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Status and recognition: acknowledging the work of school-based coordinators in initial teacher education, in an effort to improve the practicum experience of pre-service teachers.

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Background

The work of the school-based coordinator in ITE is both under-researched and, in many instances, poorly acknowledged. Too often it is regarded as a purely administrative role. In many schools, the coordinator is perceived to be the arranger of timetables, filer of reports and financial claims and, occasionally, a "port of call" when things fall apart between the supervising and pre-service teacher. In reality, the role is a crucial one in that the coordinator acts as a liaison between the university, and the school and is a key figure in the preparation of pre-service teachers.

A recent study in Auckland, NZ, found that coordinators were not remaining in the role long enough to even start to recognize the potential of the role as a teacher educator. Schools were allocating the role in one of three ways: adding the task to the job description of very busy Deputy Principals, or conceiving of it as a first taste of responsibility for a promising young teacher, or, occasionally, adding it to the portfolio of a teacher with other responsibilities. In the circumstances surrounding initial teacher education in NZ, universities did not necessarily feel able to make demands of schools concerning any aspect of initial teacher education within the school.

This paper reports on a project resulting from one university's desire to change and strengthen its relationship with the schools which accept pre-service teachers on practicum. A series of consultation meetings between the university and a group of principals resulted in the decision to proceed with a trial project in which, amongst other things, "status and recognition" were to be given to the role of the school-based coordinator, re-named for the purposes of the trial, Pre-service Liaison Teacher, or PLT.

Research Questions

The stated aim of the project was to reframe practicum for the purposes of enhancing the quality of beginning teachers graduating from the university. This was to be achieved specifically by providing status and recognition of the PLT as the person taking the lead role within the school in relation to pre-service teachers, and by developing a stronger relationship between the school and university, one which recognizes that the preparation of new teachers is a partnership between the two institutions. The research questions inquired into the extent to which the practicum trial had achieved the aims of enhancing practicum as a high quality opportunity to learn to teach, of giving status and recognition to the role of PLTs by way of acknowledging the centrality and significance of their role, and of developing a stronger relationship between the university and the school. This paper focuses on the ways in which the university sought, with the trial schools, to develop the role of PLT and explores the extent to which this has been achieved. It asks whether "status and recognition" are appropriate and adequate means of achieving the aim.

Methods

This qualitative study is interpretive and involves individual and cross-case study. Data sources include semi-structured interviews with individuals, pairs, and focus groups, as well as documentary evidence.

A series of interviews were conducted by different researchers. For evaluative purposes, principals and PLTs were interviewed together, and five focus groups of pre-service teachers were interviewed by an independent researcher at the conclusion of the first practicum. A second independent researcher led a focus group interview with the five PLTs at the conclusion of the first practicum.

In connection with the research project developed by this author, PLTs were interviewed individually, supervising teachers were interviewed as a group in each of the five schools, and six groups of pre-service teachers were interviewed at the end of the first year of the two-year trial.

Documentary evidence includes the evaluation survey undertaken by all pre-service teachers in the programme at the conclusion of practicums 1 and 2, and surveys completed by the supervising teachers at the end of the first year.

Frame

The significance of school-based teaching practice as a site for learning to teach is acknowledged in the research literature (McIntyre, Hagger, & Mutton, 2007). The literature also acknowledges that school-based teaching practice is not problem-free (Britzman, 1986; Zeichner 2002). Drawing on models of partnership and school-based teacher education (McIntyre & Hagger, 1993; Furlong et al. 2000; McIntyre, Hagger, & Mutton, 2007; Mutton & Butcher, 2007), the university and schools worked collaboratively to trial a practicum experience that met university requirements and that also allowed individual schools to include those aspects of school culture that they believed contributed to the preparation of effective beginning teachers.

Research findings

Interviews with PLTs report a high level of enjoyment and satisfaction with the role. Evaluation surveys from pre-service teachers [PSTs] indicate that PLTs in the five trial schools provided a high level of support for the PSTs. All PLTs have indicated a desire to continue in the role. This paper considers some of the factors which have contributed to role satisfaction. It also draws on the work of Bullough (2002) in considering whether factors other than "status and recognition" might contribute to the positive attitudes of the PLTs at the conclusion of the first year of the trial.

In an environment where greater demands and accountability are placed on schools and universities, and where enhanced achievement of pupils is the stated outcome of school and teacher education programmes, school-based teaching practice must be a high quality opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn to teach. The project reported on in this paper has relevance for all who work in initial teacher education to support the learning of pre-service teachers.