
Published 2010 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, MILPERRA NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 0 155 6223
ISBN 0 908557 80 9

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors’ names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and sub-themes, originality, quality and presentation. Following review and acceptance, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

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Liaison staff in pre-service teacher education programs

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University courses that are designed to produce work-ready professionals rely on quality fieldwork education to prepare graduates for the challenges of professional practice. Effective communication between universities and their industry partners is needed to negotiate expectations of roles, assessment practices, strategies and goals of fieldwork education programs to ensure optimal learning outcomes for students. Liaison staff are engaged in some pre-service teacher education programs to bridge the gap between the worlds of university academics and workplace supervisors, to trouble-shoot, to act as ‘go-between’ and to problem-solve to support student learning. This paper examines the experiences of liaison staff in three pre-service education programs in an Australian university. The findings of this study suggest that liaison staff can make a significant and timely contribution to the quality of fieldwork education and student learning outcomes, particularly through their ability to enhance effective communication between students, associate teachers and university academics. However, in their own eyes, inconsistencies in induction, training and professional recognition of liaison staff and feedback about their own performance diminished their ability to perform their role. Greater attention to the induction and professional development of liaison staff can make better use of these people who are a valuable and sometimes under-utilised resource.

Keywords: liaison staff, pre-service teacher education, fieldwork education

Introduction

Perspectives on the future of higher education recognise the critical role of fieldwork education in preparing students for professional practice (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The potential outcomes of fieldwork education include enhanced student learning through the integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills and through exposure to relational and sociocultural aspects of practice in real world contexts (Eames, 2001; Patrick et al., 2008). However, the assumptions that workplace supervisors make about student performance standards can be at odds with those of university academics who base their expectations on professional and scientific literature produced at a distance from the complexity and changing nature of the workplace (Rust, 2007). In addition, many workplace supervisors lack confidence in assessing students and prefer to leave the grading, and particularly the failing, of students to the university (Goos, Hughes, & Webster-Wright, 2009). It is, therefore, clear that effective communication channels need to be established between universities and their industry partners to establish expectations of roles, assessment practices, strategies and goals of fieldwork education programs to ensure optimal learning outcomes for students (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Yorke, 2005). Effective communication,
however, must be managed within the time constraints and heavy workloads that many workplace supervisors and university academics experience.

Fieldwork education programs are established within universities in accordance with discipline-specific learning outcomes, course accreditation requirements, human and financial resources, and student load. Some universities engage personnel to liaise between students, industry and university academics. This is particularly the case in discipline areas such as teacher education. Liaison staff are often contracted by universities and assigned to work with individual students during blocks of pre-service placement. The role of liaison staff is to bridge the gap between the worlds of university academics and workplace supervisors, to trouble-shoot, to act as ‘go-betweens’ and to problem-solve to support student learning. Typically liaison staff contact students (usually referred to as pre-service teachers in this context) by phone or email in the first week of a block practicum to introduce themselves to the students, to make sure they have settled in, and to negotiate future contact times. In the middle of the block, the liaison staff talk to both pre-service teachers and associate teachers (teachers who have responsibility for supervising pre-service teachers in the classroom) to monitor the pre-service teacher’s performance and put strategies in place as required to guide pre-service teachers to successful completion of their practicum. Liaison staff visit schools, observe pre-service teachers in the classroom and write reports. If problems are identified, contact becomes more regular. Associate teachers can also request more visits by liaison staff if they feel pre-service teachers are at risk of failing and need further support.

A small number of studies have investigated the experiences of liaison staff including those working with international students (Campbell, O’Gorman, Tangen, Spooner-Lane, & Alford, 2008), those using computer-aided communication as an adjunct to supervision (Dyson, 2002), and those working with students in rural and remote schools (Lincoln, 2001). Such studies suggest that liaison staff may facilitate the development of an effective relationship between pre-service teachers and associate teachers, an important contributor to positive learning experiences for students on practicum (Ferrier-Kerr, 2003; Johnston, Duvernoy, McGill, & Will, 1996; McGee, Ferrier-Kerr, & Miller, 2001). The aim of this study was to examine experiences of liaison staff in three site-based pre-service teacher education programs in an Australian university and to explore their contribution to positive relations between universities and their industry partners and to student learning outcomes.

Method

This study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of liaison staff in three pre-service teacher education programs in a rural Australian university. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretations of stakeholders, in this case liaison staff in site-based teacher education programs. Phenomenological research examines the nature of human phenomena and the experiences of those who live through them, taking into account the contexts and subjective meanings participants give to particular situations. In hermeneutic phenomenology the emphasis is placed on interpretations of phenomena that offer deep layers of meaning (van Manen, 1997).

In keeping with this qualitative approach, the number of participants was not predetermined but evolved in response to the quality and redundancy of information that emerged from the data collection (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Liaison staff from three site-based teacher education programs (from preschool to secondary school) were issued with flyers inviting them to participate in semi-structured telephone interviews about their experiences as liaison
staff and their professional development needs. Each respondent to this invitation was contacted by phone or email to arrange a time for the interview. Interviews were conducted with 17 participants. Each interview lasted from one to one and a half hours. The interview guide (see Table 1) was designed to explore the liaison staff’s overall evaluation of the program, the support provided for both pre-service teachers and the liaison staff themselves, and professional recognition. Interviews ceased when no new information emerged from interviews and redundancy of information occurred.

Table 1: Interview guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>How long have you been involved in teaching?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>How long have you worked as a member of the liaison staff? What led you into teaching/fieldwork supervision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction and training</td>
<td>How did you learn about your job role? What sources of information do you have access to? How much support do you receive? From whom? How much support do you feel you should receive? From whom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service student support</td>
<td>How much contact time do you have with pre-service teachers/associate or supervising teachers/university academics? How much support do you give to pre-service students? How much support do you feel you should give? How do you understand the similarities or differences between supervision and mentoring? What have been the strengths of the supervision/mentoring you have given? In what ways could the supervision/mentoring you have given have been better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site-based teacher education program</td>
<td>Can you tell me about the site-based teacher education program from your point of view? In what ways has it been a positive or negative experience? Has the fieldwork program changed in your time within it? In what ways? Are there any particular experiences/education you feel that pre-service teachers/site-based teachers/university academics should get, but don’t? Are there any particular experiences/education you feel that pre-service teachers are getting that they are not yet ready for? Can you tell me about the relationships you have with pre-service teachers/site-based teachers/university academics? How do you see the balance between independent and supervised practice for pre-service teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Do you have any contact with other education professionals? What have been the strengths of the supervision/mentoring you have given? In what ways could the supervision/mentoring you have given have been better? Our aim is to develop some professional development resources. What do you think should be included? How would it best be delivered? What teaching/learning style do you prefer? (didactic, self-directed etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and data analysis were conducted concurrently by the researchers so that questioning and observation were progressively guided by the data. NVivo8 software was used for data management. Data analysis consisted of repeatedly reviewing transcripts to identify emerging concepts. A key feature of the analysis process was constant comparison to identify conceptual similarities and themes in the data (Tesch, 1995). Emerging themes were refined, expanded, or discarded throughout the data analysis process. Bracketing (acknowledging and reflecting on researchers’ own preconceptions) was used to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation (Patton, 2002).
Results

From the perspective of the liaison staff in this research, their involvement in site-based teacher education programs was effective in supporting pre-service teachers (and to a lesser extent, associate teachers) and in providing timely feedback that enabled the implementation of strategies to guide students towards successful completion of their practicums. The involvement of liaison staff was also personally rewarding. Key issues emerging from the research were inconsistencies in induction, training and feedback about the performance of liaison staff, and professional recognition of liaison staff.

1. Interpretations of their role as liaison staff
Liaison staff saw themselves as having two primary roles:

i) supporting and guiding pre-service students to make the transition from student to professional ready to join the teaching workforce. They considered themselves both supervisors and mentors.

For the fourth year students I feel it’s more of a supervisory role, because they’re going to be in a classroom in the following year and they need to be fairly confident in what they’re doing. For first, second and sometimes third year students, it is more of a mentoring role. Ask me whatever questions you want at any stage and I’ll step you through it (Liaison officer 1).

ii) as the university’s representative in the workplace. Liaison staff communicated with pre-service students, associate teachers, schools’ administration staff, university placement co-ordinators and in some cases, university academics. They ensured that students arrived and settled in. They were available for contact by students at any time during their placement. They were responsible for alerting the university to any difficulties students were experiencing and making sure procedures were set in place to guide students to successful completion of their practicum.

It’s just a matter of the liaison so I contact the supervising student and basically make sure everything’s going OK and if any issues arise it’s my responsibility to pass them on to the practicum coordinator who follows up from there. I’m really just a pipeline I suppose. There was one case where the supervising teacher raised some concerns so I made a note, recorded everything that she raised with me, and then I contacted the practicum coordinator. She followed this up and then liaised with both the teacher and the student to sort out the problems that had arisen (Liaison officer 2).

Liaison staff also reported supporting supervising classroom teachers and the program more generally.

Associate teachers also need support. Some staff might not have volunteered for the job [of supervising a pre-service teacher]. If they know that such help [from liaison staff] is available for them, others might volunteer because I guess there is a need for having more teachers so more students can be placed. I think that there would be times when it is difficult to place students (Liaison officer 3).
The student was a very closed person to begin with because she hadn’t wanted to be in this placement. She was only looking at the primary school area and she was in a child care centre in a three-to-fives room so there was a lot of resistance. And there was a lack of communication, empathy and understanding on the part of the supervising teacher who actually started to stand right back and wasn’t sure about how to support the student. There were a lot of personality and communication issues. Even with the children. The student was lovely with the children but there wasn’t that empathy or genuineness to start with. But we worked through it. We talked about it and I tried to put it into perspective. She wasn’t going to be there forever and that every experience brought something to her learning in one form or another. I just listened to where people were coming from and then acted as the conduit between the two so that they could talk. And work it out because they needed to work together. Then on her last day I went to visit her, the class teacher was called away and despite the fact that someone else stepped in the student did it beautifully (Liaison officer 4).

2. Recruitment, induction, training and feedback on the performance of liaison staff

A lack of clarity about the extent to which liaison staff were required to support and mentor students stemmed from recruitment procedures and inconsistencies in induction, training and feedback. The liaison staff in this research had either sought employment in education after retirement from teaching or were invited to join the program by a contact in the university. This procedure provided the university with highly experienced teachers who at some stage had personal experience as pre-service teachers, supervising teachers and in many cases had been members of school executives. Fourteen of the liaison staff taking part in this research had been teaching for more than 20 years (see Table 2). However, this recruitment procedure also meant that formal job descriptions and applications had not been made and that divergent interpretations of the job role could emerge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching experience of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the pre-service teaching programs held formal induction meetings before the first practicum of the year. Those who attended induction meetings had the opportunity to ask questions about their job role, to clarify the expectations of the university and to meet other liaison staff. However, many liaison staff had no formal induction. They were sent documents describing the program and their role and provided with forms for reporting on pre-service students. Although they all knew who to contact should they have any questions or concerns, they felt some isolation from the university staff. However, they were resourceful and could take steps to resolve their own concerns quickly.

3. Inconsistent professional recognition

Participants generally felt there was a lack of professional recognition for their work. Most liaison staff had received little or no feedback about their own performance or about the students they had supervised. In a few cases, feedback and thanks had been received both individually and in a group at an end of year function.

I was invited to a meeting before Christmas. It was for all the professional liaison people that were covering all areas from early education right through to
secondary education. The university wanted to get a general overview of how everyone was going, how we felt about the placements, what changes we would like to see happen, was the paperwork working for you - all those sort of things. It was supportive and you got to see other people there and you actually have some contact with the university staff as well (Liaison officer 4).

The lack of feedback suggested to some that their work was not highly valued by the university. This feeling was further endorsed by the low level of remuneration the liaison staff received, many providing more time to support students than they were able to claim for.

I’d like a pat on the back occasionally. You don't expect it every day but especially if it’s been a bit of a difficult one or there's been a small problem or something. Occasionally you do have to go back a couple of times where you could just say no and just tick it off the report but of course you don't do that. You go and check up and make sure everything’s OK. You put in a bit extra than what you usually do. I think sometimes it would be nice for someone to say thanks for following that up (Liaison officer 5).

What I find is somewhat puzzling is that we seem to give the students so much support and feedback, yet I haven’t had any feedback myself as a liaison officer. How am I going or how am I filling the forms or am I doing the right thing by the students? I’ve never had feedback from the university about how I’m going in my role. Yet this is the third year they’ve appointed me. I’m presuming I must be doing alright or they’re desperate and there’s no one else. So it’s incongruous. The students are getting all this feedback, but the liaison staff are getting nothing. It’s lamentable (Liaison officer 6).

4. Professional development

A range of perspectives on the need for professional development was evident, although it was unanimously recognised that support was helpful for those beginning the job or for those isolated from the university, including contracted staff. The greatest professional development needs were maintaining currency with education trends (for example, school assessment policies, accountability to schools, government policies) and emerging technologies (for example, Smartboards). Course information such as curriculum documents and information about the subjects their students had completed was also requested to clarify what liaison staff might expect of students. Liaison staff also requested further assistance with strategies for their introduction to schools, advising students at risk, conflict resolution, mentoring and supervision in the context of support by liaison staff, and advice on reporting (for example, sample assessment reports, actions to take when associate teachers’ and liaison staffs assessments differ).

Some participants, particularly those who were isolated from the teaching and university communities, favoured face-to-face contact, for example, through induction meetings and workshops. A buddy system to pair less experienced liaison staff with more experienced ones was generally considered useful. One participant suggested that this could reduce the burden of questions to time-poor practicum co-ordinators. Networks could involve face-to-face meetings, emails, or teleconferences. Another suggestion involved establishing a forum or internet site with a chat room where liaison staff could ask questions or find support. Other suggestions included:
a professional reading list including journal articles to keep liaison staff abreast of educational trends;
resources to recommend to students (for example, up-to-date programming formats, practical tips for behaviour management);
DVDs of case studies of liaison staff supporting students at risk of failing;
improved access to information (for example, access to university and other library databases); and
formalising continuing education and exploring possible career progression for liaison staff.

Conclusion

The liaison staff in this study had extensive experience both as classroom teachers and as supervisors. They were keen to stay involved with teacher education and drew on their experience and expertise to supervise and mentor their students. The depth of the commitment of liaison staff to their roles and the professionalism which informed how they envisaged these roles demonstrate the considerable contribution such programs have to offer to the quality of fieldwork education. Liaison staff were effective facilitators of communication between schools, pre-service teachers and the university they represented. They were particularly effective in promoting productive relationships between pre-service teachers and associate teachers when it was required, in alerting university staff to students who required specific support and, in some cases, in overseeing the implementation of such support.

The contribution of liaison staff to site-based teacher education programs could be further enhanced through the provision of prior structured input by the university into their role expectation and greater contact and feedback once they had embarked on mentoring pre-service teachers. These omissions potentially vitiated their effectiveness as liaison staff and damaged their morale. The professional development needs of liaison staff identified in this research included training in emerging educational trends, in new technologies that had been introduced into schools since they had left the education workforce, and the need for greater familiarity with students’ curriculum content. The liaison staff felt that such training could enhance the quality of their supervision of pre-service teachers.

The findings of this study suggest that liaison staff can make a significant and timely contribution to the quality of fieldwork education and student learning outcomes, particularly through their ability to enhance effective communication between students, associate teachers and university academics. Greater attention to their induction and professional development can further strengthen the valuable contribution that liaison staff presently make to site-based teacher education programs.

References


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