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Rosemary Dobbins
University of South Australia

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Student Teacher Self-Esteem in the Practicum

Rosemary Dobbins
University of South Australia

Abstract

This article is based on a study in which I have been involved for the last four years, investigating the learning of final-year primary student teachers and their school-based teacher educators during the practicum. My investigation has confirmed findings from other research indicating that student teachers' learning in the practicum is a complex process (Feiman-Nemser, 1985; Britzman, 1986; Goodman, 1986; Zeichner, 1986; Calderhead, 1991; Groundwater-Smith, 1993). Student teacher self-esteem was found to play a central role in the complexity of the learning process. Two particular findings in relation to student teacher self-esteem are discussed in this article. Firstly, student teacher self-esteem was not static. It fluctuated throughout the practicum, depending on the nature of each individual, his/her energy level, how well he/she was managing the professional demands of "being a student teacher" and the personal pressures on him/her (including his/her own expectations) and the amount of support he/she received. Secondly, student teacher self-esteem had an impact on many aspects of the practicum experience for the student teachers. It not only affected the student teachers' teaching, but how they interpreted the practicum, their ability to cope, their ability to interact effectively with adults and children and finally, in what they learnt from the practicum.

Introduction

The focus on quality has been underpinning practicum research in the last decade, which is in keeping with the broader interest in teacher education and the current quality arguments. This has led many researchers to look more closely at the practicum in terms of what is learned and how it is learned, taking the context, the student teacher and the program's philosophical base into account (Zeichner, 1986). Recent investigations have included the use of case studies which portray the reality of the practicum experience and allow a deeper understanding of the experience from the student teachers' perspectives. The present study falls into this category. It aimed to provide further insights into student teacher learning and conditions which facilitate and/or hinder student teacher learning.

The findings from this study confirm findings from other research indicating that student teacher learning in the practicum is a complex process (Feiman-Nemser, 1985; Britzman, 1986; Goodman, 1986; Zeichner, 1986; Calderhead, 1991; Groundwater-Smith, 1993). It is complex because, as illuminated in this study, it involved the student teachers attending to both personal and professional issues associated with the role of "being a student teacher", the various dimensions of the experience (the stated and the hidden practicum curriculum) and the affective and cognitive demands of the experience. Above all else, this study has illuminated the humanness of the learning process in the practicum. The complexity of the learning process was intensified by the central role played by each student teacher's self-esteem. How the student teachers' self-esteem affected various aspects of the practicum is the focus of this article.

The research

The study consisted of two phases and focused on several groups of third year student teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary/JP), over a two-year period. The research study was structured around the student teachers' final major field experience placement, which involved a voluntary week at the beginning of the school year (January), voluntary days throughout first term, one week in March and culminated in a five-week block at the beginning of second term (April-May). The practicum was structured around single classrooms, in which individual student teachers spent the majority of their time. It was traditionally supervised in that the classroom teachers' and university lecturers' key role was to provide feedback on the students' teaching. Each student teacher was observed by the university lecturer once a week for approximately an hour.

The final year students undertook their major practicum placement with all the requirements of other final year students (i.e. written program, daily lesson planners, daily evaluations, two weeks' minimum full-responsibility teaching, etc) but with one distinct difference. They were asked to concentrate on their learning during the practicum. To facilitate this process, they were given half an hour a day release from their classrooms to record their thoughts and feelings about their learning in a journal. Two and a half days each week were spent in the school by the researcher during which time journals were read, points noted for discussions and then individual interviews were conducted with the students which typically lasted for approximately an hour. Student teacher meetings which were organised each week by the co-ordinators of the practicum were also observed. Extensive interviewing was undertaken prior to the practicum and following it as well. Moreover, individual and group interviews were conducted with the cooperating teachers, the university lecturer and other school staff.

The major data sources were interview transcripts (student teachers and teachers), student teacher journals, field notes and other practicum documentation. Data were analysed according to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) procedures, which involved immediate ongoing interpretation of events, checking of emerging interpretations, categorisation and description and theory building grounded in context.

The affective dimension of the practicum

Brookfield (1990: 45) made the point that when students speak about learning they do so in "highly emotional terms". This was certainly the case for the student teachers involved in this study. They expressed the following feelings in their journals and interviews throughout the six months of their involvement in the study: excited, frustrated, guilty, anxious, overwhelmed, pleased, relieved, confused, disappointed, encouraged, reassured, unsettled, nervous, worried, impatient, upset, angry, apprehensive, exhausted, inspired, tense, pressured, inadequate, satisfied.

Throughout the practicum the student teachers experienced a wide range of feelings as well as fluctuations in these feelings. One of the student teachers made the comment, *"My feelings were like a roller coaster"* and another said, *"It was the up and down thing with your feelings that got to you"*. All of the student teachers stated at the end of the study that the *"highs and lows were*

a part of being a student teacher". Brookfield noted that such fluctuation was one of the most familiar rhythms of significant learning. He explained that "Learners embrace the unfamiliar while concurrently longing for the familiar. They take two steps forward and one step back" (1990: 63). He claimed that this process is highly emotional because it "involves great threats to students' self-esteem, especially when they are exploring new and difficult knowledge and skill domains" (1990: 204). The rhythms can also be explained by the reflective nature of the learning process in which the student teachers were engaged due to their involvement in the research. Schon (1987: 83) pointed out that in order to move forward, reflective learners "must move into the center of the learning situation, into the center of their own doubts". This occurred for the student teachers, as they identified their significant learning. They were engaged in analysing their experiences, grappling with conflicts and dilemmas and confronting their values and attitudes. This process was unsettling and tiring at times, but regarded by the student teachers as *"significant"* and *"beneficial"*. As one of the students wrote in her journal: *"If you can't identify your learning, how can you help children with theirs?"*

For various reasons, then, the practicum can be described as an intense affective experience for the student teachers in this study. Their feelings played a major role throughout all the stages of the practicum in how they interpreted the practicum. On completion of the study, the students emphasised that they had not been prepared for the affective dimension of the practicum. Their preparation for the practicum had focused on details of programming and their teaching, not on their responses to the whole experience or their learning. In fact, while significant learning had obviously occurred for the student teachers (as documented in their final reports), they themselves did not interpret the practicum as a "learning experience". Three notions worried the student teachers continually: "pleasing significant others", "being perfect" and "guessing what's in others' heads". They felt a lot of pressure during the practicum as a result of them pursuing the notions of "being perfect" and "doing it right". The practicum was perceived as a "testing time" rather than a "learning time" and mistakes were seen as "failures" rather than "learning opportunities". This finding is consistent with Calderhead (1988), who found that the student teachers in his study viewed the field experience as a test to be passed, rather than as a learning experience. The effect of this interpretation was that the student teachers were not able to see their "lows" as a normal part of learning, but rather they became a focus which resulted in self-doubt and self-depreciation. This affected not only their professional lives, but also their personal lives. There was a very negative effect for the student teachers on their self-esteem.

The role of student teacher

The realities of "being a student teacher" were revealed in this study, as were the various messages conveyed to the student teachers about their status and power, the purpose of the practicum and teaching and learning. The students interpreted their practicum through a range of contradictory messages, incongruous expectations and a plethora of emotions. This finding is in keeping with Groundwater-Smith, who noted (1993:137): "The practicum experience is one fraught with difficulties, dilemmas and challenges as the student attempts to negotiate his or her way along a hazardous path of competing professional policies and practices". The practicum, was, for the students in this study, a disempowering experience. They all associated "being a student teacher" with having no power or control - over themselves or the situation. A recent edition to the literature on the practicum is the "voices" of student teachers themselves. Poirier

(1992:85), a pre-service teacher, confirmed the voices of the student teachers in this study, in the following:

Power is the ability to act. It is the ability, right and capacity to exercise control. An educational conundrum exists that empowerment of students is the key to good education, yet my student teaching experience contradicted this. Instead, my personal sense of power was undermined. Conflict between empowerment and power (in theory and practice) characterized my journey as a student teacher.

The student teachers in this study encountered traditional attitudes in the form of covert messages about the perceived low status of "being a student teacher" within the school setting. Messages such as "you're only a student teacher" and "know your place" were conveyed at one time or another throughout the practicum experience, in spite of formal and undoubtedly sincere attempts to make them welcome in the school. Moreover, the students themselves approached their practicum with the view that they were "only student teachers", resulting from their previous practicum experiences and messages conveyed from previous student teachers. 'Being a student teacher' then requires recognition of the institutional context in which he/she is operating. The reality is that schools are hierarchical systems and relationships and roles are embedded in that context. Britzman (1991:221) conveyed the difficulties for student teachers when she wrote:

To view the problem of learning to teach as simply one of preparedness and ill-preparedness does not allow for the contradictory realities that individuals confront. That judgment can neither illumine the turmoil of learning to teach nor assuage the deeply personal dissonance engendered by the circumstances of being there. The commonsense formula of preparedness or ill-preparedness rooted in the normative discourse of teacher education can not explain what it is that structures the practices and subjectivities of individuals and why certain practices dominate and persist over others. The fact is, to place student teachers in compulsory school settings and to expect them to act as if they had entered a neutral zone where they can single-handedly fashion it into places of learning sets them up for the discursive practice of self-blame. Such a typical scenario makes the student teacher the site of conflict, and in doing so, inhibits the development of practices that could be internally persuasive.

The discursive practice of "self-blame", referred to by Britzman (1991), was evident in this study. The student teachers felt guilty at many stages during the practicum, when in fact, they had no reason to. This was exemplified during the student teachers' time of full responsibility for their class, when the children transferred their affections to the student teachers. The student teachers blamed themselves for this and continually worried about their supervisory teachers' response.

The student teachers in this study, given their disempowered position in the practicum, suffered from constant attacks on their self-esteem. This lowered self-esteem affected the way they interpreted their practicum experience. It also had an effect on other aspects of the experience, including their:

- teaching
- ability to cope

- interpersonal communication skills
- learning

Effect of negative self-esteem on student teachers' teaching

One of the biggest concerns for the student teachers in this study was "performance", as it related to classroom teaching behaviour. The student teachers perceived the practicum as "teaching practice". This perception was reinforced by their supervisory teachers and the university supervisor, given that it was the student teachers' observable teaching behaviours which were the focus of their attention and on which the students were given feedback. This almost exclusive focus on the student teachers' classroom teaching behaviour by both the students and the supervisors exacerbated the vulnerable position for the student teachers. It meant that there was often a concentration on what went wrong - not only by the supervisors but the student teachers themselves. This focus on deficits had a detrimental effect on the student teachers' self-esteem, which in turn affected their teaching performance.

This cyclic effect, and the link between feelings and behaviour, is depicted in the following diagram, which has been termed "the negative cycle".

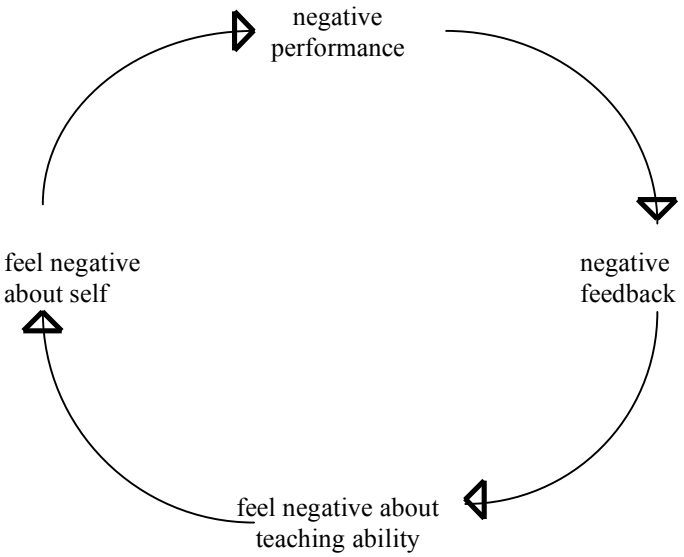

Figure 1: The Negative Cycle

When the student teachers felt unsure or anxious, these feelings had a direct result on their teaching. This was particularly the case when they were "being watched", which is consistent with the finding in the literature that it is the act of "being supervised" which causes stress for student teachers (Sinclair and Nicoll, 1981; Calderhead, 1988).

The supervisory teachers and university supervisor reported during the study that the student teachers became defensive when they received feedback. This is not hard to understand when one considers the threat to the student teachers' self-esteem, together with the fact that it was the

supervisors who were in control of the feedback - not only the content, but when and how the feedback was given.

The importance of high student teacher self-esteem in relation to their teaching ability can be appreciated when it is acknowledged that teachers work through social relationships. They teach by creating interactions between themselves and students and amongst students. In doing so, all teachers behave in certain ways and elicit certain kinds of behaviours from their students (Cartledge and Milburn, 1978). Thus, how the student teachers felt about themselves and their abilities was reflected in their interactions with the children. The importance of teacher self-esteem has been reported in the literature (Coopersmith, 1967; Coombs, 1969; Burns, 1989, cited in Burns, 1991). Burns (1989, cited in Burns, 1991), for example, claimed that teachers with higher self-concepts tended to espouse more pupil-centred and less teacher-directed approaches.
The "negative cycle" can be reconstructed as a "positive cycle". This is illustrated in Figure 2.

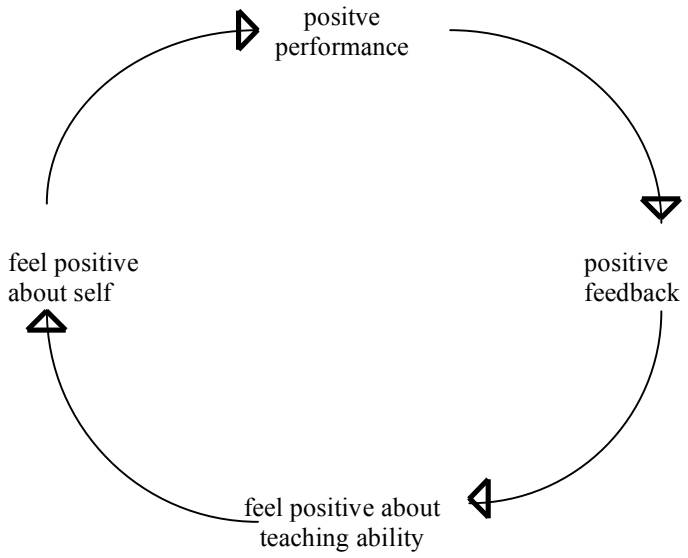

Figure 2: The Positive Cycle

Several of the student teachers in the study may well have been perceived as experiencing the "positive cycle". Their teaching was viewed as effective, they received positive feedback, they felt positive about their teaching ability and then felt positive about themselves, which in turn led to further positive "performances". However, this did not mean that they were free of doubts and anxieties. They were not. These particular students wanted everything associated with the practicum, including their teaching to "be perfect" and so their own perceptions of their teaching ability interfered. One of the students, for example, thought that for her to say that a lesson went well, meant that everything should be exactly right. If this was not the case, she was highly critical of herself. Thus, even though the student teachers may have been receiving positive feedback about their teaching, they at times, "were their own worst enemy", in that they focused on the negative aspects rather than the positive.

Calderhead (1991: 533) identified the close link between the personal and professional dimensions of the student teacher role when he wrote:

The task of teaching exposes one's personality in a way that other occupations do not. The student teacher is constantly being watched by children, teachers and college tutors. As a student teacher, there is constant feedback both explicit and implicit about one's performance of the task and also about oneself as a person.

Effect of negative self-esteem on student teachers' ability to cope

The student teachers' ability to cope during the practicum was affected by their self-esteem, which fluctuated throughout the practicum, depending on the nature of each individual, his/her energy level, how well he/she was managing the professional demands of "being a student teacher" and the personal pressures on him/her and the amount of support he/she received.

One of the pressures for many of the student teachers was the high expectations they had of themselves. Thus, when they were not feeling as positive about their abilities as they would have liked, they felt less able to cope generally with the demands of the practicum. Here again, the cyclic effect was apparent, because if they were feeling "down" and believed that they were not coping well, this affected their performance.

This problem was heightened for the student teachers as the practicum progressed, when tiredness became an overwhelming issue for them. This was a very human response. People cope better when they feel good about themselves and have plenty of energy. When they are worried or tired, their ability to cope declines. The emotional turmoil which the student teachers endured as a "constant companion" throughout the practicum (as a result of trying to "please everybody" and "be perfect"), was even harder to deal with when they were tired. They became even more emotional, as seen in an example of one of the student teachers crying during her preparation for a science lesson or another swearing in class. Adjusting to the new environment and the new role, the workload, lack of sleep and not being to "turn off" were recognised as contributing factors by the student teachers to their tiredness. However tiredness itself was not the main problem. The issue of guilt surfaced again for the student teachers. They constantly felt guilty at the effect their low energy had on their teaching and on the children. This then had an effect on how they felt about themselves which in turn affected not only their teaching (as depicted earlier), but their perceptions of their teaching and other situations in which they found themselves.

This finding is consistent with the outcomes from a recent study by Edwards, who acknowledged the importance of feelings of self-worth amongst student teachers in terms of coping with practicum difficulties. She used the work of Brockner and Hulton (1978) and Greenwald & Pratkins (1984) to claim that "research has indicated that high self-esteem enables people to be less depressed, more independent of conformity pressures and more persistent at difficult tasks" (1993: 39). Similarly, a study on student teachers by Burns (1989, cited in Burns, 1991) found that "low self-concept students" compared to "high self-concept students" reported more stress symptoms, were less competent, were less integrated socially, were absent more often and had more emotional problems during the teaching practice.

Effect of negative self-esteem on student teachers' interpersonal communication skills

Self-esteem and self-concept are at the very core of the communication process. They affect communication because "we behave in ways consistent with our self-views and because we interpret the behaviour of others in ways consistent with our self-images" (Bassett and Smythe, 1979: 27). The significance of this statement may best be understood when one considers the myriad of interpersonal interactions and relationships in which the student teachers were involved during the practicum. Every one of those interactions and relationships was affected by the student teachers' feelings about themselves, which fluctuated continually throughout the practicum.

The effects of this situation are best illustrated in the student teacher-supervisory teacher relationships. This study has highlighted the point that the interpersonal relationship between the student teachers and their supervisory teachers was dictated very much by the teachers. The student teachers modelled their interactions on those that were shown to them. They constantly modified what they said or did not say. For example, one of the student teachers did not initiate personal conversations with her teacher early on because her teacher was reserved and kept to herself. She did not want to be seen as *"pushy"*. And yet another aspect was highlighted by another student in response to her teacher being upset about personal issues. Her teacher chose to share these problems with the student teacher who experienced two dilemmas as a result. First, early on in their relationship, when her teacher had been upset one day and the next day did not say much, the student wrote in her journal: *"What do you say? Do you ask her about her personal stuff (she's been so upset) or not?"* She felt that it was not her place to initiate conversation but she did not want to seem unconcerned - she described it as a *"catch 22"* situation. And, as their relationship developed over time, her teacher shared more intimate details of her problems with the student and due to a previous experience the student herself had had, she did not want to hear it, but again, as she said: *"What could I say? I couldn't say 'I don't want to hear this', so I just shut up and listened"*. The student teachers then were continually having to question their responses and modify their interpersonal behaviour (as well as experiencing much discomfort at times, as a result). Their interpersonal skills were very much affected by their self-esteem in the practicum.

The complexity of the student teacher-supervisory teacher relationship must not be under-estimated. Traditional studies reported in the practicum literature have emphasised that stress exists for student teachers in situations where there are differences between them and their supervisory teachers (Yee, 1971, cited in Dickie, 1983; Karmos and Jacko, 1977). However, this study has shown that this relationship is much more complex than that and that even when there are similarities between teachers and student teachers, tensions and dilemmas exist for the student teachers in establishing and maintaining a personal/professional relationship with their supervisory teacher. Brookfield (1990:29) wrote: "In human communication the potential for mutual miscomprehension is ubiquitous, especially in the complex relationship between teachers and students". This statement can equally apply to "teachers and student teachers".

This study has highlighted the very individual and human aspects of the encounter between a teacher and a student teacher. Who each of these people are is important and their expectations of themselves and each other are significant. It should be remembered that teachers as human beings have their own insecurities, worries and concerns too. For example, many of the teachers

in the study also suffered from the notions of "being perfect" and "doing it right" in relation to their supervisory roles and in their interviews, described themselves as *"only classroom teachers"*. Their self-esteem no doubt had an impact on the quality of the communication between themselves and the student teachers. It was the student teacher though, as the disempowered person in the relationship, who was the most affected. This point was illustrated again and again in the research field notes in various situations involving the student teachers and their supervisory teachers. For example, in an interaction which may not have been as positive as it might due to the teachers' interpersonal skills (and self-esteem at the time), the student teachers actually interpreted it as their problem. They felt that they had done something wrong. Such interpretations reflect the fragility of student teacher self-esteem during the practicum.

Effect of negative self-esteem on student teachers' learning

It has long been acknowledged that self-esteem is crucial to learning, both for children (Coombs, 1962, cited in Collier and Donnelly, 1984; Samuels, 1977; Johnson, 1972; Purkey, 1970; Aspey and Roebuck, 1977) and adults (Bandura, 1989, cited in Burns, 1991; Burns, 1991).

The student teachers in this study were hindered by a practicum which was disempowering. The way it was structured (with almost all of the time spent in one classroom, isolated from their peers and involvement in the wider life of the school, and with"
"supervision" revolving around the technical skills of teaching), the student teachers' learning was far from maximised.

The student teachers were dependent learners, as they enacted a passive stance in trying to fulfil everyone else's image of what "good" student teachers were and what they should be doing. They deferred constantly to the "higher authorities" (perceived as the university and the school), and they had little confidence in their own judgements or their own opinions. They considered valid knowledge was that prescribed by the university and the learning that was seen as significant was that which was outlined in their subject booklet. This dependency was illustrated by one of the students when she wrote in her journal: *"It's like we're being spoonfed"*. Another noted the effect of this dependency when she said: *"I stuck to things I knew. Things that were safe"*. Her learning was limited.

The student teachers then did not feel in control of their own learning. They felt it was dictated by "others". They did what they thought they should do rather than what would be of most benefit to them, in terms of their learning. Freire (1973, cited in Shor, 1980: 109) offered one explanation:

Years of processing through the institutions of mass society have left students divided, frustrated and defensive about their own skills. Their conditioned self-images interfere with their taking command of the learning process.

In this practicum, the student teachers' "conditioned negative self-image" very much "interfered with their taking command of the learning process".

It must be acknowledged at this point that the research process helped to counter these effects. The reflection process enhanced the student teachers' learning from the practicum, by bringing into consciousness and allowing a number of key insights to be gained and discussed which would probably have otherwise remained unexamined. For example, the student teachers began to challenge many of the overt and covert messages which they had received about teaching throughout their lives and the notions of "being perfect" and "pleasing others" By the end of the practicum, the student teachers had revised their ideas on these concepts . They also became aware of the various levels operating in a practicum experience - that is, the explicit planned curriculum (university prescribed), the unplanned curriculum (school related) and, underlying both of these, the hidden curriculum of the practicum (Dobbins, 1995). They were able to identify significant learning as a result and take a more active role in all aspects of the school, rather than only the one classroom. The process of focusing on their own learning also enabled the student teachers to go beyond a consideration of the technical skills of teaching and consider some of the ethical and moral issues involved in teaching and learning. They began to analyse the origins, purposes and context of their actions, and those of other teachers, rather than focusing on the immediate concern of accomplishing the task ahead of them.

At the end of the practicum, the student teachers stated that they had found it *"empowering"* to be involved in a project which valued their thoughts and opinions and where they believed they had some control of their learning. They were able to clarify what was particularly significant for them in their learning and why this was so. They felt valued as learners, and as a result, came to value themselves. Their self-esteem was enhanced which resulted in them enhancing their own learning.

Implications

The traditional practicum, with its emphasis on the acquisition of technical skills of teaching and the utilisation of a hierarchical model of supervision, must change, if student teacher learning in the practicum is to be maximised. The practicum needs to incorporate structured opportunities for student teachers to reflect on their learning. It also needs supportive teacher educators who are committed to the notion of facilitating student teacher learning. These views are confirmed in the practicum literature of the last decade (Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann, 1987; Smyth, 1989, 1993; Calderhead, 1991; McIntyre, 1991; Rogers and Webb, 1991; Colton and Sparks-Langer, 1992; Zeichner, 1992). Reasons given for developing reflectivity include the notion of student teachers maximising their learning from the practicum and accepting responsibility for their own professional development and the acknowledgment that teaching, as well as being a practical and intellectual activity, is also a moral endeavour. In regard to "supervision", rather than adopting the role of "outside expert", teacher educators need to assist student teachers in their learning process and help them make sense of their learning.

The nature of the support provided in the reflective process is a challenging issue for teacher educators. In this study, participating in collaborative learning situations - with their peers and a "mentor" (the student teachers' perceptions of the researcher), was seen by the student teachers as an effective way to facilitate reflection and support both the cognitive and affective demands that were made on individuals. At times, however, the process of getting students to focus on themselves was difficult. This was particularly the case when student teachers started to identify and analyse unfamiliar or unpleasant feelings and thoughts, in relation to how they were

perceiving their experience. Tremmel (1993: 449) offered an explanation for this difficulty: "The surprise, the shock, even the revulsion some students experience when they confront what is going on in their minds reflects the difficulty many of us have directing our attention inward toward ourselves". Nonetheless, this is a necessary part of the process. For as Bolin (1990: 18) maintained:

Unless student teaching experiences are connected to "personal thoughts, feelings and reflections" (Yinger and Clark, 1981), student teachers may soon dismiss their student teaching experiences. The events of the student teaching experience will not be as important as the way in which they are perceived and the meanings ascribed to them in relation to the student's total life experience.

The role of facilitators of reflection needs further investigation. How do teacher educators develop student teacher self-confidence and at the same time, encourage reflection which may be threatening in itself? How does one most effectively facilitate reflection in groups? How can a facilitator both support and challenge student teachers? How is conflict handled? These are some of the questions which emerged in this study. The development of a trusting relationship between teacher educators and student teachers and the establishment of a risk-taking environment will be necessary prerequisites if student teacher self-esteem is to be developed in the practicum and the level of reflection is to go beyond a superficial consideration of general issues.

Conclusion

Student teacher self-esteem is important if the educational potential of the practicum is to be realised. This article has provided insights into how student teachers interpreted their experience as a result of low self-esteem. The key to changing student teachers' interpretations of the practicum is to structure the practicum so that it is a growth experience based on the belief in affirmation of self rather than the creation of self-doubts. There will always be an element of the latter given the nature of the role of being a student teacher, but the situation can be greatly improved. There needs to be a commitment by teacher educators to providing a practicum based on the notions of empowerment, collaboration and reflection.

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