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6. COMMUNICATION IN THE PRACTICUM: FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary teacher education world many commentators see close relationships between schools and universities as critical to quality teacher education (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Zeichner, 2010). Schools and universities must work together, it is argued, because they must support the crucial site of professional learning, the practicum. The practicum, known by a range of other terms including professional experience, field experience, teaching placement, teaching round and internship, is the period of time that teacher education students, or pre-service teachers, develop their planning and teaching capabilities within the school context. It has been seen as a fundamental aspect of a teacher's preparation (Grundy, 2007; Peters, 2011; Zeichner, 2002) where educational theory and practice can be linked (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Teacher education programs have often been criticised for failing to assist pre-service teachers to see the links between the university and the school-based aspects of their courses (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). Lecturers at universities and supervising teachers in schools often have a distinct lack of knowledge and understanding of one another's programs, underlying philosophies and principles (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ure, 2009; Zeichner, 2002). The disconnect requires the pre-service teachers to try to make sense of the theory they experience at university and the experience they have in the classroom with little support from someone who understands what is occurring in each of these environments.

Effective relationships between schools and universities are needed to bridge this gap and ensure that the practicum is a supportive and successful learning experience for pre-service teachers. The project considered in this chapter was an initiative of researchers from two universities who collaborated to improve the practicum experience for pre-service teachers through undertaking and evaluating a range of measures to bridge the communication gap between schools and universities. It also involved an investigation of the points of view of the teacher supervisors on the practicum relationship. The chapter outlines the initiatives undertaken and explicates the findings of an investigation into a range of instruments and their value and potential to improve communication between the university and school partners in the pre-service teacher practicum. The chapter takes the view argued persuasively by Darling-

Hammond (2006) and others (e.g. Loughran, 2006) that teacher education is a process of learning to understand and act in the school context, a reflective process modeled for pre-service teachers by more expert practitioners, whether in the university or school context. For this process to be productive there needs to be rich communication among participants. In the context of current limited budgets the researchers aimed to find useful ways to enrich the communication.

PARTNERSHIPS TO SUPPORT PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PRACTICUM

Many have claimed that schools and universities should form a *partnership* to support the practicum; that is a mutually supportive alliance with shared aims, committed resources and effective communication (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2005; House of Representatives, 2007; Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell & Cherednichenko, 2009; Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Ure, 2009). These commentators argue that support for the pre-service teacher practicum should be part of a shared school-university enterprise which promotes the learning of all participants, the teacher supervisors and the university lecturers, as well as the future teachers. Analyses of the factors that make for strong university-school partnerships in teacher education have been frequent with a number of key findings repeated across studies as well as important differences in emphasis. One key point of difference among researchers about what constitutes a school-university practicum partnership is how elaborated and transforming for participants they see a partnership needing to be. Some argue for a high unity of purpose among the partners, reached through significant communication and negotiation. Such a partnership has been called a "collaborative partnership" (Kruger et al. 2009, p. 47)**.** Others see the partnership as a more pragmatic union in which the partners agree to work together to provide mandatory practicum experiences for pre-service teachers, what Kruger et al. describe as a "complementary partnership" (p. 47).

Among those who aim for a collaborative partnership in the practicum enterprise is Le Cornu (2012), who argues that there needs to be a commitment to viewing the members of the partnership, the pre-service teacher, the teacher supervisor and the school leadership, as a learning community; a relationship which she sees as developed though the commitment by the university to school visits and meetings, ideally maintaining stable relationships over time. The findings of a comprehensive study of 81 school-university partnerships (Kruger et al., 2009) agreed with Le Cornu that the successful partnerships do have a "focus on the learning for all stakeholders" (p. 10) and that a focus on the learning of school students is a shared goal in these strong partnerships. Kruger et al. also identify the creation of space for relationship building and conversation as indicative of a successful partnership.

Whether as part of a collaborative or complementary partnership, there are beneficial outcomes that partnerships bring to teachers including new ideas for classroom teaching and career development (Robinson & Darling-Hammond, 2005). University staff can also benefit through the opportunities that partnerships provide to keep up-to-date with school issues and curriculum (Batholemew & Sandholtz,

2009). In addition to these benefits, teacher supervisors in schools often report their enjoyment of working with pre-service teachers and feel they are contributing to the profession by engaging in pre-service teacher supervision (Peters, 2011; Ryan, Jones & Walta, 2012). In such conditions, it is argued, pre-service teachers are most likely to develop their knowledge and skills as expert professionals (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

IMPEDIMENTS TO PRACTICUM PARTNERSHIPS

For all the positive impacts identified for partnerships, it is widely argued that the reality falls well short of even a limited view of partnership (Ure, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). In Australia a succession of government reports (e.g. Ramsey, 2000; Parliament of Victoria, 2005; House of Representatives, 2007) have advocated for close university-school links to improve the way teachers are educated but have suggested that the reality falls far short of this goal. It is suggested that teachers and principals generally feel that universities no longer support the practicum sufficiently (Parliament of Victoria, 2005) and that this perceived lack of support has led to a withdrawal of school engagement in teacher education and difficulties for universities in finding quality placements for students (House of Representatives, 2007).

Analyses of the weaknesses in relationships between schools and universities in supporting the practicum have highlighted systemic failures to provide sufficient resources to support the partnerships. Teachers report a lack of incentives, financial or other, for them to work with pre-service teachers (House of Representatives, 2007). Bartholomew and Sandholtz (2009) indicate that teachers identify issues of time, rewards, funding and conflicting schedules as challenges for fostering partnerships with universities. It has also been acknowledged that faculties of education are insufficiently funded to cover school visits during practicum (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005) and given the increasing research and teaching demands on tenured academics, they too have few incentives to co-ordinate the practicum program thoroughly (Zeichner, 2010). This often sees university faculties employing short-term contract staff, who have little to no engagement in the course overall, to oversee practicum placement (House of Representatives, 2007; Zeichner, 2010). The absence of contact between university staff and teachers also creates a lack of on-going professional dialogue between schools and universities which deprives teachers of opportunities to discuss new educational ideas with those whose job it is to keep abreast of them (House of Representatives, 2007).

Another source of conflict can arise from the tension between the pragmatic approach that schools often take to practicum learning compared to the more theoretical emphasis universities are seeking from a field experience (Bartholemew & Sandholtz, 2009). There is evidence that some teachers go so far as to convey to pre-service teachers that nothing being learned at university is actually applicable once they are in the classroom (Peters, 2011). Teachers also, it is suggested, do

not engage themselves in the goals of the practicum as explicated in university documentation, seeing the material as overly complex and this seems "to predispose them to reject much of the written information they are given" (Ure, 2009, p. 23). These multiple differences in perspectives further undermine the sense of partnership between schools and universities and place additional pressure on the pre-service teacher to meet the expectations of both.

The situation of pre-service teachers caught between partners who may have different conceptions of teacher education and who do not communicate well with one another can be very difficult, especially in relation to assessment. Usually, it is a classroom teacher, here referred to as the teacher supervisor, who is charged with the guidance and assessment of pre-service teachers on practicum, sometimes with a single visit from a university supervisor who may or may not witness the pre-service teacher's teaching (Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Ure, 2009). Pre-service teachers can be unsure of which party to attend to and what is required to achieve satisfactory grades in their practicum (Allen, 2011; Ure, 2009). Given that it is fundamental to pre-service teachers and to the teaching profession that standards for a successful practicum are known and maintained, this lack of shared understanding and communication about assessment is disturbing (Ure, 2009). In general, governments in Australia have not provided funds for major partnership initiatives that might address the difficulties (Parliament of Victoria, 2005; House of Representatives, 2007); although Neal & Eckersley (Chapter 2) do describe one exemplary exception. The absence of significant systemic funding has left the focus of reform on more limited measures such as improved communication.

In the discussion about the path to improved communication between schools and universities there has been much debate about the importance of school visits by university staff during the practicum period (House of Representatives, 2007; Neal, 2010; Ure, 2009). Some commentators argue that visits are fundamental (Le Cornu, 2012); but it has been suggested that teachers are suspicious of the one-off visits, seeing them as tokenistic (Neal, 2010; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). Some suggest that contemporary communication practices such as email, web communication and phone calls need to be added to traditional mail-outs that presently dominate (Neal, 2010; Peters, 2011; Ryan et al., 2012). It is argued that communication also needs to be three-way: involve the pre-service teacher, teacher supervisor and lecturer (Ure, 2009; Kruger et al., 2009). This communication is especially important given the general lack of access supervising teachers have to the preparation and support they need, and to engage in what Zeichner (2010) describes as "a more active and educative conception of mentoring" (p. 90).

COMMUNICATION AS A STRATEGY FOR ENHANCING SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

The study reported in this chapter sought to evaluate various communication approaches during the practicum to examine their impact on the relationship between

schools and universities. As argued, there is evidence that a lack of meaningful communication is a significant feature of poor university-school relationships. The schools that hosted the practicum placements in the study were in rural and regional areas of Australia, many at a distance from the universities involved, a feature that made personal communication between universities and schools particularly challenging because school visits were expensive and time-consuming. Other communication options included written documentation, phone calls, emails and web-based contact including Skype. As well as this communication focus, in the context of suggestions that teacher supervisors are reluctant to undertake active mentoring of pre-service teachers because they are insufficiently rewarded for it (Ure, 2009; Zeichner, 2010), the study also aimed to discover more about what teacher supervisors wanted from their university partners. In the terms described above, the universities and schools in the project had "complementary partnerships" (Kruger et al., p. 47) in which the university delegated responsibility to the teachers to ensure the pre-service teachers completed their practicum successfully rather than creating more elaborated partnerships where university lecturers were significantly involved in school activities. The researchers were interested to see whether teacher supervisors, and the teacher educators, were satisfied with this relationship.

The context of the study involved the pre-service teacher education programs of two university campuses based in Australian regional (or provincial) centres: Australian Catholic University's Ballarat campus and La Trobe University's Shepparton campus. Both programs were one-year Graduate Diploma in Education courses, the former preparing secondary teachers, and the latter, middle school specialists. The study focused on the practicum aspect of the courses. Seventy-eight pre-service teachers in 64 schools participated in the study along with the teacher supervisors associated with their practicum supervision and four teacher educators. The study was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and had the overall aim of identifying ways of enhancing school-university partnerships in rural and regional areas.

The project had a qualitative research design and focused on teacher supervisors' sense of the relationship with the university as developed through the forms of communication in which they participated. Richards and Morse (2007) indicate that qualitative research "seeks understanding of data that are complex and can be approached only in context" (p. 47). It is concerned with describing, understanding and interpreting phenomena rather than measuring it for cause and effect (Lichtman, 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) indicate "that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). In being interested in teacher supervisors' experience this study fits with this qualitative approach.

Data collection took place during the five-week practicum placement associated with the programs. The communication practices listed below, undertaken during the whole practicum period, were evaluated using a range of instruments. An online survey using Survey Monkey® for all teacher supervisors was the instrument and

was followed by a semi-structured interview for a random selection of 17 teacher supervisors. The survey included closed Likert-scale statements that provided aggregate data on teacher supervisors' level of satisfaction with different modes of communication as well as open questions that probed reasons for their responses. A similar survey instrument was administered with teacher educators. Teacher supervisors were also asked whether they felt there was sufficient recognition/reward for the supervision role and what they believed universities could do to provide better support. Semi-structured interviews enabled a set of guiding questions to provide a general structure for all interviews conducted, but provided the interviewer with some flexibility to vary questions as the situation demanded (Lichtman, 2006). This then enabled individual differences to be explored, making them an appropriate data collection strategy for the current study. Conducted after the survey data was reviewed, the interview also enabled researchers to follow up on any responses of interest that emerged from the survey data. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed creating transcripts that enabled researchers to share the interpretations.

The communication practices that the research team investigated were:

1. Use of hard copy documents including a practicum guideline booklet that outlined the university requirements, and included sample lesson plan templates and report forms. This material was mailed to the co-ordinator of the practicum in the school who was expected to pass it on to the teacher supervisor. The report form to be used to assess the pre-service teacher's practicum was also enclosed in this package along with the form the school was required to use to invoice the university for the payment associated with supervision.

2. Email contact with teacher supervisors three times during the practicum: at the beginning, midway and end of the practicum period. The initial email was an introduction to the university supervisor. It referred to the written documentation that had been sent to the school and provided electronic forms of these through an attachment. In this email communication, teacher supervisors were encouraged to make contact should any concerns arise and they were invited into a secure teacher supervisor website for further support. The second email, sent approximately mid-way through the practicum, highlighted that the halfway point had been reached and referred to some of the tasks/expectations on pre-service teachers. For example "Hopefully pre-service teachers are starting to take full control of a number of classes per week by now and are successfully using a range of classroom management techniques…." Again in this email teacher supervisors were invited to contact the university about any concerns and were reminded to complete the pre-service teacher's progress report and to discuss this with the pre-service teacher. The final email occurred in the fifth and final week of the practicum reminding the teacher supervisor to complete the final report and give it to the pre-service teacher, conveyed the hope that the practicum had proceeded well, and thanked the teacher supervisor for their time and for the support they provided to the pre-service teacher and to the profession through

their involvement in supervision. As these descriptors highlight, the email communication essentially served an administrative purpose, helping to outline requirements, expectations and manage the practicum. The emails also, however, provided ready access for teacher supervisors to make contact with the relevant university staff.

3. In an effort to further support teacher supervisors, a website was established through the online platform PebblePad. This site contained all of the practicum resources (practicum guidelines, report forms), a set of suggested guidelines for working with a pre-service teacher in the school and some professional learning materials associated with effective mentoring. An interactive discussion space was also provided where teacher supervisors were encouraged to discuss their supervision experiences and respond to the guidelines and mentoring resources. The link to this website along with a secure login was provided in the first email.

In addition to the written documentation, email communications and the teacher supervisor website, a random selection of schools then received either an in-person visit, a Skype meeting, or a phone call some time into the practicum (Table 1). Each university lecturer was in charge of a group of approximately 25 pre-service teachers and each implemented the various supervision approaches. In seeking to enable comparison between the three approaches (visit, Skype or phone call) the researchers aimed to have equal numbers in each category. Table 1 shows the numbers for each form of communication used. However, as will be explained later, in some cases phone calls or Skype communication did not eventuate; hence the variation in numbers in the table.

Data analysis occurred in two parts. Descriptive statistics were applied to survey data associated with responses to Likert scales. This included aggregates of responses to demonstrate trends among teacher supervisor responses. Open responses were subject to analytical coding (Richards, 2009) where responses were categorised into emergent themes. Analytical coding was also applied to interview data. Seventy-four teacher supervisors, who supervised the 76 pre-service teachers in the study, each experienced some of the various communication approaches evaluated. Of the 74 teacher supervisors 24 completed the survey and 17 were interviewed.

Table 1. Forms of communication trialed with different supervisors

Supervisor Set	Forms of Communication	Number
A	Written Documents and Email Only	30
B	Written Documents, Email and visit	24
C	Written Documents, Email and Skype meeting	10
D	Written Documents, Email and phone call	18

In planning, the researchers used a number of approaches to maximise "trustworthiness" (Shenton, 2004, p. 63) of the data in terms of presenting the views of the teacher supervisors. Aiming for a strong response rate to the survey, completion of the survey by approximately one quarter of supervisors was a reasonable rate of return and established a set of notions that could be interrogated and expanded during interviews. Researchers did not know whether those interviewed also completed a survey.

RESULTS

The results are reported below in two sections addressing 1) the strategies used to enhance communication; and 2) teacher supervisors' responses to how well they felt they were recognised/rewarded and supported for engaging in the supervision role.

Strategies to Enhance Communication

Table 2 is based on the survey data and highlights the level of satisfaction teacher supervisors indicated they felt with regard to the different modes of communication trialed.

Table 2 demonstrates, that overall, teacher supervisors found all forms of communication quite useful as indicated by the 54 (87%) high or very high level of satisfaction they reported with the different forms of communication. This satisfaction was also reflected through the 21 (95.2%) teachers who responded that the information provided enabled ease of contact with appropriate university personnel during the practicum. However, this was not so much the case for the web-based communication where only five (23%) of the teacher supervisors responded to the invitation to access and be involved. Of these, three indicated that it benefited their ability to support the pre-service teacher, with one of these also seeing it as a form of professional learning about mentoring; and two reported that it was of no immediate benefit in terms of their own professional learning or to assist their ability to support the pre-service teacher. Some teacher supervisors indicated reasons they did not access the website indicating that they "didn't have any time to do so" and "I didn't go back after my initial visit...a prompt function …may have encouraged me to visit again" (Supervisor Survey Monkey). Among the forms of communication trialed the website was the least used by the teacher supervisors.

In responding to the open-section of the questionnaire asking what other forms of communication were used, three participants said Skype, two received a school visit, four received a telephone call, ten received emails and two indicated "Other". A number of teachers skipped this question. Some responses were provided in regard to email in particular. One teacher supervisor indicated "Emails are useful as a tool when they are direct and to the point" (Supervisor, Survey Monkey). It is uncertain whether this was indicating that the emails received actually met this standard, but it was certainly something in the minds of the researchers as the email

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Table 2. Teacher supervisors' satisfaction with communication modes

Mode	Frequency of Response						Total
	Very High	*High*	*Neutral*	*Low*	*Very Low*	*No Response*	
Written Documentation	3	16	0	0	0	0	19
Email	12	9	0	0	1	0	21
Other - Skype, visit, email, phone	4	10	1	2	0	5	22
Total	19	35	1	2	1	5	62

content was being drafted. The one "very low" response to the use of emails in the survey linked to the comment that "Not everyone in schools has the opinion that emails are good, or simply ignore them making this communication often one sided and ineffectual" (Supervisor, Survey Monkey). While this can be the case, generally email is accepted as a high use form of communication in schools today. One teacher supervisor commented on the convenience of online copies of documents "The online copy of the report made it easy to complete over a longer time frame and, as appropriate, make adjustments as improvements and/or issues became evident" (Supervisor, Survey Monkey).

An example of where the bulk email approach was not effective emerged in the case of one pre-service teacher who completed their practicum slightly out of phase from the rest of the group. The teacher supervisor of this pre-service teacher commented, "There appeared to be some communication breakdown – I am unsure at which end. Contact via email from [the university] occurred approximately 3 weeks in to the pre-service teacher's practicum" (Supervisor, Survey Monkey). This highlights the need for email to be somewhat individualised so that inappropriate timing of information does not potentially damage relationships.

When teachers commented on the other forms of communication trialed in the study, it emerged that the face-to-face visits that are often espoused as being crucial for developing relationships with schools were not always necessarily valued. One teacher commented that, "I only spent a short time with the lecturer and that was during my pre-service teacher's lesson. It did not allow a decent opportunity to discuss the progress of my student teacher" (Supervisor, Survey Monkey).

Others did feel that it was only through a visit that particular details about the pre-service teacher and their teaching could be appreciated. This was reflected in the response "the university would be able to pick up nuances from what's going on and they can make a judgment about what sort of teacher they're working with so therefore you can give weight to what sort of judgments are being made" (Supervisor interview). Another commented that they were happy to have a visit but that there were alternatives, "Great to have a visit from a university supervisor - not always the case when hosting a pre-service teacher. Web conferencing may assist

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to develop relationships between universities, schools and students" (Supervisor, Survey Monkey).

Skype sessions, when successful, were seen as a viable alternative to school visits. "Skype conversation was good...embracing technology...Better than telephone" (Supervisor interview). Another teacher supervisor commented "Skype was an innovation and I was really happy to use that and there's other options besides Skype in terms of Apple programs so Messenger and Facetime...those things work well" (Supervisor interview). However, one teacher who was in a remote school in the Northern Territory in the far north of Australia did indicate that Skype could be problematic saying that it quite often did not work and the phone was more reliable. This highlights the impact bandwidth and/or suitable technology may have in determining the outcome.

Most teachers who received a phone call for supervision were satisfied with this as a form of contact. One teacher did suggest that phone calls could be "too hit and miss" (Supervisor interview). But when they were organised in advance with a set meeting time and a speakerphone to allow for three-way communication, they appeared to work well. This was reflected in the statement "It wasn't a random phone call because we made a time and I told the daily supervisor...to keep me free" (Supervisor interview).

Teachers who received only email communication provided mixed responses to this form of communication. One teacher expressed satisfaction with "I could just email straight back to raise any concerns" (Supervisor interview), but there were also comments that expressed disappointment with email only contact: "A phone call half-way through would have been nice, just to say are they going OK. The emails tend to suggest if you're having problems, contact us, which we weren't so therefore I didn't worry about it" (Supervisor interview). Also some lecturers, hoping to establish a partnership with supervisors to assist pre-service teacher learning, found it limiting, with one lecturer stating in their reflections: "I don't think it is an effective way to talk about the pre-service teachers' progress or performance in the classroom."

When asked about the use of ICT generally, a large proportion of teacher supervisors supported the potential of ICT as a mode of communication and collaboration between schools and universities. This was reflected in the 17 (81%) teachers who agreed and 4 (19%) teachers who strongly agreed to the potential of ICT for collaboration and the 17 (81%) and 3 (14.3%) respectively who agreed or strongly agreed that it had the potential to support pre-service teacher learning. One teacher (4.8%) was undecided.

Overall, it was difficult to distinguish the more and less effective forms of communication with teachers. Most teachers seemed quite accepting of the form of communication trialed, although there was less support for email only contact compared to when an additional form of communication was provided through a pre-arranged phone call, Skype call or visit. One teacher provided a comment that may help explain this general acceptance of any form of communication saying:

> The ideal is to have the option there, all the time...to know the contact details of the person. You should know what their position is and how that is going to help the student teacher and how that's going to be passed on. Just to have that support there, even if you don't use it, is really important. So that could be a phone call, it could be the option of a visit; they all need to be there the whole time. (Supervisor interview)

In regard to the written documentation, most teachers found that it was satisfactory in communicating requirements of the practicum. "It was easy to understand – a quick read and I was right" (Supervisor interview). Some did express a preference for the report form to allow for more feedback: "There probably should have been more room, but I'm glad there wasn't in the end because you're always pushed for time with these matters" (Supervisor interview), but this was contrasted with another's response where it was stated that:

> The actual report is too wordy – I would prefer some tick the box options and a rubric style report so there is less writing as supervising a student teacher is already time consuming as each teaching day is full. (Supervisor interview)

Generally, most teachers expressed satisfaction with the documentation. It was evident that for some, however, the details of the practicum requirements were unlikely to be read in any depth. This was represented through comments like:

> The elements that are important are where the university spells out to me what the expectations are, what is the student expected to do, it's the nuts and bolts stuff of how many hours class time are they supposed to experience, what is expected, what are they expected to get out of the experience and it was that information that is obviously the most pertinent and useful. (Supervisor interview)

Reward and Recognition

In order to investigate issues which might be hindering the development of stronger university-school relationships teacher supervisors were asked whether they thought there was sufficient reward and recognition for engaging in pre-service teacher supervision. Most responded in a manner that implied they had not really considered the role as one that required reward and that engagement in this role was more to do with their own engagement in the profession and sometimes as a form of professional development. For example:

> I don't think it's necessary to have a reward. (Supervisor interview)

> It's something I enjoy doing and that's probably one of my little interest areas – new teachers, mentoring graduate teachers...so I don't class it as something that I want monetary value for. (Supervisor interview)

In fact only three of the seventeen teachers interviewed felt they were insufficiently rewarded, especially in terms of time, and two were unsure. Those who commented on the issue of time expressed disappointment at how little the school allowed for what they saw as important work:

> The school could probably do a bit more in terms of that [recognition] because sometimes it was really hard to catch up with the student teacher because the school doesn't see that you've got a student teacher and don't seem to care so you will try to make plans...to catch up...and I've got an extra or there's this thing on. (Supervisor interview)

> Of those who felt unrewarded the following comment expressed the tensions felt:

> I just see it as part of my professional responsibility...but if you have a dud teacher it's the hardest thing in the world …I think we're grossly under-recognised. The pocket money is handy, make no bones about that. Last year I had two student teachers and I managed to buy a new BBQ. Whoohoo! (Supervisor interview)

However, almost universally, even those teacher supervisors who felt under-appreciated by the school and the profession, stated that they found significant professional rewards from the work, both helping the pre-service teachers and in allowing them to reflect on their own teaching:

> It's a happy partnership because it is a two-way street. (Supervisor interview)
> It does help me reflect on my teaching so that is...a vital part of your professional development. (Supervisor interview)

None of the teachers interviewed seemed to think that the university should be providing more recognition or reward. Teachers were also asked whether there needed to be professional learning support for being a teacher supervisor to ensure those who volunteered or were nominated were adequately prepared for such a role. In response to this, one teacher in a rural school at a considerable distance from a major centre said that it was difficult to find useful professional development at her school. She was obliged to travel and it was expensive. One teacher thought it might be useful to have the role count towards registration requirements: "now we've got to keep logs of all professional hours, so it would be really good...for that to be officially checked off on" (Supervisor interview).

There was some interest in more formal professional development of a limited kind: "maybe train up a few people in the school...who are prepared to take on a student teacher" (Supervisor interview) or training for inexperienced supervisors. Teachers recognised that their knowledge of the university program was sometimes tenuous and a number were keen on the idea of some kind of orientation to supervision:

> I think that would be valuable, particularly for supervising teachers that haven't supervised teachers before like I was in this instance. It would be valuable to

have a training workshop or something where you just go through how you can add the most value to that student teacher's time here." (Supervisor interview)

In exploring the idea of providing some sort of compulsory training that contributed towards a formal qualification, very few responded in favour. One teacher said that they might be interested in completing such a qualification "I think it's a good thing to do...but...once they've done it, they shouldn't have to do it every year" (Supervisor interview). But the majority said no. One teacher felt that "if it [accreditation] becomes compulsory it would cause a lot of resentment and I think you'd get less people willing to supervise" (Supervisor interview). Others said it would take away from other more important activities such as teaching.

DISCUSSION

It has been argued by some commentators (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Ure 2009) that relationships between the partners in the practicum enterprise are seriously fractured. This finding was not supported by the study reported here in that in many ways the teachers who participated in the study expressed satisfaction with the way the practicum was conducted. This is an interesting finding. One explanation may be that researchers received data from teacher supervisors who were most interested in the issues relating to pre-service teacher education given that they chose (in the case of the survey) or agreed (in the case of the interview) to participate. Their views may not be similar to those supervisors who did not respond to the survey or be interviewed, let alone those who were not supervisors.

However, it is also true that teachers opted for a limited view of partnership with universities. They welcomed initiatives which might streamline the process but did not seek a partnership of learners as advocated by some (Kruger et al., 2009; Le Cornu, 2012), but rather a complementary partnership which allowed them to undertake their work with pre-service teachers in an efficient manner.

In relation to documentation it has also been suggested that teachers reject the universities' documentation because of its myriad of confusing terminology (Ure, 2009). Supervisors in the current study appeared untroubled by and quite tolerant of the differences in the language and layout of university practicum documentation, although they did express a preference for documentation which was quick to peruse and easy to negotiate.

The study offered teacher supervisors the options of hard copy, email and website material in terms of the form in which they could receive communication from the universities. Supervisors liked the idea of the website as a backup but preferred documentation in their email and some were glad to receive a hard copy as well. Despite on-going efforts by universities, teachers often lack information about practicum requirements and processes (Parliament of Victoria, 2005; Ure, 2009). Communicating directly with supervisors required asking pre-service teachers to

send their supervisors' email address and this process sometimes took some time to achieve but it was largely seen as effective for administrative communication. Only one of the 24 supervisors said in the survey he/she did not appreciate emails at all. Lecturers did find that some supervisors were slow or did not respond to emails. However, responses to requests for phone calls to schools were not always effective or efficient either so email as a minimum form of contact seems inescapable. Emails were not seen as a preferred option for supervision of pre-service teachers in terms of their progress on practicum but were invaluable for communicating about administrative matters.

Despite the usefulness of these communication measures, the project found that rural and regional teacher supervisors, like those in another study that did not have rural/regional focus (Ure, 2009), were somewhat detached from the teacher education programs in which their pre-service teachers were enrolled. They read documentation sufficiently to find out how to fulfill their role but were not concerned to investigate the overall goals of the programs. They were mostly concerned with receiving clear, straightforward documentation to be provided in a timely and efficient manner, supporting previous research findings (e.g. Peters, 2011).

While some of the supervisors said that the personal contact of a visit was very important to them, this was not the most common response. In some instances visits were not always successful for the supervisors. As in Ure's (2009) analysis and also noted in Neal (2010) even when lecturers did visit, some supervisors found the experience limited. The supervisors thought that the "once-only visit" (p. 147) as Neal describes it, is not sufficient to create a useful working practicum relationship between themselves and the universities. Moreover, a number expressed an understanding of the constraints universities are under in terms of finding the opportunity to visit schools at a distance from the university so were happy to receive contact in another form. Neal suggested that from the point of view of supervisors there was an opportunity for universities to try other modes of contact such as phone and online contact and the current project confirms the value of her recommendation.

There was satisfaction with phone calls from a number of supervisors. In many cases if phone calls were to be successful a speakerphone and a private space were needed to encourage three-way-communication. Where it worked well the lecturer had prearranged the time and had prepared for the discussion. Without this preparation the phone call could be quite limited and not conducive to three-way communication. Lecturers also found that in busy schools phone messages to supervisors did not always reach their destinations.

Skype, where it was successfully undertaken, was praised as opening up various useful possibilities for communication. It is relevant here to discuss lecturers' experience in terms of their "side" of the relationship in that they had an overall view of what took place, for there were more plans for Skype to take place than there were successful contacts made. The lecturer who was most successful was the one who addressed an email to both the supervising teacher and the pre-service teacher,

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inviting them to nominate a preferred time for a Skype meeting and specifying in this email that the pre-service teacher take responsibility for arranging the Skype set up. Instructions for first-time users of the software outlining how to download and use Skype were also attached to this email. Pre-service teachers then seemed to take their responsibility seriously. The less successful attempts to establish Skype meetings seemed to be associated with forms of contact that were directed to the pre-service teacher *only,* which were often ignored. Apart from the project team receiving no response when suggesting a Skype supervision session, some reasons given for it not occurring were supervisors saying they were unfamiliar with the technology or a suitable time could not be found.

In retrospect, given that Skype is a relatively untried medium, it may have been better to try it with as many supervisors as possible to better find the conditions in which it is successful rather than setting up a comparison in the study. However, in the cases where it was successful, lecturers and supervisors largely saw Skype as a useful option for making a three-way communication happen at a distance. This remains an area of interest for further research.

It is difficult to sum up which is the best means of contact for supervisors in that all approaches were liked by some and criticised by others. However, it is possible to concur with Neal (2010) that supervisors were critical of cursory approaches to supervision by lecturers. They wanted lecturers to be readily available when they needed them and they did not want to be operating alone.

Reports on pre-service teacher education have argued that teachers see supervision as insufficiently recognised and rewarded (House of Representatives, 2007; Parliament of Victoria, 2005). When this topic was explored with teacher supervisors, most said they did not do it for the monetary reward but saw it as part of their professional life with the rewards being largely intrinsic. This finding fits in well with Ure's (2009) recommendation that pre-service teacher mentoring should be part of the staffing formula for teachers' workloads.

The finding indicating that teacher supervisors were generally positive about their work with pre-service teachers certainly also suggests there may be the possibility of greater teacher engagement in pre-service teacher education programs, as has been proposed (Ure, 2009). However, teachers in the project were wary of any proposal that might significantly increase their workload. In line with this perspective, rather than opting for further professional commitment they preferred the suggestion that their work with pre-service teachers might be counted as part of the required professional development for registration purposes. They were against any idea of compulsory professional development about mentoring pre-service teachers as has been suggested (Recommendation 5.0 in Ure, 2009, p. 86). The professional development support trialed through the website in the form of guidelines for hosting pre-service teachers, and podcasts/readings on mentoring and even the opportunity to engage with other teacher supervisors were all largely ignored.

CONCLUSION

The study reported in this chapter explored a range of communication strategies during the practicum period with the view to improving the support provided to teacher supervisors and thus improve the experience for the pre-service teachers. The evaluation of the various strategies undertaken yielded a range of data that pointed to key elements that can enhance communication with teacher supervisors. Firstly, practicum documents needs to be clear, straightforward and provided in a timely and efficient manner. Efficiency appears to be increased when documentation is provided through a variety of means, both in hardcopy and electronically through email attachments. It is also recommended that where possible, sending documentation directly to the teacher supervisor as well as, or instead of, to the school pre-service teacher coordinator, is beneficial, and that email is a useful tool for achieving this. Furthermore, the use of regular email contact with teacher supervisors throughout the practicum to communicate practicum milestones and to provide opportunities for ongoing communication is supportive and provides an accessible invitation to schools to make contact as required.

A further finding is that *one-off* visits to schools by university staff are neither essential nor necessarily useful as a means of promoting relationships during the practicum; meaningful relationships are cultivated through regular contact that teacher supervisors welcome in a variety of forms (e.g. email, phone, Skype). Further, more extensive research on the value of video-based technology for university involvement in practicum supervision is needed. Whatever the form of university supervision, it was found in this study that meetings between supervising teachers, pre-service teachers and university supervisors need to be three-way communications to enhance the level of support to all participants and thus augment the sense of partnership.

In terms of providing teacher supervisors with appropriate recognition, reward and support, the study found that teachers generally felt rewarded through their participation in supervision, and that extrinsic motivators, excepts for provision of time to manage the supervision effectively, are unnecessary. Recognition of supervision as a professional development activity that is counted towards ongoing registration would be beneficial and contribute to a more formal valuing of teachers' participation in this role. In addition, while universities could offer professional learning for teacher supervisors in order to promote better practicum outcomes, such offerings should be planned so they are viewed as professionally useful to attract teachers rather than be made compulsory.

Overall, the study found that rural and regional supervisors in Victoria held similar views to those in the Deans of Education study (Ure, 2009): they were aware that greater connection with the university programs might develop a coherent approach to pre-service teacher learning but they were not keen to commit to further significant professional activity to create a closer partnership. They tended to support a complementary rather than a collaborative partnership. For those who see the ideal

teacher education as highly engaging collaborative partnerships between schools and universities this presents a challenge.

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