Beyond Traditional Structures of Student Teaching

By Ken Zeichner

In this set of papers, we have an analysis and discussion of many issues concerning student teacher learning during the practicum. These papers represent a variety of contexts: preservice programs at New York University (NYU), Mills College, and Roosevelt University (all relatively small programs), and the University of Haifa. The papers also represent a variety of methodologies that have been used to address the question of what makes a good placement setting: surveys of student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors; interviews with mentors and preservice and inservice teachers; and analyses of student teacher journals.

On the one hand, I agree with much of what is asserted in the papers: (1) Student teaching is a critical aspect of preservice teacher education and cooperating teachers are key participants in determining the quality of learning for student teachers. (2) Being a good cooperating teacher is important but is not synonymous with being a good teacher. Being a good cooperating teacher is more than providing access to a classroom or modeling a particular version of good practice. It involves active mentoring. (3) Learning to be a good mentor is a complex and demanding process. (4) The quality of human relationships is important to the making of a good student teaching placement. Specifically, the importance of a safe and supportive environment where student teachers feel able to take risks and explore

Ken Zeichner is a professor with the College of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

options is stressed in the papers. (5) It is important to consider the compatibility of the teaching enacted in the placement setting with that which is advocated in the rest of the teacher education curriculum. The Mills paper also discusses the possibility of compatibility and familiarity acting as a barrier to teacher learning, a point of view that makes a lot of sense to me.

Limitations of the Traditional Structure of Student Teaching

While I agree with many of the arguments made in these papers, I also think that they take for granted in many ways the current dominant situation for student teaching in many teacher education institutions throughout the world, a very problematic situation in terms of what we know about its effects on teacher learning (Zeichner, 1996)

In this traditional model, student teaching and teacher education generally have been and continue to be low status activities in colleges and universities that are under resourced in relation to the complexity of the work to be done (Goodlad, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1999). There is clear documentation that teacher education has often been used as a "cash cow in research universities to fund higher status activities and of inequitable teaching loads and faculty salaries among those who do the work of teacher education and those who do not (e.g., Tom, 1997; Zeichner, in press). It has even been argued that there is an inverse relationship between one's closeness to work with schools and teacher education and one's status in the academy (Lanier & Little, 1986).

There is also clear evidence that mentoring student teachers is not often valued as an important activity either in schools or universities. This is demonstrated by the lack of preparation and support for the work, the temporary and marginal status of those who do the work in universities, and the lack of incentives and rewards for doing a good job. Liston (1995) has referred to teacher education as the domestic labor of colleges and universities, the invisible, under appreciated " keeping house" work that enables others to engage in the more high status work of teaching doctoral students and conducting research. Student teaching and practicum supervision is treated as overload by some colleges and universities (something to be done in addition to a full teaching load) and is often carried out by temporary staff (e.g., retired teachers, graduate students, academic staff) who have little connection to or authority in the rest of the teacher education program. Finally, cooperating teachers usually assume responsibility for mentoring prospective teachers in addition to a full teaching load, often receiving very meager compensation in relation to the work that they do.

Even in programs where much faculty time and energy is put into the teacher education program, like the ones represented in this symposium, these problems are evident. For example, in the NYU paper we are told:

> We continue to employ antiquated methods of reimbursing cooperating teachers: tuition remission, which we know less than 1/3 of our cooperating teachers can use. In other words, 2/3 of our cooperating teachers receive nothing for their work with us. Our supervisors are among the lowest paid in the city. (Reich, 1999, p.6)

Also, with regard to the Mills program we are told:

> The majority of the supervision is done by part time associates who are not supported particularly well in their learning of the program principles, and not compensated well for their critically important work. (LaBoskey & Richert, 1999 p.42)

While there is some discussion in these papers about the need to provide better conditions for university and school-based teacher educators to do the important work of mentoring prospective teachers, it is not emphasized. Good human relations and the importance of the compatibility of philosophies receives much more attention than the material context in which the work is done.

There is often a huge disconnect between the campus-based portion of teacher education programs and student teaching. Cooperating teachers and university instructors are often mutually ignorant of each other's work and the principles that underlie it. These papers discuss the importance of the compatibility of the student teaching placements with the principles of good teaching that are taught in campus courses and/or underlie the program. The main message that I get from them about the meaning of "compatibility" reinforces the view of a "theory into practice" model which posits that student teachers learn theory in the university and apply and enact it in the schools. This view places school-based teacher educators in a secondary role in the teacher education program and undervalues the importance of practitioner knowledge in the process of learning to teach.

Using compatibility as a criterion for determining student teaching placements raises a number of sticky issues. I will briefly mention two of them here. First, all of the programs described in this set of papers are relatively small. It is probably not possible to find philosophically compatible student teaching placements for all student teachers in many of the very large teacher education programs that must place hundreds of student teachers each year. Another very difficult issue with the compatibility goal is concerned with urban teacher education, the emphasis in this symposium. Specifically, if we only look at how well particular settings currently match what is advocated in campus teacher education courses, then many classrooms in large urban districts, often in close proximity to universities, would not be used as student teaching placement sites. We have recently experienced a major positive development in American teacher education where many of the urban universities in the U.S. that formerly placed student teachers only in middle class to upper middle class suburbs have recommitted themselves to public urban education and have begun to reestablish teacher education connections with the public schools in our cities. Compatibility as the major criterion for selecting placement sites would undermine this new commitment to urban public schooling,

and would work against the urgent need to prepare teachers who want to teach in urban schools and who can be successful there.

LaBoskey & Richert (1999) provide us with a way to think about and deal with this issue. They argue that the important thing to consider in thinking about classroom placement sites is whether the teachers in those classrooms are learners, questioning and examining their practices, and continually seeking to improve their practices. This line of argument suggests that rather than looking for classrooms that model the specific teaching practices advocated in campus courses, we look for classrooms where the school culture encourages inquiry and reflection about teaching among the staff and where teachers are working on their practice to make it better. This approach recognizes the importance influence of school culture on teacher practices and enables us to act on our commitment to improve public education in the areas that are currently in the most need of improvement. The question that we should be asking ourselves is what are we doing to help make classrooms better places for teacher and student learning, not just how compatible with our philosophies currently are.

Breaking Out of the Box of the Traditional Student Teaching Model

In my view, the issue of a good student teaching placement requires that we break outside of the traditional structures of student teaching that have been with us for many years and think in new ways about how schools and universities should relate to each other in the initial and continuing education of teachers. For example, the papers in this set focus on the individual classroom as the placement site and on individual cooperating teachers and supervisors as the mentors of student teachers. We need to think more broadly about schools and communities as places for learning to teach and not just about individual classrooms. Some of what is going on in the current professional development school movement represents a break from the patterns that we have relied on for many years (e.g., Levine & Trachtman, 1996). For example, some of the recently created professional development school or professional practice school partnerships[1] have included the following elements:

(1) Whole schools are often viewed as the placement site and teacher education students work with a variety staff during the course of a student teaching experience.

(2) Community field experiences as part of student teaching are becoming more common and there is an increased emphasis on teaching prospective teachers how to learn about and build upon the cultural resources that pupils bring to school.

(3) University supervisors are not always removed from the school situation

as they have been in the past. There has been an increase in the use of school-based university supervisors and of methods courses taught in schools.

(4) Cooperating teachers and other school staff are assuming more significant roles in relation to the entire teacher education curriculum (e.g., team teaching courses, participating in admissions decisions and program development) and there is greater recognition of and respect for practitioner knowledge in the teacher education curriculum.

In my view, the place that we need to start is by prioritizing teacher education as a major responsibility of schools, colleges, and departments of education and of whole institutions and by putting resources and reward structures into place that are consistent with this emphasis. This would include such things as giving load credit to faculty for work in schools including student teacher supervision, establishing reward systems that value good work done in these areas, better connecting of student teaching to the rest of the teacher education curriculum and integrating clinical faculty and staff into the mainstream of programs, funding innovative work in student teaching on hard money and moving away from the reliance on temporary grants that has plagued many professional development schools. We also need to continue current efforts to involve cooperating teachers as full partners in our teacher education programs and stop treating them as second-class citizens who only provide places for our students to teach. All of this work will require a great deal of time and effort by those of us located in colleges and universities. It is not so much a matter of finding good student teaching placement sites as it is of working to develop them.

I've come to the conclusion that not much more can be done in addressing the enduring problems of learning to teach during student teaching within the current dominant structures. I am struck by how similar the problems are today to when I began as a teacher educator in the 1970s. We have been struggling with the same problems for many years. All of the proposals in this set of papers about the importance of the relationships between student teachers, cooperating teachers and university supervisors, supporting the active mentoring of student teachers, improving the connections between the university teacher education curriculum and the school curriculum, etc. depend upon our ability to deal with the issues associated with the larger context of teacher education in colleges and universities. Unless we take a broader perspective on the question of determining good student teaching placements than we have to date, the enduring problems of student teaching will be with us for a long time to come.

In her keynote address at the 1999 national meeting of the Holmes Partnership, Nancy Zimpher, the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, urged teacher educators to begin to demand the resources that are needed to support teacher education programs as we know they should be run. She argued that business schools, engineering schools, law schools, medical schools and so on have been successfully making their cases at the campus level for many years, but that teacher

educators have passively settled for a share of what has been left over. As accountability demands on teacher education programs continue to increase and we are beginning to hear calls for evidence that what we do in preservice teacher education programs makes a difference in terms of the quality of student learning in the classrooms of our program graduates, it is especially important that we finally begin to challenge and change the marginal position of teacher education in colleges and universities. There are recent signs that some university presidents and chancellors have affirmed the importance to the entire university of high quality teacher education programs (e.g., American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1999). We need to continue to make the case at the highest levels of our institutions for the resources needed to run high quality student teaching experiences and teacher education programs. Until we have won this battle, high quality student teaching placements will continue to be a matter of good fortune rather than the norm.

Note

[1] Much of what has emerged in this reform movement however, represents a repackaging and renaming of the same old practices without fundamental changes in university-school power relationships.

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