

THE ROLE OF LIAISON TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING SCHOOL - UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

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ABSTRACT *In New Zealand, normal schools have played a key role in collaborating with teacher education institutions in the provision of pre-service teacher education. This paper describes the role of liaison teachers in normal schools, and the strategies used to develop an effective partnership between a university School of Education and a normal school staff. Attention will be drawn to factors that need to be identified and resolved to enhance the benefits for teacher education students. These factors are related to broader issues of partnership and approaches to effective teacher education delivery.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the principal goals of the University of Waikato, School of Education pre-service programme for primary teacher education is that theory is not divorced from school practice. The intention is that practice will be informed by critical consideration of theory and knowledge (McGee and Fraser, 1994). School-based experiences are therefore offered to provide the opportunity to link theory and the practice of teaching. The practicum enables student teachers to operate in classroom settings and to develop their theoretical knowledge and teaching skills in an applied manner. Student teachers are given early exposure to classrooms and schools and are encouraged to reflect upon their teaching practices in the course of their professional development. Partnership between the School of Education lecturers, classroom teachers and student teachers is essential if links between a theoretical basis of teaching and practical application are to be established and maintained.

Early exposure to schools comes in two forms. First, are teaching experience placements where students are placed with individual teachers and remain in the same classroom over an extended period of some three to eight weeks depending upon the students' year of development. Second, student teachers are also involved in teaching in the on-going professional practice and curriculum courses throughout their academic year. Thus, the pre-service primary programme is designed to foster links between curriculum knowledge and professional practice. Within the courses the nature of subjects and the teaching methodologies and approaches which are embedded in their teaching are examined.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

In New Zealand, normal schools have historically provided a context for student teachers to apply the principles and theories found within their theoretical courses. Geographically located within a reasonable travelling distance from the School of Education are four normal schools and two country model schools. Within the normal schools small groups of teacher education students work with an individual child or a small group of children using a particular strategy or approach which has been initiated by the course lecturer (Zeichner, 1990). Such an approach requires guidance and consultation between the course lecturers, the normal school classroom teachers and the student teachers because teaching is observed, commented on and reflected upon. This report focuses on the liaison role of teachers in normal schools.

Teachers are appointed to normal schools with the expectation that there will be numbers of student teachers in their classrooms from time to time. They know that they are expected to co-operate with the School of Education requirements as part of their appointment and they know that they are supposed to serve as role models able to implement successful programmes which reflect current ideas about teaching. Normal school teachers receive a salary supplement. However, research by Ramsay and Battersby (1988), which examined in-school training for primary student teachers, noted that in the relationship between lecturers and normal school teachers there was a lack of consultation and sometimes problems over briefing and the "booking in" system. A problem of communication and a need for a better information flow between the tertiary institution and the primary schools was identified (Ramsay and Battersby, 1988).

Each of the normal schools now has a liaison teacher who has overall responsibility for communication between their teaching colleagues and the lecturing staff from the School of Education. In an informal interview (November, 1994), the School of Education Co-ordinator of Teaching Practice revealed his perception that the position of liaison teacher had developed in response to a need. Whereas student teacher contact with the normal schools in the 1960s and 1970s had required demonstration-type lessons, the demand in the 1980s was for a more hands on approach. As the demonstration approach became less favoured, lecturers from the curriculum courses were wanting more contact with children. But in the mid and late 1980s principals of normal schools, finding that their administrative loads were becoming more and more demanding, delegated some of their responsibility. Gradually in each of the normal schools, a person was designated to undertake liaison responsibility with the School of Education. The programmes and the teaching requirements were, and are, initiated by lecturers at the School of Education, but it is the liaison teacher who has the responsibility of facilitating the overall programme requirements in their school setting. The liaison teacher ensures that their colleagues are informed of the needs of the student teachers and the University's School of Education academic staff.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how liaison teachers acquired their liaison responsibility in their particular normal school. How did they perceive the nature of the liaison position? Was it formally recognised? How were the staff of the School of Education, teaching colleagues, and student teachers consulted? Were there individuals or collective agencies with whom

there was a need to liaise? How did they view their role in establishing and maintaining a partnership role with the School of Education? What were the key elements in the partnership?

METHODOLOGY

Each normal school was visited by the researcher and each liaison teacher asked if they were willing to be interviewed. It was clearly stated that the purpose of the interview was to gather information so that the part the liaison teacher played in establishing and maintaining a partnership role with the School of Education could be identified and examined. At the initial contact open-ended questions were provided with the intention that discussion points would guide the overall interview format. However, the interviewees were encouraged to consider any aspects which they felt may not have been included because there may have been matters which they personally wished to address.

I wanted my interpretation of their responses to be a result of collaboration between the researcher and the researched. I felt personally involved because I was already known to five of the six liaison teachers in my professional role as a lecturer in curriculum and subject studies in the School of Education. Four of the six would also have been aware that I had previously held the position of liaison teacher at one of the normal schools, but as far as I was aware, there was very little formal or informal communication between the liaison teachers. As well as gathering information, I was wanting people to come to know each other and to admit each other into their professional lives. Each was aware that my purpose was to write a case study and that I wished to know how they had become liaison teachers, how they perceived the requirements of their position and how they interpreted their role in the partnership relationship between their normal school and the School of Education. I realise that in any research interview people have a tendency to only tell interviewers what they want them to know (Cohen and Manion, 1989).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Identifying the liaison role

Interview responses revealed that currently only one school had made an appointment which specifically identified the role of the liaison teacher as a position of responsibility which carried senior teacher status. Within the overall job description for the position there were stated criteria which listed what the school perceived the responsibilities for the liaison teacher to be. The position had been nationally advertised, applicants had been short-listed and interviews held. Another school was considering adopting this model, but, at the time of the interviews, the remaining five schools had seconded their liaison teachers from within existing middle management positions. The Deputy Principal or the Assistant Principal had been either asked by their school Principal or had been told to assume the liaison role along with their other responsibilities. Consequently, these teachers had inherited the liaison responsibilities at the time of their appointment to middle management. For those who already held a senior

position the liaison role became another add on. Details of the actual requirements for the position gradually appeared as statements in their performance agreements as Deputy or Assistant Principals.

Thus, responsibilities had become formalised in response to what was perceived as the particular needs relative to the individual school. Initially there had been no formal liaison teacher job descriptions. These were gradually developed in the school and from within other positions which required formal written agreements and accountability procedures to be put in place. Yet, it appeared that the School of Education had no input into these particular statements. For two of the liaison teachers, newly appointed to their schools, there appeared to be no job description which specified or defined actual expectations or tasks. At her interview for appointment, one teacher had been asked if she was willing to promote the relationship with staff and students from the School of Education, but no actual tasks had been defined. All of the six teachers with liaison responsibility were experienced teachers. They held middle management positions and they were busy practising teachers with either classroom teaching commitments or scheduled teaching arrangements for working on a regular daily basis with groups of children who have special needs.

When asked what they thought were the professional and personal requirements necessary to fulfil their role, their responses indicated that their perceptions of professional and personal qualities were interlinked. Their responses showed that they did not make a fine distinction between personal and professional qualities. Although knowledge of the curriculum and a good understanding of organisational and management structures about how things work were common professional expectations, personal characteristics also appeared in their responses; such as being approachable, positive, reassuring, able to listen, flexible and able to cope with change. They felt that they needed patience, a sense of humour, a sense of proportion, and confidence. One liaison teacher spoke of the need to always be "pleasant and bubbly" and the need to value herself. She frequently affirmed herself by thinking "I know I can work with this person and the job will be done!"

The need for good communication and administrative skills featured prominently. One liaison teacher mentioned that she needed to use counselling and mediation skills. Another confirmed that there was always the potential for a "tricky situation" to occur particularly where the evaluation of the practicum was involved and the lecturer and the classroom teacher had differing viewpoints. Their comments support research which shows that there can be disputes between the expectations of classroom teachers and lecturers (Calder, Faire and Schon, 1993; McGee, Oliver and Carstensen, 1994).

So where had their knowledge come from? Who or what had guided them in knowing what to do? None of the liaison teachers had ever received any official or formal guidance or training in preparation for the position. Each teacher had developed their role around previous personal experiences or at some point they had individually sought and received suggestions from colleagues. Among their mentors they identified the School of Education liaison person; the previous liaison person in the school; the school principal or another member of the school staff. People with historical knowledge were identified as particularly helpful. But their own knowledge had come mostly from working on the job and

from informal support developed from personal relationships with individuals, who, in some way or another had had some experience connected with the School of Education. Although some of the liaison teachers mentioned professional courses that they had attended which focused upon personal growth and effective communication skills, these appeared to relate to professional training towards leadership or for another professionally-defined role in the field of education. Some had drawn upon their experiences as community members involved in committee work, such as in sports' clubs.

Consulting and Conveying information

Although none of the liaison teachers had ever received any formal direction they had developed common patterns of consulting and communicating through personal experience and trial and error. The School of Education handbook was considered invaluable. It was praised highly because it was considered to provide good support and offer useful formats to follow. But time required for personal meetings with lecturers was not always possible to schedule into the normal working day because of the mismatch of timetables and work commitments. Consultation on a one-to-one basis often had to take place after working hours, sometimes from homes or on chance meetings. Phone calls and faxes were essential but both were seen as problematic. Phone call contacts depended upon the availability of both the teacher and the lecturer which was often difficult. The timing of the response using answerphones was also difficult. Faxes were being used more but were described as being both extremely helpful and extremely frustrating. All remarked upon the lack of confidentiality of faxed messages which had to be conveyed openly. One teacher summed up the problems of communication by saying, "there are times when you seek confidentiality because you have a tricky situation with a student, a staff member or a lecturer and the fax is too public".

Individuals were named as essential in the communication process and for maintaining partnership with the School of Education. The School of Education lecturer with responsibility for liaison with the normal schools (a position which is undertaken in addition to the teaching role) and the academic staff member who is the teaching practice co-ordinator were considered vital to the partnership. So, too, were School of Education university staff first year tutorial group advisers who have the overall responsibility for co-ordinating and organising the time requirements and the needs of the first year curriculum and professional practice courses. Such positions obviously play a key role in the partnership. The responses also showed that liaison teachers had developed a network with individual lecturers who helped them cope with communication. And it was not only academic staff who helped the partnership. Secretaries and other general staff also helped to "personalise" the institution.

With their own teaching colleagues, written memos and planning sheets outlined the requirements for either a week or a slightly more extended period. Provision was made within school and syndicate meetings for the liaison teachers to bring the requirements of both lecturers and students to school staff attention. In each school staff room the School of Education requirements and booking arrangements were prominently displayed on a large whiteboard noticeboard.

This staff noticeboard played an effective part in updating information and reminding staff members of their commitments to School of Education programmes and the student teacher placements. One school also had a daily log book which was sent around the classrooms for staff to read. In some of the schools the liaison teachers acknowledged that the complexity of the schedules required multiple reminders to staff and that it was essential for everyone to see the overall co-ordination.

The school principals and liaison teachers mostly appeared to keep in touch informally and the expectations seemed to vary from school to school. There were on-going informal discussions, although meetings at the management level were considered more formal. These meetings seemed to vary from regular to irregular. In some instances the principal became involved only if something major occurred or where there were difficulties being experienced. But mostly the principal was made aware of the School of Education day-to-day needs through the whiteboard notices and copies of planning sheets. It was most important for principals to have information immediately at hand about the usage of the school. Therefore, the number of student teacher contact hours were systematically gathered and collated by the liaison teachers. In the larger schools the individual teacher and classroom contacts were also carefully recorded. Other records filed included copies of correspondence, faxes, letters, student postings and the notification of lecturers requirements and visits. One school held copies of student teacher reports in their central file but in most schools these were held by the individual teachers. Student reports were kept because a number of the student teachers often returned to seek references and support from the teaching staff when they applied for beginning teaching positions or wished to be placed on the schools list of relief teachers. Record keeping was identified as a somewhat difficult area. Teachers obviously felt very insecure. They asked: How much information is open? What should be kept? How and where should information be located?

The liaison teachers also communicated with numbers of student teachers. This was done on a one to one basis as well as face to face with larger groups, especially with the first year student teachers who would be placed in the school over an extended period. Most felt some orientation to the school was needed to ensure smoother and safer running of the programme. Student teachers might be provided with maps or given a guided tour of the school. They were introduced to the school's philosophy and school policies, mostly through handouts or copies of the school's handbook. Some of the liaison teachers felt it necessary to address issues such as student teachers general conduct in the school.

Parents and the school Board of Trustees also needed to be consulted. When children were enrolled, parents or caregivers often expressed their interest and their concerns about their child's contact with student teachers. Liaison teachers often needed to discuss the implications with the caregivers and parents. Most issues were covered by statements in either a school booklet or in home newsletters and liaison teachers sometimes spoke at a meeting for new parents to explain the role played by the normal school and its obligations in preparing student teachers.

Liaison teachers' reflections

The liaison teachers saw both positive and negative aspects to their role. All expressed their pleasure in meeting people and felt that this aspect of the position took them beyond their usual classroom environment and opened doors to a wider professional world in which they could make contacts with other people professionally and personally. Some saw this as offering career opportunities. Most enjoyed adult interaction and they felt that they had grown to know and understand more about the context of their particular school. The focus upon people had also helped their professional growth in that it had encouraged them to keep up-to-date with new ideas and to accept change more readily. They enjoyed the challenges, which most found "stimulating".

However, the liaison teachers also expressed fears and frustrations. There was an underlying fear that the job, particularly in the larger schools, was very big and complex and there was always the possibility that the organisation could go wrong because so many people were involved. This often resulted from some School of Education lecturers not knowing or not complying with procedures that were relevant to primary schools or to a particular school. The liaison teachers reported that a few of the School of Education staff did not appear to have working knowledge of school "culture" and they could be unrealistically demanding in their expectations and ignorant of school etiquette. Although most of the lecturers were considered very reasonable there was an assumption that "you are here to provide and you should provide". Faxes provided evidence that a few lecturers could be extremely demanding on the schools particularly where resources were concerned.

Most teachers felt they were inadequately resourced for the equipment needed to support the curriculum and professional practice programmes. Not only were resources insufficient, there were major problems with space allocation and a lack of withdrawal areas for the work of student teachers and children. Lessons were frequently implemented in draughty corridors and outside because the schools had not been designed or custom built for teacher education.

The physical nature of the "exploded" building design made consulting and communicating very time-consuming. The difficulties associated with message sending and receiving meant a lot of "leg work" around schools which took time and energy in a busy day. The liaison teachers carried information such as timetables and booking schedules with them as they taught.

The liaison teachers welcomed the opportunity to speak out for themselves in the course of the case study interviews. At the end of each school year a meeting of principals, liaison teachers, and some School of Education staff is held at the School of Education but several of the liaison teachers remarked that "when I go up there it's not on my home ground".

All the liaison teachers considered that lack of time was a major problem. An uneven distribution of release time across schools was apparent. It was essential to communicate and consult, but because they were all actively engaged in teaching and other administrative work, paper work was mostly done during out of school time and often at weekends.

The lack of incentives in either time release or remuneration was a source of frustration for most. Interestingly, in the schools where the position was openly

offered or rotated, no other staff members expressed interest. It was found that the most positive response towards partnership came from the liaison person who had a clearly-defined role. The position had enabled career advancement and time release had been given so that the requirements of the position could be fulfilled.

Revisiting Partnership

There was a mixed response when the liaison teachers were asked if they felt they were in partnership with the School of Education. The question drew "yes but" or "yes and no" or "yes to a degree" answers. Partnership with individual lecturers was felt when contact and consultation was made on their home ground. There, they felt more comfortable because they considered that the practicum was valued in the school setting (Renwick and Vize, 1993). Some expressed their desire to be more involved in the teaching component of the professional and the curriculum courses (Ramsay and Battersby, 1988). They considered that the role they played and the work they did as liaison teachers needed greater acknowledgment. They indicated that they would like more than just one end of year meeting, particularly with other liaison teachers so that they could share their ideas and concerns and discuss current issues that affected the School of Education primary programme and schools.

One liaison teacher did not know who the other liaison people were and said that she would like to know more about each school's different approaches. Another felt "out on a limb" and was anxious to hear and share ideas through contact with the others. Most believed that although more meetings would be desirable, their time was already fully committed.

The greatest challenge which the liaison teachers faced was trying to do their best for both the children and the student teachers. In trying to balance the needs of both groups of learners they needed to consider the benefits and the problems. One said "we have to act as a gate keeper in order to provide the balance between the needs of student teachers and the children. We have to know our whole school and what is happening. We need to know the strengths and the weaknesses of the staff and the children within each class. We need to make sure that no one teacher is over or under used".

CONCLUSIONS

These research findings show how new theoretical ideas and innovative practices change the requirements of the practicum (Zeichner, 1990). In the 1980s changes to the practicum altered the requirements of the School of Education. In response to the requirements, liaison teachers were appointed, under a variety of conditions, in each of the normal schools. The liaison teachers themselves, had to organise and develop strategies for bringing together the needs of the university and the primary school programme. Without their support and the personal and professional characteristics which they perceived necessary for their position, it is hard to envisage how the practicum could have been developed in its present form. The need for liaison is probably best summed up in the teachers' responses

to the question:- how would the partnership function without a liaison teacher in your school?

- It would fall apart.
- It would be diabolical. There's just too many hiccups. The dominant would survive while the weak would disappear.
- It just would not work.
- It would be chaos. Absolute chaos. Someone has got to do this and they need to be a good organiser because it is complex and difficult and constantly challenging.
- It would be a shambles. You really do need one person to be able to co-ordinate and manage.
- It's challenging and there has just got to be someone.

The evidence from this research is that it is people who create partnerships and that partnerships are developed through mutual professional and personal respect. In any partnership trust is essential. But the research findings also show that there is a need to improve the structure of the partnership. The partnership deserves to be formalised so that it can be valued and raised in status. A more clearly defined and stated role would provide liaison teachers with guidance so that they could work more confidently and securely. This would particularly help new appointees because they found the task daunting because they were unfamiliar with the lecturers and the existing systems. More meetings, or "buddy" contacts need to be held not only on the university campus but in the schools. Acknowledgment, such as time release for consultation should be given because liaison teachers provide a valuable link in establishing and maintaining relationships between lecturers, teachers and principals, students, children and parents.

There are wider implications. At the state or national level consideration should be given to the need for appropriately designed buildings and additional resources which are relative to the requirements of teacher education programmes. Student teachers and all educators need to be aware of the political climate and economic constraints which are placed upon the practicum. That there are wider community expectations beyond the institutions should be acknowledged.

The practicum requires consultation. University lecturers should be visible in schools because teachers can benefit from exposure to research which can guide and support their practice. In turn, teacher educators can benefit from exposure to the politics and reality of the classroom and the school community.

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