounts of the roles of the student teacher, the supervising teacher, and the university-based teacher educator. However, the school-based professional experience coordinator, usually the principal or deputy principal, has been dismissed as an administrative outsider to the essential triad of supervision. Feedback from the field suggested that the coordinator's role may in fact be crucial in ensuring that practicum is an occasion for quality learning. This paper reports on a study to explore ways in which a small selection of professional experience coordinators contribute to the establishment, support and appraisal of high quality practicum experience in a variety of settings. The research fills a gap in the existing literature on the practicum by providing some illumination of the varied ways the school-based coordinator role is filled. In addition, the paper raises questions about selection and support of coordinators, about ownership of the practicum, and argues for a reconceptualisation of the practicum as the site where all shareholders engage in the partnership, with continual opportunities for construction, reconstruction and renewal of the teaching profession.*

Professional Experience Coordinators: roles and research

The literature on practicum in preservice teacher education provides varied and detailed accounts of the roles of the student teacher, the school-based supervising teacher and the university-based teacher educator (see, for example, Gaffey & Dobbins, 1996; Glickman, 1992; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Martinez, 1998; McDermott *et al.*, 1995; Waite, 1995; Zeichner, 1999).

However, the school-based professional experience coordinator, usually the principal or deputy principal, has been dismissed as an administrative outsider to the essential triad of preservice supervision. Coordinators' roles traditionally have been seen as largely administrative—the link between university and school, receiving and distributing information such as practicum handbooks, organising pay claims and reports to be returned to the university. Our search of literature has revealed no consideration of the coordinators' role. Our search of university education faculty manuals reveals that only a few of them specify requirements of the school-based coordinator role. In those specifications, administrative matters dominate, with occasional inclusion of orientation talks, and in one case, mention of regular checking on student teachers' welfare and progress during their school practicum.

We wish to affirm that efficient and competent administration is a key factor for successful practicum experiences. However, the role of the coordinator extends beyond the administrative function, and is crucial in establishing the practicum as an occasion

for quality learning. For example, in Queensland schools, coordinators also select school-based teachers to act in a supervisory role for student teachers during practicum, and often undertake some informal preparation of those teachers for their supervisory roles. With increased student teacher intake in Queensland in response to predicted teacher shortage, this task of selecting and preparing quality practicum places is poised to become even more demanding. A further role that coordinators traditionally play is to offer a series of talks to preservice teachers about general policies and expectations of the particular site. In some schools, the coordinator also takes a very active role in the moderation of practicum assessment and the writing of practicum reports. In Queensland schools, for the past 2 years, professional experience coordinators have also been directly involved in the organisation and conduct of systemic recruitment for final year preservice teachers.

In our work as university-based coordinators of professional experience, we have noticed considerable differences in the ways schools acquit their responsibilities to preservice practicum. Differences occur in many aspects: the number of student teachers that sites agree to host; the substance and quality of coordinator talks; levels of communication and participation in supervision workshops; student teachers' reported satisfaction; timeliness and quality of written prac reports; rates of employment of graduate teachers. Anecdotal feedback from student teachers and university-based teacher educators, along with our direct working contacts, suggested that the coordinator's role may in fact be crucial in ensuring that practicum is an occasion for quality learning. It was our hunch that the professional experience coordinator may influence many aspects of the practicum, and help shape the professional ethos of a school, as experienced by preservice teachers.

Accordingly, we initiated a small research project with two goals: to identify the roles played by professional experience coordinators in establishing high quality practicum experiences; and to document exemplary practices of professional experience coordinators in establishing, supporting and appraising preservice professional experience.

Context and Selection of Participant Coordinators

James Cook University (JCU) offers two major teacher preparation pathways—a 4-year undergraduate degree and a 2-year graduate program. Fundamental to the professional experience programs at James Cook University is a strong working partnership between the university and the local schools and centres who host student teachers. School-based professional experience coordinators are key links in establishing and maintaining that partnership. (For further information about the programs, see <<http://www.soe.jcu.edu.au/profex>>.)

At a coordinators' meeting in November 1999, we outlined our intended research, and called for volunteers to participate if they believed they had attempted strategies that appeared to have been effective in promoting high quality practicum experiences for JCU student teachers. At the end of the 1999 academic year, and after the round of practica in 2000, student teachers and university-based teacher educators were asked to nominate professional experience coordinators who had contributed to high quality practicum experiences, and to specify activities or processes that were especially effective. From the two sets of nominations, a group of 10 coordinators were selected as participants in the research process. The group included representation from early childhood, primary and secondary settings in Education Queensland and in non-state

systems; coordinators included a principal, a classroom teacher, a learning support teacher, and seven deputy principals.

Exploration and Documentation of Exemplary Professional Experience Coordinators' Practices

Initial, individual semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Kvale, 1996) were conducted with the selected professional experience coordinators. In the course of the interviews, key practices in fulfilling the professional experience coordinator role were identified. Where appropriate, coordinators were asked to provide samples of written documentation of their practices, such as outlines of group talks, written information circulated to teachers, and processes for report moderation.

Exemplary practices were collated and organised as a draft handbook for professional experience coordinators. The draft handbook, *TIPS for PECS* (Professional Experience Unit, 2000), was taken back to the participant group for their feedback and amendment, and the amended version has now been distributed to all partner schools.

This paper summarises some of the exemplary practices of coordinators, and discusses issues arising from them. In writing the paper, we have faced the challenge of presenting more than a 'how to' manual, although we hope that capturing best practice may also be helpful. Accordingly, we have included considerable detail of coordinators' varied approaches to certain aspects of their work. We have also attempted to connect practices to two major frames: the conceptualisation of the practicum as an occasion for high quality learning; and the political and economic issues surrounding the question of who should take responsibility for and ownership of the practicum. These issues are discussed in the concluding section of this paper. Details of more administrative, technical aspects of the coordinators' role such as welcoming, orientation and arranging programs of talks, are included in *TIPS for PECS*.

Selecting and Supporting Supervising Teachers

A common problem for provision of high quality professional experience in education is a shortage of placements, particularly at this time when teacher shortages are predicted, and university enrolments are expanding. Universities, especially small regional ones such as James Cook, are in no position to insist on potential supervisors participating in supervision or mentoring education in order to be accepted as school-based teacher educators. Rather, as administrative staff will attest, the university is more likely to be 'begging' the school-based coordinators to find extra placements. Accordingly, any quality control of supervising practitioners rests entirely with the school-based professional experience coordinator; those in our study took this aspect of their role very seriously. They considered that some good classroom teachers would not necessarily make good school-based teacher educators. The criteria for selection readily nominated by one coordinator were generally consistent for the group:

I would be looking at that person being willing to go out of themselves. Not to be within themselves. They're people that are willing to share things. Share themselves, share time. It's no good to pick someone who just, I suppose is 'selfish' they just do their own work, they don't interact with people well. They've got to have social skills, people skills. Someone that is willing to share, is a good operator. And willing to put in the time are the main criteria.

One coordinator indicated that he was careful to avoid any teacher ‘who’s not organised, who’s not prepared to give the extra in spending that time with a student teacher’. He was aware that poor selection of supervisors resulted in problems, and extra work for the coordinator: ‘a lot comes back onto me because [then] I’ve got a student who’s not happy, a teacher who’s not coping well, so we don’t allow it to happen’.

Several coordinators described a phase-in developmental process for supervisors, leading up to the final year, which all coordinators regarded as deserving their ‘best’ supervising teachers. One coordinator identified the special willingness to ‘give up’ their classes that characterised the final year supervisor:

Fourth year supervisors have got to be special people because they’ve got to be willing to give their class up. It’s not easy and you get the supervisors come to you during the day and say, ‘I’ve had to walk out for ten minutes because if I stay!’ So they spend ten minutes out and then they go back and they’ve calmed down. It’s a skill that they have to learn to be able to sit there, do nothing and say nothing, because sometimes it’s sink or swim. You can’t keep rescuing.

The coordinators were also sensitive to the multiplicity of attributes of teachers at their site. For example, one of the secondary school coordinators explained that he attempted to provide a balance in teaching and supervisory styles in allocating supervisors to a student teacher. For example, if one teacher excelled in inquiry-oriented cooperative group learning strategies, the coordinator would try to pair the student teacher with a more traditional expository teacher for the second specialist area. Coordinators also took into account other factors: ‘If we have a teacher who is really good mentoring and training students but is already loaded at that particular time of year for any number of reasons, I may say, “Look, give it a miss this year”.’

The experiences of several of the coordinators in this study suggest that their work in selecting and supporting school-based teacher educators is located within the broader context of the professional ethos of the school. One suggested that the ‘very cohesive team’ of teachers in the whole school made all the processes of preservice teacher supervision and education easier, as it fell within the general scope of professional communication and development. Several coordinators mentioned specific strategies for promoting talk and reflection about supervision. One urged teachers to recall their own experiences of being supervised as a guide for their own supervising practices.

Another emphasised informal communication: ‘You know chat, chat, chat. I try and keep the informal communication happening for the student and the supervisor when you just bump into them in the corridor. “How is X, Y, and Z going?”’ At a large primary school, the coordinator deliberately opted for a positive, pragmatic approach to preservice teacher education, and described selection of supervisors as positive recognition of their skills:

I think there’s two ways I see JCU students are viewed: as a necessary evil that must be tolerated or as a way to ensure that the person potentially at the end of your room next year is up to par. It’s a very important responsibility thing and if you’re asked to do it, it means someone thinks you’re doing a good job.

By way of further recognition, one coordinator sent out a letter of thanks at the end of each year. Another reported that she formally thanked the school-based teacher educators for all the effort they put into the supervisory process by taking them all out

to dinner after the practicum was over. All coordinators in the study saw the work of supervising teachers as demanding and critical for the profession.

Relationships with Preservice Teachers: personal and professional

This research indicates that the work of the coordinators is highly interpersonal. They expressed views on the sorts of relationships which they sought to establish with preservice teachers, and saw these relationships as pivotal in the process. A coordinator who saw pastoral care as the essence of her work with student teachers explained that hers was an 'open door' policy, and that she was always available for them. She found that counselling skills she had acquired during a Masters subject had proven very helpful in her role as coordinator. The one coordinator in the group who was also principal considered that her status as principal may have been a little daunting for student teachers, and may have prevented them seeing her door as open.

Coordinators indicated that they differentiated among different year levels of student teachers:

So my dealings with the first years would be quite [different]. I would come in more as an authority, directive. But when I deal with my fourth years it would be like as a peer relationship.

When coordinators spoke about final year students, they described them variously as 'special' or 'precious', and feeling 'protective' of them in their vital preservice year.

Coordinators' focus on relationships should not be construed as 'soft'; they all expressed strong positions about the professional focus of their work. One made it clear that the personal and the professional were both involved:

It is hard because you've got to remember the person who's there and the profession ... they're separate and combined and you've got to be careful how you deal with them when they do come together.

Another stated that she made it clear from the outset that the onus remained with the preservice teacher to demonstrate their independence and competence:

'We're here to help but we're not here to do it for you.' I tell them that. 'Unpleasant as it is, we have failed people and we will tell you if you are failing but by and large we don't want to know about that. We want to know that you're in there trying and if you've got a problem hey that's fine. If you don't want to make a mistake or you don't have a problem you never learn anything. As long as you then try and do something about it we'll help you, but we won't do it for you.' I ram that point down their throat very strongly.

For many of the coordinators, it was a sense of responsibility to the teaching profession that guided their work, and provided their satisfaction in being coordinators. One reported that she enjoyed 'the fact that I can influence them to make a good teacher'. Another talked with pride about the high professional standards they set and modelled for student teachers:

I feel quite passionate about making sure that whatever we do, that we do it properly. I say to our JCU students that doing a prac here is a lot of hard work and probably very stressful but what we're doing is making their first year of teaching less stressful and making them more confident as new teachers.

The professional gate-keeping responsibilities associated with the role included a measure of future orientation, with possible repercussions for their own staff: 'You have

to make sure that you get the quality people in the classrooms'. Several coordinators made it clear that this mix of personal and professional aspects of their relationships with student teachers not only provided the rewards of their work, but also contributed to the 'downside' of the coordinator role when they had to help make the 'agonising' decision to fail a student teacher with whom they had come to establish a caring relationship. Nonetheless, most coordinators stressed the professional bottom line:

There are two questions supervisors have to ask about a student when they give them their marks and pass them. 'Would you like that person to teach your child next year?' And 'would you like that person to be at the other end of your classroom next year?' And if you don't get two yesses, there's a problem.

Scheduling and Observing

In some sites, it has become common practice for school-based teacher educators to visit and observe student teachers other than the one with whom they are working. In part, these exchanges were prompted by concerns for moderation of the final report grade. In some sites, these exchanges were organised by a formal, complicated timetable which one coordinator referred to as 'like organising a dance':

... so that every one of our supervising teachers sees all of our preservice teachers a number of times. And they see them once during their first prac, and then during their continuous they see them two or three or four times. They all write comments after they've observed a lesson.

This formal organisation appeared more likely to occur where there were large numbers of student teachers. With fewer student teachers, coordinators opted for informal, personal negotiation.

In one secondary school, where each student teacher was usually allocated to a number of supervising teachers, the coordinator had moved from a formal schedule to one that the teachers arranged themselves. In several of the primary school sites, coordinators reported that they left it to the teachers to work out their own times because that allowed them the flexibility to take into account day-to-day changes in their classroom programs. In two cases, preservice teachers had been given the responsibility of establishing a timetable of visits for supervising teachers and for preservice teachers to visit a range of different classrooms:

Last year, we had five fourth years and I appointed one of those as the leader and she had to make up a timetable and they visited each other. And their supervisors visited them. I wouldn't have time to [draw up a timetable] ... The teachers swap regularly, at least two or three times a week.

The coordinator in one of those sites was adamant that this was a beneficial process for all involved, and served broader professional goals than moderation of assessment:

Generally the preservice teachers find that, even though they're freaked out to begin with, they'll come to me later and say, 'That was great, it was really good, I got these ideas from this teacher and that teacher told me something else. Now I've got to know somebody you know I can go and talk to her. She

said come to my classroom and I'll show you something else'. So they're benefiting from getting input from not just their own supervising teacher.

He added that he believed student teachers needed to see a wide range of teaching styles and strategies, and that these exchanges facilitated development of a richer repertoire. At the large secondary school, the coordinator also charged student teachers with the responsibility of arranging the observation exchanges. She saw this as a further way to encourage student teachers to become proactive in advocating their own high quality professional learning during practicum. Other coordinators also commented that the exchange of observations stimulated animated professional conversations among the school-based teacher educators: 'Once the teachers started hearing one another talking, like you just had to walk into the staffroom, it was really lively. These six supervising teachers, it was vibrant type of conversations happening. It's that shared wisdom.'

As well as arranging or delegating the schedules of observations, coordinators also generally took an active role in observing student teachers, especially those in final year. Again, their approaches varied. Most of these coordinators had again adopted a flexible and responsive approach to this aspect of their role. They spoke about 'random drop ins' mixed with more formal, pre-arranged visits. One of the coordinators described a mix of formal and informal visits, generally starting with formal appointed times early in the year, and later just 'popping in'. Several coordinators allowed and encouraged student teachers to nominate times and specific lessons that they would prefer to have observed:

I'd say to them, 'Look, I'd really love to come and have a look at one of your lessons and see how you go, but you let me know when you'd like me to come'. And so you're much better off doing it that way so they're not seeing you as an ogre.

Coordinators also varied the ways in which they offered feedback from their observations. One suggested a range from formal written feedback to informal one-to-one follow-up chat. Another favoured a more holistic approach to observation and feedback, in the hope that this reduced stress and encouraged experimentation:

I like to give feedback, but I don't actually want to give feedback every lesson. Now the reason being I don't think they should be under the microscope every lesson ... I think that's very stressful. There's no holistic view. If you know you're going to be assessed every lesson you could sometimes, and I don't know whether it happens to other schools, not take a risk. Have it so planned. [But] teaching is about experimenting.

For coordinators who were also classroom teachers, finding time to observe was a major difficulty. One of them indicated that observations were only made if the supervising teacher had reported concerns. This was confirmed by another coordinator, who had also attempted to deal with the issue in other ways. He allocated himself a final year student, and asked us at the university to ensure he had a preservice teacher who was likely to be fairly competent and independent, so that he could free himself for short periods during those practicum periods. He has also approached the principal at the school with a request for allocation of some supply teaching during the practicum period. Nonetheless, the structural contextual problem remained to fulfil his coordinator role while maintaining primary focus on his classroom learners.

Relationship with University-based Teacher Educators

As discussed in the opening section, the ‘essential triad’ of supervision is generally seen in the literature as the student teacher, the supervising teacher and the university-based teacher educator. We believe that changed economic contexts for higher education in Australia have resulted in minimising the significance of the university-based teacher educator’s role. As we read the national scene, many universities have been forced—mostly reluctantly—to withdraw from active participation in school-based professional experience. Rising student numbers, reduced funding and the emergence of the entrepreneurial, user-pay university have pushed school-based activities off the agenda. At James Cook University, we have fought to maintain involvement in the practicum, especially at final year level. Several competing forces apply. As a regional university responsive to local needs, many student teachers complete their practicum in rural and remote schools distant from campus. Visits to such sites are costly in terms of time, travel and accommodation. And yet, as a regional university committed to strong mutually respectful relationships with school-based colleagues, we are keen to remain visible and actively engaged with schools. The practicum is a significant program component for most student teachers. The participation of academics in those experiences is a great educational opportunity. Many university-based teacher educators want to be involved with practicum, but institutional constraints make it almost impossible to do so.

Against this background, coordinators reported great variation in their relationships with university-based teacher educators. There were also variations in the ways the university visits were arranged. In some cases, coordinators played a major role:

[The university-based teacher educator] just rings up and says, ‘These are my times’, and I just do a timetable for him and fax it back to him and that’s it ... The other thing I do is I pull the students together and just say look, ‘Ian’s coming this time, when does it suit you?’ So actually the students are having a say in what they’re wanting to be teaching when Ian’s coming because they get so nervous when Ian’s coming.

At several schools, coordinators believed the university-based teacher educator’s major responsibilities were with the student and the supervising teacher, not with them, and so minimised their own contact and involvement. In another case, the coordinator wanted contact only if there were problems, and saw it as time wasted if the university-based teacher educator sought her out.

On the other hand, in some primary schools, coordinators reported having a very strong relationship with the university-based teacher educator, who visited regularly and whose input was greatly valued:

Excellent, we’ve had really good support from Ian—very, very good. He’s not over-powering, he’s supportive, he’s willing to listen, he likes to listen to the students and the teachers. He’s very good value and gives good constructive feedback. And not just ‘Oh yes, you’re a good student’, when that student isn’t good ... His head isn’t in the clouds and he does know what’s going on in the real world. And he’s got really good people skills. Nothing flusters him, he’s just calm, calm, calm.

All coordinators reported that the university-based teacher educator was consulted when there were problems with students, particularly with final year students who were at risk of failing. In most settings, the university-based teacher educator was actively

involved in the reporting and moderation processes. Again, Ian's involvement was singled out:

We all come back with Ian present, so I've called him in for that because I think with the fourth years there is so much at stake in terms of employment etc. I want to crack a nut with a sledge.

Even in those cases where the university-based teacher educator was not actually present for the moderation process, their written reports were used by coordinators, or supervising teachers sought their informal oral affirmation for likely report grades.

Only one coordinator had any negative comments on a university-based teacher educator, and that involved some written comments that were in direct conflict with the school-based teacher educator's opinions about a particular student teacher:

To be honest in our first year we found that the visiting lecturer wrote comments which were at odds with what we were saying to our preservice teachers.

For another coordinator, who was a classroom teacher, the university-based teacher educator was crucial back-up. He made it clear that he depended on the university-based teacher educator being available to help him as soon as any problems occurred, and that this availability was a condition of his continuing in the role of coordinator:

If someone does have a problem, I'm right there and if I yell 'Help', and someone [from JCU] isn't coming, you've lost me because I don't have the time.

As discussed above, funding cutbacks and culture shifts in higher education make the role of the university-based teacher educator in professional experience likely to come under increasing pressure. This study suggests that this role can be educative for all, adding greatly to the quality of learning during professional experience, or it can teeter on the brink of tokenism, with limited real time or involvement.

Reporting, Moderation and Recruitment

Closely connected with current economic and cultural contexts of higher education are issues of sharing responsibility for appraisal and reporting between university- and school-based personnel. At James Cook University, in accordance with a decision made collaboratively some years ago, professional experience reports require a grade. (We have currently reviewed our program, and have now decided, again in collaboration with school colleagues, to opt for a more outcomes-based statement of competence to proceed.) Major responsibility for that grading rests with the school personnel, in recognition of their having seen the fuller picture of the preservice teacher's practices in a variety of contexts, as well as their development over the period of the practicum. However, the situation is more complex. In part, reduction of the presence of university-based teacher educators in the field could be expected to weaken their voice in the process of evaluating students. However, in recent years in Queensland state schools, a new system of school-based recruitment rating has increased the need for some cross-school moderation, and university-based teacher educators are well placed to offer that service.

At the schools in our study, the process of moderation was frequently linked to the cross-observation program. Those schools that had a comprehensive swapping system

tended to use a group moderation process where all school-based teacher educators discussed the grade for each student teacher:

Everybody gets together ... teachers pencilled things out and then we discussed fairly basic things such as, 'Oh her preparation is really on the ball. She allows for every student in the class'. 'No, I think mine still depends on me to do that for her' ... It's important to make sure with third and fourth years that you're moderating. Don't just become isolated with each one.

At another school, one of the coordinators spoke at length about the value of the observations and these shared meetings, not only for their quality assurance role in report grading, but also as helpful professional learning occasions, especially when the university-based teacher educator was also involved.

Where the principal and the university-based teacher educator were also involved, the coordinator found:

The more people I've got sitting around that table who are agreeing with me or with the supervisor, that this is what's going on the reports, the more I like it.

In schools with less elaborate schedules of observation or of group meetings, the role of the coordinator in moderation of reports appeared to be quite different. In the large secondary school, the coordinator and another deputy principal appeared to arrive at consensus through informal conversations with supervising teachers:

Meredith and I are the moderators so by constant conversation with their supervisor and knowing the supervisor, it seems somehow to work. So that if a certain supervisor says that so and so is heading down a distinction path, we seem to concur. So it's not formalised, we don't cross-mark.

Despite the differences in approaches to moderation, all the coordinators were aware of the importance of the process, both for the individual preservice teacher and for recruitment into the teaching profession. One coordinator emphasised to the supervising teachers the importance of regular, ongoing feedback throughout the practicum so that the final written report contained no surprises. The principal/coordinator made it clear that school-based teacher educators at moderation meetings regarded professional experience gradings and standards as extremely important. She reported that teachers 'agonise' over the final grades, and take pride in preservice teachers' achievements:

The planning is unbelievable. We make them work so hard and those who do live up to our expectations we reward them. They deserve the acknowledgement.

At one state primary school, the coordinator was particularly concerned about the connections between professional experience and the Queensland recruitment rating process. She indicated that a great deal of her focus as coordinator with final year preservice teachers was to help them use their time in schools to prepare for the interview that would determine how they would start their careers. She offered detailed information about selection criteria and the process of the interview.

Another coordinator held just one extra group talk with final year preservice teachers to prepare them for the recruitment process. Another coordinator deliberately downplayed the recruitment interviews, aware of the anxiety sometimes engendered. She attempted to construct them as 'professional conversations' over a cup of tea, where preservice teachers could 'share their highs and lows' and recount 'their wonderful stories' of prac teaching.

What we learnt from the coordinators in this study was that moderation and reporting of professional experience are very closely related for them to recruitment of new teachers for their schools and system. Several coordinators made it clear to us that this ‘pipeline to the brewery’ effect, as one coordinator colourfully expressed it, was a major motivation and reward for her work in professional experience.

Research Products: professional experience coordinators to sing about

We embarked on this research with two goals: to find out the range of the professional experience coordinators’ work, and to capture some of the practices that had contributed to high quality practica. The participants have provided us with rich information on both scores. In this paper, and in the handbook *TIPS for PECS*, we have attempted to represent the features of the work and some of the variety of approaches to it.

Without exception, coordinators were all extremely busy people. They were also highly organised—all had files or folders designated to professional experience, regularly updated, often including information from a range of universities. Others had complex lists and tables for recording supervisor allocations, preservice teacher attendance, observation schedules and records, report and pay claim completion. They had liaised with classroom teachers, administrators in the school, general office staff, and university officials to keep all informed about professional experience. Mixed with this high level of organisation was flexibility. These effective coordinators appeared to be highly adaptive, and responsive to structural features of their setting, and to the human talents, resources and particular personal and professional conditions of their colleagues. They also performed their coordination work in ways that took into account the size of the school, and the numbers and range of year levels of student teachers in a particular year. Their own personal values about learning and teaching coloured the texture of their work in all its aspects, from welcoming and orientation procedures, through selection and support of supervising teachers, to substance and style of professional talks, classroom observations, feedback, administration and reporting. Some chose to ‘deliver’ the university model; others were much more proactive in giving a unique flavour to professional experience at ‘their’ site. They were all great talkers—communication skills were clearly strong suits. Most seemed to us to share a commitment to develop preservice teachers who would become autonomous, competent, reflective practitioners whom they would be pleased to welcome to their staff.

All participants took their work in professional experience seriously, and all dedicated considerable time to it. Often, the work was invisible to other administrators in the school, and perhaps to teachers and student teachers too. Those interviewed exhibited very high levels of professional commitment, were genuinely interested in the well-being of student teachers, and all saw their work as coordinators as part of their professionalism. It is our belief that school-based coordinators play a crucial role in shaping every aspect of professional experience.

Further Research Implications

As Zeichner (1999) warned, the more closely we look at professional education, the messier it all becomes. This research has evoked a further range of responses and questions for us. Some practical issues arise. How should professional experience coordinators be selected and screened? Can classroom teachers be expected to fill the

role? How should this work be recognised and valued? By whom? How should their work be supported?

These questions in turn spin us to the heart of practical experience in professional education. Whose responsibility is it? Uncertainty about ownership of professional experience has contributed a great deal to the 'favour' mentality that many university-based professional experience coordinators and administrators will recognise from their dealings with both university- and school-based teacher educators. School-based colleagues often see their work in preservice teacher education as a 'favour' to the university, where they believe real responsibility lies. Some academics fill their professional experience roles begrudgingly because it is so poorly regarded in the academy.

In Australian teacher education, these issues of ownership as they relate to school-based professional experience coordinators are further complicated by industrial and political factors. The 1990 industrial agreement, under which school-based teacher educators are still employed, binds universities (which are funded primarily from Commonwealth funding) to a meagre payment of \$1.44 per day per preservice teacher. Direct employers of professional experience coordinators employed in state schools (accounting for about 70% of placements in Queensland) are funded largely from the State treasury, and for the most part have, until very recently, seen preservice teacher education as lying outside their real jurisdiction.

And yet, our research and our experience indicate to us that *all* stages of professional education—from selection into preservice, through preservice, recruitment, induction and ongoing professional learning—are crucial to the quality of that profession. Further, *all* shareholders have responsibility for *all* stages, albeit to differing degrees.

We are also optimistic that there are some signals that suggest that such a view of shared responsibility and commitment may be on the horizon. Late in 2000, Education Queensland convened a forum for all teacher education institutions to discuss new working partnerships. One senior executive talked about the need to amend the department's past record of 'abrogation of responsibility' for preservice teacher education, and appeared to listen sympathetically to concerns for providing and supporting quality professional experience placements. The Queensland Board of Teacher Registration has also launched a *Fresh Look at Teacher Education* (2000) which may have the potential to broaden the base of ownership for preservice programs, including professional experience. One of the terms of reference specifically addresses 'ways of strengthening working relationships among universities, employing authorities and schools, especially as these apply to the practicum and internships'.

The recently released *Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales* (Ramsey, 2000) makes strong claims for the importance of professional experience. It argues that 'professional experience in schools must be at the centre of initial teacher education' (p. 56), and urges schools and school systems to play much more significant roles, and so cross the university-school divide. Prompting greatest optimism of all was a recent editorial in *The Weekend Australian* (2001), which claimed that the teaching profession is emerging from the doldrums—moving from 'a career of default' to reclaim 'its proper place ... as a third force in keeping society together'. The editor went so far as to assert that 'Society has gained a greater appreciation of teaching as a rewarding and altruistic pursuit'. If this is an accurate reading of the current status of teaching nationally, we can perhaps hope that politicians at state and national levels will reflect this status in policies, practice and funding.

It is our view that the recent history of teacher education in Australia can be seen as a pendulum swing that has gone from practitioner-owned apprenticeship models to

elitist academic-owned theories. Perhaps now is the moment that the pendulum corrects, when we all work together to strengthen preservice education, especially the professional experience components. The school-based professional experience coordinators in this research have given us further hope for such optimism. We regard them as the unsung heroes of professional experience. We conclude with the enthusiasm of one of them for her work in the transition from preservice to career entry. Her words reveal her sense of the life-long continuum of professional learning, along with her understanding of the possibilities for renewal that professional experience partnerships hold:

I think it's fantastic. From the pipeline to the brewery with all these wonderful people coming out with the latest in contemporary practice and certainly we just love it.

The enthusiasm and commitment that we encountered during this research suggests to us a reconceptualisation of the practicum. As asserted by one of the coordinators cited earlier, professional experience should not be seen as 'a necessary evil'. Work in professional experience should not be seen as a burdensome chore that is done as a favour for someone else. Rather, professional experience should be seen as the site where all shareholders engage in the partnership, with continual opportunities for construction, reconstruction and renewal of the teaching profession.

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