The Journal of Teaching and Learning 2017
Vol. 11, No. 1. pp. 20–28
http://dx.doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v11i1.4612

Problems in Student Teaching

Elizabeth Soslau
School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

James Raths
School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

Abstract

Currently, schools of education across the United States are reforming teacher education programs in light of the newly developed common core standards, shifting accreditation principles, new measures of teacher performance, and the pressing concern that in-service teachers are woefully under-prepared for the realities of classrooms. During this time of wide spread programmatic reform, we present a list of considerations that are particularly germane to the clinical preparation of student teachers. Our list includes common practices that limit learning opportunities for student teachers and detract from the meaningfulness of assessing student teachers. We posit three approaches for education schools to consider as they engage in program revisions.

Introduction

In an essay commissioned by the American Educational Research Association, Kenneth Zeichner (2011) highlights two approaches to teacher education reform: strengthen existing schools of education, or support alternative models for teacher education. Like Zeichner (2011), we know we can learn from successful alternative models, but agree that the former is a sounder approach. The history of teacher education reveals at least two common threads related to traditional preparation programs. First, there is the sincere and steady effort on the part of teacher educators to prepare pre-service teachers for the nation's schools. This task is made daunting by the fact that the need for new teachers is great — greater than the number of teachers education colleges can produce. The gap is widened by the fact that almost half of the teachers recruited into the profession leave after only five years of practice. The second thread is the general dissatisfaction found in the public and the profession itself with respect to the requirements and the outputs of teacher education programs. Many critics see the process as unneeded, soft in its implementation, and weak in its conception of the needs of beginning teachers. The low status of American schools of education,

variability in program quality, lack of teacher candidate diversity, and a shortage of programs that prepare candidates to teach in under-resourced schools weaken the claim of quality made by traditional preparation programs (Zeichner, 2011). In the context of shrill criticisms of teacher education, almost all critics agree that the one place where teacher education "has it right" is student teaching. However, as of late, even this aspect of teacher education has come under fire.

A recent report by the National Council on Teacher Quality (2011) rated the quality of student teaching experiences against five standards. The first standard requires a student teaching experience of at least ten weeks in duration. The other four quality standards focus on the cooperating teacher. That is, the cooperating teacher must be selected by the institution, have three years of teaching experience, have the capacity to enhance student learning, and have acquired the skill set associated with mentoring a student teacher. In applying its standards to a collection of teacher education programs, the Council found a number of programs it deemed as less than stellar. Given that this report is likely to prompt programs to review their student teaching practices, we have marshaled a list of additional problems found in the typical student teaching program that merit scrutiny.

Though the Council focused on the cooperating teacher as the source of quality supervision, others point out that quality supervision can be university-based (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Like Zeichner (2011), we fear that local school control of teacher education, in the form of cooperating teachers as field instructors, would perpetuate the status quo and undermine the sharing of research findings with places of practice. Our paper is focused on university-based supervision. Our list of problems in student teaching reflects findings from our own research, which included intensive interviews with student teachers and their university supervisors, and transcripts of supervisor-led teaching conversations (Soslau, 2010; 2012). We also draw on our experiences as auditors and panelists for the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), which include conducting on-site auditing and reviewing inquiry briefs of over thirty university and college based teacher education programs — institutions large and small, private and public, exclusive and inclusive.

Based on our research and past experiences in our TEAC roles, we present some problematic aspects of student teaching. These apparent problems may be characteristic of other clinical-based programs, not merely of the programs that we have studied. In that spirit, we summarize our insights for the purposes of helping the field identify issues associated with student teaching that may lead to improved student teaching practices and supervision. We list the areas we see as problematic in no particular order.

Summative Evaluation Systems

Reference Groups

The scales or rubrics used to give feedback to student teachers often use terms such as *average* or *superior*, which imply that the student teachers are being judged against some undesignated population of teachers. Which *average* is intended? *Superior* to whom? Is it the average of all practicing teachers? Is it the average of all student teachers? Is it the average of all

student teachers in the present cohort? The reference group is almost never made clear. As reported in the New York Times, the problem is compounded by the fact that more than 90% of the judgments on those scales are at the highest level (Dillon, 2010). It seems likely that the imprecision in defining the meanings of terms such as average and superior diminishes the efficacy of the evaluation system.

Standards Shift

For over a hundred years, student teachers were evaluated on the basis of their teaching behaviours and traits. Supervisors rewarded student teachers who were enthusiastic, caring, and improving (Raths, 1982). The current trend in teacher evaluation is to move judgments about these factors into the background, and to focus instead on the learning performances of the student teachers' pupils (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff , 2009). In this way of thinking, it matters little if a supervisor finds a student teacher enthusiastic. What matters is whether a sufficient number of the student teacher's pupils performed well on an assessment of the student teacher's lesson's goals. This profound paradigm shift is a challenge to supervisors and cooperating teachers, not the least because most persons in these roles have very little training, experience, or knowledge in the realm of psychometrics. How to interpret gain scores or reliability coefficients is a significant challenge for supervisors and cooperating teachers, and how to collect and analyze value added data is a challenge for the field. Additionally, we wonder whether value-added data is possible to calculate at any statistically significant strength, since student teachers have limited full-time opportunities to influence pupil achievement. Boyd et al. (2009) cautioned against using results from value-added studies, admitting that their own instruments were not validated and that value-added measures might not represent the kind of learning that teachers, or citizens for that matter, care about.

Use of Rubrics

In studies of teacher evaluation over the past 50 years, Likert scales have been the dominant tool for rating student teachers' behaviours (Raths, 1982). Now, under the guise of authentic assessment, supervisors are using rubrics to evaluate student teachers and their teaching. It is a widely held belief that rubrics provide clarity, guide evaluators to make judgments that are more reliable, and give student teachers a better opportunity to understand the feedback they are receiving. While some rubrics may indeed contribute both to more reliable ratings and more accurate understandings of achievement (e.g., Pecheone & Chung, 2006), many rubrics differentiate between ratings using only an adverb or adjective to designate one rating or another. For instance, a mid-range rating for a teacher's planning might include the following phrase: "Teacher plans lesson to meet *most* of the relevant state standards." A higher rating might then include the phrase: "Teacher plans lessons that meet *almost all* of the relevant state standards." The distinction between *most* and *almost all* is difficult to discern, and this difficulty can interfere with a feedback process that is so important to learning how to teach.

Scales

Most instruments used in evaluating student teachers usually include one, or rarely two, holistic items that call for ratings of overall proficiency. The instruments include mostly items that give feedback about particular aspects of teaching: planning, assessment, relationships with pupils, and so forth. Both sets of items — holistic items and specific items — are usually rated using the same scale, including many of the evaluative codes described above in our discussion of reference groups. In our judgment, it is problematic to use terms such as *superior* or *excellent* in effecting ratings on the holistic items. Summative ratings for teacher candidates should communicate whether or not the teacher candidate is ready to enter the profession as an independent practitioner. A more descriptive judgment is not valuable because ratings do not predict in-service teacher quality. The majority of in-service teacher ratings are not correlated with student teacher evaluations. If teacher candidates were as good as we rate them, our nation's schools would be overflowing with high quality teachers.

Weight or Priority of Evaluation Components/Indicators

Student teachers are often rated on 15 to 20 components of their teaching – everything from planning, to assessment, rapport, preparedness and much more (Raths, 1982). As described above, in almost all programs, 90% of the student teachers receive the highest available rating for all 15 to 20 dimensions (Dillon, 2010). We have already discussed briefly the problematic nature of these inflated ratings, but we suggest yet another problem with them. It would seem most unusual for any student teacher to be superior in all 20 components. Further, it appears almost obvious to assert that some of the 20 components hold more importance, both in the field in general and in particular with a specific student teacher in mind. Yet, rarely are the components prioritized. Student teachers are urged to be superior in all of the components, and as we have indicated, are usually found to be superior in all 20 components. As a result, student teachers do not learn that some of the 20 components should receive their closest attention as they enter the teaching profession.

Elusive Expectations/Standards for Effective Teaching

Coaching student teachers is a difficult task because the profession does not agree about what comprises effective teaching as evidenced by the diverse articulation of standards (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Serafini, 2002; Wiseman, 2012; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). When a supervisor offers a suggestion for improvement, the student teacher may ask, though likely introspectively, "What is the basis of that suggestion? Where is it coming from?" The answer is often that the suggestion is based on the supervisor's own teaching experiences or even the supervisor's sense of style. Some suggestions, such as, "Don't turn your back on the class!" may make intuitive sense. Suggestions of this nature are often appreciated by naïve student teachers who experience difficulty in their classrooms when they don't abide by them. But other less obvious suggestions about timing, examples, and more appropriate responses to pupil questions may be less helpful since they might be deemed as merely opinion. It would be helpful, given the lack of professional consensus about the nuances of teaching excellence, if the feedback provided to student teachers focused on elements of a larger grain size that we know are related to effectiveness such as

relationship building, indirectness, instructional problem solving, rather than on micro-managing the teaching process (Gage, 1966). This approach would eliminate feedback designed to help the student teacher emulate their supervisor. To this end, there are many approaches to addressing these larger grain sized elements and evidence of learning can be collected as the main source of judging the practice.

Formative Feedback

Maintaining Safe Learning Environments

Two major components of learning include the practice and feedback cycle. In most programs, students receive ongoing observation feedback from university-appointed field supervisors. However, there are several issues surrounding the feedback offered to teacher candidates in their student teaching experience.

As the field well understands, negative comments and criticism can arouse dissonance, and a normal reaction to dissonance is to discredit the source or to seek alternative views that counter the source (Festinger, 1957). Even though it is so important for student teachers to discuss their concerns, sense of weakness, and needs for coaching, it is difficult to enter into this sharing relationship with someone who appears to be critical of their efforts. As social psychologists have alerted us, it is difficult to assume simultaneous roles that are not complementary. Some supervisors find it difficult to provide robust evaluative feedback to student teachers when they also have to keep communication channels open and maintain positive daily interactions.

Supervisors need to perform both formative and summative evaluations. The former involves coaching student teachers in ways to improve their performance in the classroom. To coach effectively, the supervisor needs to understand student teachers' invisible thinking, which drives their classroom decision-making. To avoid attributions based on observed performance, supervisors must probe the complex web of rationales that underlie candidates' teaching decisions. High quality instructional conversations require that candidates make their thinking public, a process which is impossible without trust. Student teachers need to be assured that shared revelations will not be used against them in the supervisor's inevitable evaluations. The obligation to submit a final evaluation, well understood by student teachers, may inhibit the open sharing essential for the supervisor's ability to coach effectively. One pattern of assessment that seems to usurp this dilemma in the short run is for the supervisor to assure, either tacitly or explicitly, that the student is passing and that teaching conversations will not influence the final evaluation results. With this assurance, the trusting relationship might be sustained. The simultaneous needs to ensure a safe learning environment and provide an honest and useful summative evaluation are in conflict and pose significant challenges for supervisors.

Field and University Disconnects

Within teacher education programs, there are a number of structural issues that contribute to the less than optimal conditions for delivering first class student teaching opportunities. The first of

these issues is specialization. Few people within schools of education see themselves as teacher educators. Instead, they identify with sub-fields within education, such as science education, mathematics education, literacy education, and early childhood education. Their identification takes various forms: (a) professors join professional associations associated with the sub-fields; (b) professors write for journals within the sub-fields; and (c) professors develop cross-national friendships and acquaintances from within their sub-fields. Further, the promotion and tenure guidelines of most schools of education often reward specialization. Professors are expected to present programs of research that focus on narrow issues within their field. Their field or signature area is almost always a sub-field of Education. These structural arrangements, among others, contribute to situations such as the following hypothetical situation:

> A history methods professor might be teaching in her methods class the latest work on lesson study, derived from close attention to teaching in Germany and Japan. However, the history methods professor doesn't set foot in the schools, nor does she consult with the student teacher supervisors who do. Neither have sufficient time or interest to spend on these liaison activities. The history methods professor can't speak with confidence about how the methods she is advocating play out in the public school classroom. For instance, candidates may ask, "In a discovery lesson, how can a teacher cope with pupils who are either not interested in the content or who have needs that prompt them to act out in crucial moments of the lesson?" The history education professor may not have current first-hand knowledge to respond to this, or may dismiss the question since it falls outside the scope of their content area.

In some cases, the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher haven't heard of lesson study, nor are they aware of what readings, assignments, or tasks their student teachers have undertaken in their history methods campus-based portion of the teacher education program. They cannot reinforce the teaching performed by the history methods professor because they have no idea what that teaching comprised. This hypothetical situation can be repeated using ideas other than lesson study, and fields other than history education. The same situation recurs in literacy, science, and mathematics.

The specialization found in teacher education becomes more problematic by the fact that supervisors of student teachers are rarely specialists, nor are they adequately trained to provide field instruction across several content areas (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Often they are graduate students who take on the supervisory role to support their advanced education or they are retired principals or teachers who enjoy being in the classroom. Not only are they usually out of touch with what the specialists are teaching in methods courses on campus, they might also find themselves feeling unprepared to grasp the main ideas for practice being advocated by specialists (Clift & Brady, 2005). These shortcomings place enormous pressure upon the *student teaching seminar*, a component of the program that is usually scheduled in conjunction with the student teaching practice. These pressures are spelled out in the next section.

Complex Curriculum in Seminar and Field Instruction Conferences

The student teaching practicum is heralded as a pivotal learning experience designed to help pre-service teachers engage in learning to teach. Though student teaching practicum experiences vary widely across universities, teacher educators agree that the curriculum of the student teaching practicum is complex (Valencia et al., 2009). Student teachers are expected to develop *skills* related to planning, delivery, reflection, and professionalism (Danielson, 1996). Once skills are developed, the process of *applying* and *adapting* skills, based on pupil cues and real-time situational contexts, needs to be learned (Soslau, 2012). Additionally, student teachers need help strengthening *dispositions* such as the desire for and enactment of collaboration or the will to seek and use multiple methods of instruction (Katz & Raths 1985). Though student teachers are armed with years of methods and content courses, they still need to develop or enact *knowledge* of subject matter (Ball & Hill, 2008) and learn how to engage in professional relationships as part of *communities of practice* (Collinson, 1999). It has also been shown that it is important that student teachers learn to address their own *social-emotional needs* to be able to engage fully in the scholarship of learning to teach (Evelein, Korthagen, & Brekelmans, 2008).

The major problem is that these components of teacher learning rely on experiential learning contexts, so they must be taught during field-based experiences. The sole teacher during these experiences is the university supervisor or field instructor. In our work as auditors for TEAC, we found that it was unusual for cooperating teachers to share in instructional duties in student teaching seminars, though some did participate in field instruction conferences. Due to the lack of time afforded to supervisors (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990), attending consistently and meaningfully to all of these components during a weekly or semi-weekly visit over the course of a semester-long experience is almost impossible. Our experiences and empirical findings suggest that supervisors choose an area in which to concentrate, for example on skills, on building confidence, or on emphasizing collaborative practices (Soslau, 2010). Decisions to focus make the task manageable for the supervisors, reducing both the complexity of the task and the cognitive load of preparing lessons across the wide range of topics that represent the expectations of the student teaching practicum. While the strategy of providing focus and limiting scope is understandable, this tactic leaves many of the topics that are assigned to the field instructor through syllabi and program rationales untouched.

Conclusions

It is unlikely that our list of problems is new. Our litany is probably recognizable by most teacher educators and even accreditors of teacher education. What are some possible reactions to our list?

For starters, the field could assume that the problems are enduring simply because of the nature of the student teaching experience. This judgment is supported by knowing that the problems in our list can be found in the literature dating back 70 years. If we have known about them for such a long time, why haven't we found ways to ameliorate them? If they are indeed

inherent in the process of learning to teach, then they will be with us forever, and though some tweaks can be introduced, the problems will likely persist in our programs.

Secondly, the field could deny that these problems are wide spread in the profession, while agreeing that they mark some programs. Ideal programs that have overcome these problems and others could be identified and described, giving teacher educators who are struggling with the problems an opportunity to learn of ways of overcoming them. The work of Darling-Hammond (2006) in identifying excellent teacher education programs and her development of a performance assessment, to be scaled nationally (edTPA), might be a step in this direction.

A third approach would gather faculty in a workshop or a retreat to address these problems and others they have identified. The outcome of the retreat would be to plan how to collect evidence locally that would document if these problems are salient, and to propose steps to address them.

Some Bright Spots

We have encountered some efforts to rectify these issues in our work at our home institution and in our past roles as accreditation auditors. To bridge the divide between teacher education courses and the field, university programs are beginning to offer these two opportunities simultaneously, ensuring collaboration between content experts and field based experts. Some universities are beginning to follow the lead of teaching colleges by allocating field instruction workload to faculty who are fully committed to the teacher preparation program and whose voices are included in all aspects of program development and improvement. While these steps are useful, many problems remain. The complexity of the field-based curriculum, the difficulty of addressing the diverse needs of student teachers with minimal resources for field instruction coupled with the low status of field instruction in some institutions, the cross-purposed roles of field instructors, and the lack of consensus around the grain size of assessable competencies endures. We hope that teacher preparation programs continue to take up these issues and share what they learn with the field.

References

Ball, D. L., & Hill, H. C. (2008). Measuring teacher quality in practice. In D. H. Gitomer (Ed.), *Measurement issues and assessment for teaching quality* (pp. 80–98). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2009). Teacher preparation and student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 31*(4), 416–440.

Clift, R. T., & Brady, P. (2005). Research on methods courses and field experiences. In M. Cochran-Smith, & K. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (pp. 309–424). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Collinson, V. (1999). Redefining teacher excellence. *Theory into Practice 38*(1), 4–11.

Danielson, C. (1996). *Enhancing professional practice a framework for teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). *Powerful teacher education: Lessons from exemplary programs.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1999). *Reshaping teaching policy, preparation, and practice. Influences of the national board for professional teaching standards.* New York: NY: AACTE.

Dillon, S. (2010, December 10). What works in the classroom? Ask the students. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/education/11education.html

Evelein, F., Korthagen, F., & Brekelmans, M. (2008). Fulfilling of the basic psychological needs of student teachers during their first teaching experiences. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 24*, 1137–1148.

Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gage, N. L. (1966). *Desirable behaviors of teachers.* In M. D. Usdan & F. Bertolaet (Eds.), Teachers for the disadvantaged (pp. 4–12). Chicago, IL: Follett.

Guyton, E., & McIntyre, D. J. (1990). *Student teaching and school experiences.* In W. R. Houston (Ed.). Handbook of research on teacher education (pp. 329–348). New York: Macmillan.

Katz, L. G., & Raths, J. D. (1985). Dispositions as goals for teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education 1*(4), 301–307.

National Council on Teacher Quality (2011). *State teacher policy yearbook: National summary*. Retrieved from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/2011_State_Teacher_Policy_Yearbook_National_Summary_NCTQ_Report

Pecheone, R. & Chung, R. (2006). Evidence in teacher education: The Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT). *Journal of Teacher Education, 57*(1), 22–36.

Raths, J. (1982). Teacher evaluation. In H. Mitzel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational research* (pp. 611–618). New York, NY: Free Press.

Serafini, F. (2002). Possibilities and challenges: The national board for professional teaching standards. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(4), 316–327.

Soslau, E., (2010). *Opportunities to develop adaptive expertise during student teaching conferences: Identifying barriers and exploring intersubjectivity* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3423912)

Soslau, E. (2012). Opportunities to develop adaptive teaching expertise during student teaching conferences. *Teaching and Teacher Education 28*(5), 768–779.

Valencia, S., Martin, S., Place, N., & Grossman, P. (2009). Complex interaction in student teaching: Lost opportunities for learning. *Journal of Teacher Education 60*(3), 304–322.

Wiseman, D. (2012). The intersection of policy, reform, and teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 63*(2), 87–91.

Zeichner, K. (2011). *Improving teacher education in the United States. Essay commissioned by the American Education Research Association*. Retrieved from http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/docs/Annual_Meeting/Zeichner_AERA_essay-1b.pdf

Zeichner, K., & Wray, S. (2001). The teaching portfolio in US teacher education programs: What we know and what we need to know. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*(5), 613–621.