New Questions about Student Teaching

By Christopher M. Clark

Many of the difficulties we face in doing a good job with supervision of student teachers stem from the fact that there is so much to listen to—simultaneous messages, conflicting messages, signal and noise mixed together, all under the pressure of time. It's a wonder that anything "good" gets done. Yet the reports in this theme issue are radically encouraging. Good learning from field experiences is clearly possible, even under imperfect conditions. Such good learning is clearly not easy to support nor automatic. But it is possible.

The reports in this theme issue remind me of a more ancient kind of literature—the literature called "the hero's journey." In the hero's journey, the main character, full of youthful optimism and a bit of magic, sets out on a quest to locate and bring home a precious and powerful object—a holy grail, a magic sword or ring, a book of secrets. In this case, a powerful and thoughtful band of teacher educators set out to the east, to the north, and to the west to discover, describe, and tame the good student teaching placement, and bring it back to the castle keep, for all teacher educators to appreciate.

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In the classic literature of the quest, the middle part of the journey is usually full of pain, danger, uncertainty and disillusionment. The optimistic plans made back home do not work out as envisioned. Dragons bar the way. The object of the quest becomes much more complex, dangerous, and difficult to deal with as the heroes and heroines close in on it. And

those on the quest are themselves transformed by the journey, sometimes in painful and surprising ways.

Now, I don't know whether these authors encountered any dragons out there, but I do think that what they brought back is a more complicated and dilemma-filled representation of the good student teaching placement. And I think that each of these teacher educators has been changed to some degree by the journey.

In a sense, this research on the good student teaching placement tells us even more about the challenges of coping with not-so-good field experiences. My thinking as a teacher educator has been changed by this research. Instead of asking "How can we force change on the world to make every student teaching placement a perfect match?" I am now asking "How can we help each student teacher get the most value from their field experience, regardless of the excellence of the match?" So one contribution of this research is to begin to shift the questions we ask of our own teacher education programs. A better question is a wonderful and generative offering indeed.

Each of the three papers offers compatible but interestingly different advice on how to make the most of imperfect student teaching placements. The prescription that all three papers share is "more support."

- *More support for supervisors of student teaching*, in the form of adequate compensation, time to connect, read, converse, and really learn the full implications of being a teacher educator in full (not just a standardized, disconnected service provider).

- *More support for cooperating teachers*, who for better and for worse are functioning as teacher educators with little to no preparation for doing so.

- *More support for the student teachers themselves*, many of whom are experiencing the most stressful, responsible, challenging time of their lives during student teaching. Failure is a real, painful possibility for these students. Disillusionment is a daily experience.

At Bank Street, more support takes the form of the Advisement system, expanding the boundaries of typical student teaching from the traditional trio of student teacher, supervisor, and cooperating teacher to include a group of student teachers meeting weekly with a faculty advisor who also sees them in the field. Individual and group conversations about progressive teaching and how it is and is not supported in field contexts works, in the best cases, to encourage and support even struggling student teachers. The advisor, we presume, is a full-time teacher educator who knows the full program and is skilled in progressive education and group process. And the students themselves provide mutual support—never underestimate the power of knowing that you are not alone against the world. I also want to compliment Helen Freidus for surveying graduates of the Bank Street program to learn more about the memories and attributions of teachers who have

been part of the Bank Street program. I think we could all learn a great deal about how our teacher education programs actually carry forward into practice (or fail to) by mustering the courage to follow up, to ask our graduates how it is going one, three, five or more years after graduation.

At Mills College, more support means broadening the role of supervisor, especially in "discrepant" field placements, to include heavy doses of: moral support, extending and making explicit what the student teacher has said or done, reframing problems and dilemmas, raising questions, making suggestions, and "kicking student teachers in the pants" (with love, of course). In short, the supervisor of a student teacher in a discrepant field placement will have to work very hard to do her job, and the Mills College research shows that it is possible. Interestingly, each of the cases of supervision and support reported by the Mills College authors involved different journeys, different techniques (like Sam's journal). This makes the case that good supervision is not a standardized process. Rather, it is full of invention and improvisation. Supervision at its best is an extended and artful clinical relationship.

At New York University (NYU), more support involves much of what it does at Bank Street and Mills College, but their paper adds a twist: Sometimes the placement that looks perfect on paper can be the most difficult and disappointing of all. Let me compliment Frances Rust and Marcy Bullmaster for taking a truly self-critical stance. I've heard very little self-critique among teacher educators, yet we urge our teacher education students to become self-critical themselves. The message of this case of "the perfect placement" to me is to forget our dreams of matchmaking, let go of overly optimistic expectations, and recognize that *every* student teaching placement is going to be difficult for someone, and most are difficult for everyone involved. The solution is not to lower our expectations and let shallowness slide through, nor is the solution to blame the kids, or blame the cooperating teacher, the supervisor, or the student teacher. The fact is that there is no easy solution, no silver bullet to make learning something as complex as teaching in under-resourced schools a smooth, easy, trouble-free, systematic process. It is messy, it is difficult, it is uneven, uncertain, heart-rending, exhausting work (and that's just the lesson-planning part). Learning to teach is intrinsically difficult, and few of our students savor the chance to look and feel like a rookie. Few of our supervisors and fewer of our cooperating teachers are veteran adult educators, veteran teacher educators. Student teaching is hard because it is hard, not because the players are dumb, lazy, or venal. The message I take from the NYU study is that student teaching will always be difficult, if we are doing it right, and that our department chairs and deans ought to at least acknowledge and reward this facet of teacher education proportionately.

I want to close by sharing with you a list of four different conceptions of the purposes of student teaching that I was stimulated to spell out by reading the papers in this theme issue. The main conception of student teaching could be:

1. The laboratory component of a teacher education program.

2. A long performance examination.

3. A scaffolded apprenticeship in classroom teaching.

4. A practicum in inquiry-oriented teaching.

I will not spell out all the ramifications of each of these conceptions of student teaching. But I invite you to visualize a matrix with these four conceptions as the column headings and these roles heading the rows: student teacher, cooperating teacher, supervisor, children, parents, and school administrator. The thought experiment that I want to leave you with is to begin to fill in the cells of this matrix. For example, what is the role of the supervisor if she conceptualizes student teaching as a long performance examination? And what if the teacher education program director and faculty, cooperating teacher, and student teachers all hold different answers to the question "What, for me, is the primary purpose of student teaching and how can I make the most of the experience?"