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A School Advisor Association: Seeking Ways to Change Substantively the Role Played by Classroom Teachers in Preservice Teacher Education

In recent years we have written and spoken about the role of school advisors (sometimes known as school associates, cooperating teachers, or sponsor teachers) in practicum settings. We concluded these pieces by arguing that teachers should play a more substantive role in ensuring that school advisors are professionally ready, carefully selected, and continually supported in their work as teacher educators. We take this opportunity to extend those arguments and to imagine a scenario in which this might occur. Moving beyond what is to what might be, we suggest establishing at a regional level a formal body—a School Advisor Association for want of a better term—that comprises classroom teachers who in concert with faculties of education play a central role in the development, selection, and support of school advisors.

Au cours des dernières années, le rôle des enseignants associés dans les stages pédagogiques a été le sujet de nos écrits et de nos discussions. Nous avons conclu ces articles en faisant valoir que les enseignants devraient jouer un rôle plus important pour assurer que les enseignants associés soient prêts au plan professionnel, bien sélectionnés et constamment appuyés dans leur travail de formateurs d'enseignants. Nous profitons de l'occasion pour pousser plus loin ces arguments et imaginer un scénario dans lequel ces suggestions pourraient se réaliser. En allant au delà de ce qui existe pour arriver à ce qui pourrait se faire, nous suggérons l'établissement, au niveau régional, d'un comité formel (faute de mots, disons une Association d'Enseignants Associés) constitué d'enseignants qui, de concert avec les facultés d'éducation, joueraient un rôle central dans le développement, la sélection et l'appui des enseignants associés.

Defining what constitutes the practice of teacher education and exploring the implications of that definition in a variety of contexts represents our principal research interest. Although we have explored this interest in a number of professional development settings (e.g., faculty teaching, outreach programs for international teachers, and self-studies of graduate programs), it is our work with student teachers and their advisors in practicum settings that is the focus of this article. Specifically, we argue for a more active engagement of

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members of the teaching profession in the development and promotion of their work as teacher educators in preservice teacher education.

Our early research explored the process of *becoming a teacher* in field settings. We were intrigued by the reflective practices of student teachers as they interacted with school advisors during their practica (Clarke, 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Grimmatt, Erickson, MacKinnon, & Riecken, 1990; Riecken, 1990). This research resulted in a number of outcomes, one of which is that student teacher reflection is “born of incidents but thematic in nature” (Clarke, 1998, p. 58). This outcome challenged how we conceived of student teacher learning and prompted a number of related investigations, in particular an interest in the process of *becoming a school-based teacher educator*.¹ Our investigations highlight a number of anomalies between these two complex but similar processes. For example, although the process of becoming a teacher has moved well beyond a technical rational emphasis that dominated many teacher education programs in the early 1970s and 1980s, the professional development opportunities provided for those wishing to become teacher educators in school settings are still in large part imbued with a technical or clinical emphasis (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Knowles & Cole, 1996; Zeichner, 1992).

In more recent years a number of faculties of education have attended more closely to the work of school advisors. For example, in some jurisdictions professional development opportunities for school advisors range from workshops (Browne, 1992; McIntyre & Killian, 1987) to semester-length courses (Johnston, Galluzzo, & Kottkamp, 1986) and in one or two instances extended modules of study in a graduate program (Garland & Shippy, 1994; Wolfe, Schewel, & Bickham, 1989). This is a shift from earlier days when one might be forgiven for assuming that being a school advisor—often the result of simply adding one’s name to a staff room sign-up sheet—required little preparation, was a task that anyone could do, and required no ongoing support.

School Advisors: Classroom Placeholders, Supervisors of Practica, or Teacher Educators?

Unfortunately, where professional development opportunities exist most are one-off workshops that focus solely on the activities of beginning teachers and fail to engage advisors in critically analyzing their own work with student teachers. One reason for the fixation on student teacher activities is the way the work of school advisors has been conceptualized over the years by both the academy and the field. We offer a provocative representation of three such conceptualizations. Although exaggerated, we present these characterizations deliberately to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions that often surround the work of advisors; assumptions that “if unarticulated, serve to act upon the actions of student teachers in ways that perpetuate and render natural the schisms that constrain what is possible during the [practicum]” (Britzman, 1991, p. 218). We stress that there are a variety of other points and indeed other ways to think about this continuum, but we will confine our comments to three points and the notion of engagement between student teachers and school advisors in practicum settings to illustrate our point (Figure 1).

One of the earliest conceptions of the work of school advisors is *advisor as classroom placeholder* (Figure 1). In this conception the student teacher quickly finds himself or herself “taking the place of” the regular classroom teacher who

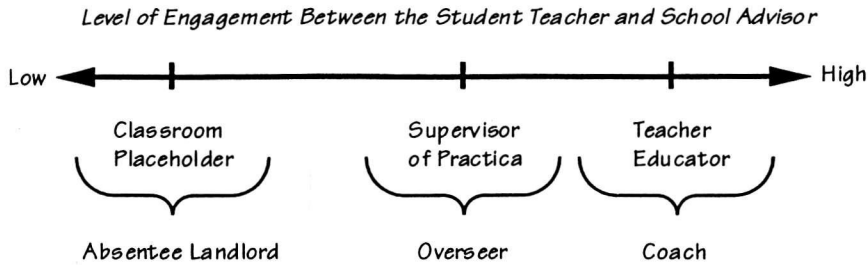


Figure 1. Three conceptions of the work of school advisors.

immediately exits to the staff room, teacher preparation room, school office, and so forth for the remainder of the practicum. This conception assumes that the student teacher almost immediately on entering the school will take full responsibility for teaching the class. In conversations with advisors who use this approach we have found that it often mirrors the way they experienced their practicum, and in adopting this approach they are modeling a practice that they believe was successful for them as beginning teachers. The literature suggests that the classroom-placeholder approach to practicum advising is rare in practicum settings today (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; RATE IV, 1990).

Some distance along the continuum is perhaps the most common conception in recent years, namely, *advisor as supervisor of practica*. This conception is promoted in a number of colleges and universities. Often embedded in this view is the assumption that school advisors oversee the work of student teachers; that is, what students need to know about teaching is acquired on campus, and the role of the school advisor is to observe, record, and report on the success or otherwise of the application of that knowledge in the practicum setting (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Although the level of engagement between student and advisor is considerably greater than in the placeholder conception, the work of the advisor is principally as an overseer.

In contrast to these two conceptions, we believe a more productive rendering, and one that exemplary school advisors currently exhibit in their interactions with student teachers, is *advisor as teacher educator* (Browne, 1992; Grimmatt & Ratzlaff, 1986; Knowles & Cole, 1996). Being a teacher educator demands among other things a level of engagement with student teachers that far exceeds that of a classroom placeholder or supervisor of practica and is akin to, for want of a better term, that of a *coach*.² We believe our conception of coach—one who works closely in the immediacy of the action setting, encouraging and eliciting the sense the learner makes of his or her actions, and providing background knowledge and expertise to guide new repertoires that the learner constructs—embodies the nature of the relationship we wish to portray. Quality teacher education in the context of a practicum setting requires that school advisors be knowledgeable about and conversant with the teacher education literature and current debates about knowledge generation in practicum settings. Working with a beginning practitioner is a practice that is characterized by complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict (Schön, 1987), and demands that school advisors:

- be grounded in the immediacy of the action setting (Russell, 1997);

- work side by side with student teachers, not from above or from afar (MacKinnon & Erickson, 1988);
- be co-investigators into the practice that is being learned (Brooks, 1998);
- know when to watch, listen, speak, and act and be able to use each of these judiciously at different times and as appropriate to the needs of student teachers (Kettle & Sellars, 1996); and
- be inquirers into their own practices as teacher educators and actively seek opportunities to inform that practice (Loughran, 1996).

The imperative for this richer conception of the work of school advisors is underscored by the fact that school advisors often are responsible for upward of 30% of a beginning teacher's BEd program (30% being equivalent to 12 weeks in a 40-week program).

We argue that a school advisor needs to be a specialist in teacher education in the same way that other areas of specialization exist in the teaching profession (e.g., for teacher librarians, school administrators, English-as-a-second-language teachers, etc.), each of which require established competences (i.e., relevant education and experience in the area of specialization). Classroom placeholders and supervisors of practica do not require specialist knowledge, and the work associated with these conceptions falls within the purview of all teachers—a general position held by most teacher associations or federations in the absence of formally established guidelines for those who work with student teachers. We argue that the specialist knowledge required for the work of a school-based teacher educator does not fall within the purview of programs or practices that constitute the standard preparatory requirements for classroom teachers (e.g., at the very least being a teacher educator would require a working knowledge of the learning-to-teach literature).

Research on the Beliefs, Understandings, and Practices of School Advisors

Although research on advisory practices and orientations appear in the literature—for example, clinical supervision commentaries abound (Zimpher & Howey, 1987)—most teacher educators who work with student teachers lament the absence of a more extensive and substantive research literature in this area. There have been repeated calls for more research into the work of school advisors: McIntyre and Killian (1987), Nolan and Huber (1989), Glickman and Bey (1990), Zeichner, (1992), and Knowles and Cole (1996). The most recent call comes from a meta-analysis of research on learning to teach published by Canadian researchers in the *Review of Educational Research*:

More attention needs to be directed at in-depth study of how other players affect the landscape and process of learning to teach. As mentioned earlier, the roles of supervising teachers are frequently missing in the research. (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998, p. 169)

Some reports suggest that inroads into the potential educative role of school advisors are occurring, although they are almost exclusively offshoots of much larger, more ambitious, teacher education reforms. The most notable example is the emergence of professional development schools (PDSs) in the United States. Although not all PDSs concentrate on the professional development of school-based teacher educators, one such example is the work of Grossman and her colleagues (Yerian & Grossman, 1993). Although the jury is “not in yet”

on all dimensions of PDS explorations (Stallings, Knight, & Wiseman, 1995), clearly some PDSs are addressing the work of school advisors in a way that is consistent with the role of school advisor as teacher educator. The PDS movement provides a context for extensive engagement between and among school advisors and their university counterparts on issues relating to teacher education. It is this rich context of professional collaboration (Knowles & Cole, 1996) among other things that we argue is essential to the work of school-based teacher educators. PDS researchers warn that the costs involved in setting up PDS sites and the institutional resistance to such innovations present a continuous challenge to their survival. It is unlikely that we will see the development of PDS sites such as those referenced above in Canada in the foreseeable future.

*Moving Beyond What Is to What Might Be: Imagining a School
Advisor Association*

Although the rhetoric surrounding the call for more research into the work of school advisors is both noble and engaging, we believe that it largely misses the mark in important ways. If we truly believe that school advisors should be teacher educators, and that such work requires thoughtful preparation, careful selection, and ongoing support, then relying on the academy to provide the impetus for change is insufficient and, by all accounts, not likely to produce the desired results in the near or distant future. We believe that the answer, or certainly an important part of it, lies elsewhere.

We contend that it is the classroom teachers themselves who are better placed to argue for and promote the structures and protocols necessary for the preparation, selection, and support of school-based teacher educators. In much the same way that the field plays a influential role in the governance structures (e.g., teacher federations, colleges of teachers, etc.) that delineate the necessary preparation, qualifications, and experiences required for specialist areas in teaching, the field also has the capacity to do the same for classroom teachers who work as teacher educators in schools. We contend that it is only when the field becomes actively and collectively engaged in this way that a substantive reconceptualization of the work of school advisor as teacher educator will occur. The need for a significant involvement by the field in the professional development, selection, and ongoing support of school advisors is all the more urgent given that as a profession they should be intimately involved in “the generative process of producing their own future” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). Further, we believe that it will only be at this point that sufficient momentum will be generated for system-wide change and the development of substantive understandings of the work of practicum advisors. Unless this occurs, efforts by individuals, be they in schools, universities, or colleges, will remain piecemeal and largely unacknowledged. The challenge we present in this article is to imagine a field-based framework, for example, a School Advisor Association, to support and guide the work of school advisors in concert with universities and colleges as teacher educators in practicum settings.³

Imagining a School Advisor Association requires one to “willingly suspend disbelief” (Schön, 1987, p. 95), to withhold judgment, so that for a moment we may entertain possibilities that in other circumstances we might dismiss out of hand. Imaginings allow for creative thinking—a moving beyond *what is to what*

might be despite the inertia associated with established systems and predominant ways of thinking about such issues.

The development of a School Advisor Association or a similar structure would stand as a clear statement by the field of the nature of the specialist knowledge required to work with beginning teachers, and that school-based teacher education is a specialized activity in the teaching profession. Members of the teaching profession would no longer accept that school advisors act as merely classroom placeholders or supervisors of practica. The creation of a School Advisor Association would also signal that the field is prepared to take on the challenges and responsibilities presented by teacher education in field settings. In addition, we believe that the creation of such a body would open the door to an exciting new career path for teachers.

Teacher Education: A Career Path for Teachers in Schools?

Currently classroom teachers who wish to extend their contribution to the teaching profession are usually faced with having to leave their classrooms and take up roles such as administrators, counselors, or curriculum consultants. We believe it is time for the profession to acknowledge formally the important dimensions of mentoring and collegial support that are fundamental to a vibrant and active community of teacher practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and that this acknowledgment should be the genesis of a new form of ascribed status in the field of teaching. Such an ascribed status could be given the designation of a *mentor teacher/teacher educator* and accompanying that designation would be a reconceptualization of a teaching specialization that would include responsibilities for advising student teachers and mentoring early career teachers. Accordingly, the classroom teaching responsibilities of such a mentor teacher/teacher educator would be reduced in order to allow for the intensive one-to-one work involved in this particular specialization. If this seems far-fetched, imagine, for example, offering teachers who supervise student teachers 2.5 release days for their contribution to teacher education—this would amount to \$500 per teacher in North American jurisdictions, and the release days could be used for professional development activities with student teachers. Considering that classroom teachers are currently responsible for upward of 30% of a 12-month BEd program, \$500 is a small investment for the large contribution that classroom teachers make to teacher education.

Arrangements such as these would allow for a series of new and exciting opportunities for school-based teacher educators. For example, substantive links between universities and colleges could be established where the mentor teacher/teacher educator would play a more significant role in mediating the cultural knowledge and differing academic and social mores of on-campus and off-campus educational settings. Although this is currently happening in a number of teacher education programs through experimental options, electives, and cohorts, we believe that only through something like a School Advisor Association and the field-wide influence that such an association could exert would such practices become norms in teacher education. Allexsaht-Snider, Deegan, and White (1995) highlight the potential of new possibilities that arise when schools and universities collectively address issues in teacher education, one of the most significant outcomes being “a spiralling process of educational renewal in both institutions” (p. 519). The relationships that they

explore in their three-year study, and the type that we envisage in this article, would allow both groups to be active partners in and negotiate the agenda for teacher education practices at the local level. This form of collaboration, virtually impossible under current practices that perpetuate student teacher placements on an individual basis without any substantive consultation with schools or teachers, would provide structure, give meaning to, and problematize the practices that each other engages in as teacher education providers.

The current climate of teacher education reform across Canada makes this an opportune time for the development of School Advisor Associations. As the demographic shift of the teaching profession continues with more and more current teachers retiring and much younger and less experienced teachers entering the profession, there is a need to reconsider how we conduct teacher education so that the expertise that we have developed collectively in schools, universities and colleges is used to its fullest potential.

Toward Defining a Framework

To imagine what a School Advisor Association (SAA) or a similar framework might look like and how it might function, we offer the following thoughts (some purposely controversial) to stimulate discussion.

- A provincial SAA might consist of a group of regional SAAs where each could be responsive to local contexts.
- For a teacher to be an accredited SAA member (and therefore ready to assume the responsibilities of working with a student teacher) he or she might need to demonstrate to the SAA the necessary knowledge and practices that are essential to the work as a school-based teacher educator.
- An SAA might be phased in over a five-year period. After the phase-in period, teachers wishing to work with student teachers would need to be fully accredited members of their regional SAA.
- Each SAA would constitute the pool of teachers from which school advisors would be selected to work with student teachers in that region.
- Some possibilities for recognizing the work of SAA accredited members might include:
 - appointment as adjunct members of the college or university from which their student teachers come;
 - tuition credit for university or college courses;
 - professional development funding and/or release time; or
 - university or college credit based on a professional portfolio of each advisor's experience as a teacher educator.
- SAA accreditation might require teachers to:
 - attend a program of studies in becoming a teacher educator (e.g., a 15-hour program) conducted by the SAA in conjunction with the colleges and universities;
 - attend three full-day workshops each year, where the analysis of student-advisor interactions would be the central feature;
 - maintain a professional diary of activities with the SAA; or
 - be a peer advisor for and be peer reviewed by SAA members once every three years.

- SAAs might develop formal collaborative frameworks over time for working with universities and colleges of education in their regional areas.

Again, we emphasize that these suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive in any way. Rather, we hope our depiction stimulates different ways of thinking about the engagement of the teaching profession in teacher education.

The Challenge Revisited

The term *teacher education provider* is currently associated with colleges and universities. If the work of school advisors continues to be seen as fulfilling a placeholder or supervisory function, the role of the field in the development of beginning teachers is likely to remain unchallenged and unchanged. The status quo—universities assigning student teachers to schools with little input from the field as to the advisors' needs, expectations, and beliefs governing teacher education practices—will prevail.

We believe that this situation is neither an effective nor productive way for schools, colleges, or universities to think about teacher education. If nothing else, the current situation ignores the extraordinary educative contribution that exemplary school advisors currently make to the professional development of student teachers. In this sense schools exercise a significant function in teacher education, albeit different from how colleges and universities contribute to teacher education. The challenge is to imagine a way for this to be recognized, formalized, and acted on to the benefit of all participants.

We believe that for schools to be more productively participating partners in teacher education, teachers in the field need to argue for the conception of *school advisor as teacher educator* and work toward ensuring that those who work with student teachers are professionally prepared, ready, and supported for that work. School advisors should be conversant with, engaged in, and recognized for their work as school-based teacher educators. To this end, a School Advisor Association is one way of imagining an alternative to current practices.

Notes

1. Following Grimmert and Ratzlaff (1986), we regard classroom teachers who act as practicum advisors as teacher educators.
2. For further elaboration on our use of the word *coach* refer to Hatch (1993) and Clarke (1997b). We use the word *coach* with caution and would be happy to entertain other possibilities.
3. The association that we are suggesting is not the same in nature as provincial subject associations (PSAs) where, for example, one could be a science teacher but would not necessarily have to be a member of the Science PSA. For our proposed School Advisor Association, a more formalized commitment would be a necessary condition for those wishing to work with student teachers.

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