

# Characteristics of Co-operating Teachers

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In this large-scale study, I have profiled the backgrounds and assumptions of co-operating teachers. The results indicate that teachers have a high state of professional preparedness, a depth of experience not previously documented, an overwhelming desire for feedback, a strong call for selection criteria, and an unexpected gender difference in terms of numbers. The profile that emerged supports some common beliefs about co-operating teachers, refutes others, and extends an overall understanding of their involvement in teacher education. Most important, it signals a shift in the conception of their role within teacher education.

L'article dresse le profil des antécédents et des postulats des enseignants associés. Les résultats indiquent que les enseignants sont très bien préparés, possèdent une vaste expérience, désirent connaître les réactions de leur entourage, s'intéressent aux critères de sélection et présentent une différence inattendue entre les sexes quant aux nombres. Le profil qui a émergé permet de mieux saisir le rôle des enseignants dans la formation des maîtres. Il signale surtout un changement dans la conception de leur travail : de superviseurs de stages, ils passent à celui de responsables de formation à l'enseignement.

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Classroom teachers who work with beginning teachers in practicum settings play a critical role in pre-service teacher education (Glickman & Bey, 1990; Guyton, 1989). These teachers are involved in the development of the teaching profession or, as Lave and Wenger (1991) put it, "the generative process of producing their own future" (p. 57). Student teachers regard co-operating teachers as the most important element of their teacher preparation (Blakey, Everett-Turner, Massing, & Scott, 1988; British Columbia College of Teachers, 1997; Wideen, Holborn, & Desrosiers, 1987).

Given the central role that co-operating teachers play in practicum settings, it is curious that their work languishes as a research area. Some researchers (e.g., Zimpher & Howey, 1987) commend the attention directed at specific advisory approaches and training-based practices — for example, clinical-supervision commentaries abound. However, many teacher educators call for more extensive research in this area (Glickman & Bey, 1990; Knowles & Cole, 1996; Zeichner, 1992). This article explores the experiences of co-operating teachers.

## RESEARCH ON SCHOOL-BASED TEACHER EDUCATORS

In their meta-analysis of a broad spectrum of teacher-preparation programs across the world, Canadian researchers Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon (1998) highlight this shortcoming: "More attention needs to be directed at an in-depth study of how other players affect the landscape and process of learning to teach. . . . [S]upervising teachers are frequently missing in the research" (p. 169). The absence of in-depth research is surprising given the present climate of reform at the pre-service level with emphases on diverse practicum formats and school/university partnerships. For example, in Canada, large-scale teacher education reform has been undertaken at a number of institutions (Cole, 2000a, 2000b).

Of the research conducted in this area, training programs to facilitate the work of co-operating teachers and the effects of these programs constitute the largest body of work. Many variants are explored (and simultaneously promoted), with the overwhelming conclusion that training improves advisory practice (Guyton, 1989; Marvin & Beasley, 1996; Metcalf, 1991). Only two studies indicate that the enthusiasm for training programs might be unfounded. Killian and McIntyre (1986) and Miller, Hudson, and Lignugaris/Kraft (1990) found little change and recommended further research.

Much of the literature exploring the work of co-operating teachers generally reads as a litany of woes with co-operating teachers bearing the brunt of the apparently poor state of affairs within practicum contexts (Ben-Peretz & Rumney, 1991; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Koerner, 1992). These are useful insights but given current arguments that knowledge is personally constructed, socially mediated, and inherently situated (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Garrison, 1995; Hennessy, 1993; Wertsch, 1991), a surprising omission from virtually all these studies is any substantive consideration of the backgrounds of the advisors and their underlying assumptions as co-operating teachers.

Exceptions to this trend are few. Zeichner, Liston, Mahlios, and Gomez (1987) first raised the issue of studying the experiences of co-operating teachers. This inquiry has been taken up more recently by Williams (1995), Knowles and Cole (1996), and John (2002), who seek a more substantive understanding of how co-operating teachers construct and make sense of their work with student teachers. The most comprehensive examination of the work of co-operating teachers currently underway is located within two more broadly conceptualized and well-funded American research initiatives. The first is the Professional Development School (PDS) movement (Darling-Hammond, 1993). While not all PDS sites focus on

co-operating teachers, one example in which this is the case is the research of Pamela Grossman and her colleagues in the Puget Sound area of Washington State (Yerian & Grossman, 1993). Although researchers have not yet reached a conclusion on the effectiveness of these activities (Stallings, Knight, & Wiseman, 1995), PDS sites provide the potential for addressing the work of co-operating teachers in a more coherent and comprehensive manner than is found elsewhere. Moving beyond training and testing programs or critiques of co-operating-teacher practices, there is an emerging picture of co-operating teachers as teacher educators within these projects. Cognizant of the cost involved in setting up PDS sites and the current political and economic resistance to such large-scale innovations (Book, 1996), it is unlikely that we will see the expansion of current PDS sites, or the adoption of similar models elsewhere.

The second large-scale research initiative that contributes to our understanding of the work of co-operating teachers is the research of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's (AACTE), *Research About Teacher Education Project — Study Four (RATE IV)*. Participating U.S. institutions were selected from more than 700 ACCTE member institutions. RATE IV (1990) — Laboratory and Clinical Experiences — provides the first profile of American co-operating teachers. For example, RATE IV shows that co-operating teachers in America are predominately female (67%), white (96%), in their mid-40s, with an average of 16 years teaching experience. Many hold master's degrees (50%), a significant number hold more advanced graduate degrees (10%), and the majority believe that "observing teaching, receiving feedback, and practicing teaching strategies" are the key elements in learning to teach (Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996, p. 292).

These two research initiatives provide a much needed database upon which to construct professional-development opportunities for co-operating teachers that acknowledge who they are, what factors influence their work, and what sense they make of their work with student teachers. Some professional-development providers responding to the rich intellectual background of advisors are now focusing on inquiry-based as opposed to training-based programs to support and facilitate co-operating teachers.

The study that is reported in this article — known as the "Voice of School Advisors" study or VOSA — adds a Canadian dimension to these works by providing a system-wide analysis of 1300 co-operating teachers from British Columbia. This study builds on earlier practicum research in the B.C. context (Grimmett & Ratzlaff, 1986) but focuses specifically on co-operating teachers, seeking detailed demographic information, and

allowing for open-ended rather than fixed category responses. VOSA has two phases. The first, reported here, represents the construction of a co-operating-teacher profile. The second, which is currently underway and draws upon this profile, is an in-depth analysis of the work of five co-operating teachers.

## THE STUDY

The UBC teacher-education program shares many features common to other teacher-education institutions, although the size and scale may vary among institutions. Each year the UBC Teacher Education Office engages approximately 1300 classroom teachers to provide practicum placements and to evaluate student teachers. The teachers receive university tuition waivers for their work in the practicum. The practicum constitutes one third of UBC's Bachelor of Education program. In any one year, approximately 30 co-operating teachers voluntarily take a "Supervision of Instruction" course offered by the university (usually off-campus) and a further 150 teachers participate in a half-day workshop. Beyond what is gleaned from advisors during these interactions, the faculty knows remarkably little about co-operating teachers other than reports from UBC faculty-advisors who visit schools approximately once a week during the student-teacher practica. As such, system-wide decisions about work with these teachers, the professional-development opportunities provided for them, and collective attempts (school and university) to integrate on-campus instruction with field work for student teachers is severely constrained by this lack of knowledge. The purpose of VOSA is to construct an initial system-wide profile of UBC co-operating teachers to provide a much needed basis upon which to make decisions. While this is an ambitious undertaking that requires continual development over time, two broad questions, which have relevance to all teacher-education institutions, frame the study: What are the backgrounds of co-operating teachers? and What assumptions do co-operating teachers bring to their work with student teachers?

With the assistance of a graduate student, I distributed in January 2000 a survey constructed around these two questions to the entire 1999-2000 cohort of UBC co-operating teachers. The UBC Teacher Education Office provided the names and addresses of co-operating teachers, all of whom were public school teachers. Surveys were mailed to 1319 teachers: 487 elementary, 80 middle, and 752 secondary-school teachers. We provided stamped and addressed envelopes for the return of the surveys and a numbered double-blind envelope system to track survey returns and

ensure anonymity. In February, we mailed a second, full-survey package to these co-operating teachers who had not replied to the first mailing. Thirty-two surveys were returned unopened or incomplete (e.g., an incorrect address, an advisor's student teacher had been re-assigned to another teacher). Of the remaining 1287 surveys, we received 778 completed surveys—a 61% return rate. In the analysis of the data and construction of a system-wide profile, we employed descriptive statistics.

## RESULTS

### *Co-operating Teachers' Backgrounds*

#### *Geographical and School-Level Distribution*

To determine if the returned surveys were representative of the overall survey population, we conducted analyses of the geographical, school-level (elementary, middle, secondary), gender, and age distribution of the respondents. We found the returned surveys were representative of the geographical distribution of the survey population — the return rate from each of the 25 school districts involved was approximately 60%. One exception was a school district where the return rate was 72%. We attributed the high return rate for this district to a number of UBC teacher-education projects conducted in the district resulting in greater interest in the survey by teachers in that district. Our analysis also found that the return survey population was representative of the overall survey population in terms of school level (elementary, middle, and secondary schools) with only minor variations.

#### *Gender*

Similarly, the returned surveys were representative of the overall co-operating-teacher population with respect to gender: 43% male and 57% female. However, in a comparison with the overall B.C. teacher population (34% male and 66% female) this result revealed that males were overrepresented in the co-operating-teacher population. The underrepresentation of females is not clearly understood from the data collected. There are many possible explanations. For example, this difference may arise because females take leave more often than their male counterparts (e.g., family leave) resulting in more frequent entry to, exit from, and movement among schools, and the need to establish themselves in new classrooms and schools upon re-entry before accepting a student teacher.

### Age

We found it impossible to determine whether the ages of the co-operating teachers who returned the survey were representative of the total survey population (we had no way to determine the ages of the total co-operating teacher population). However, comparisons between the age statistics for the B.C. teacher population as a whole (Schaefer, 1999) and the returns from the survey population show the two to be consistent. Both statistics exhibit a bimodal characteristic. This is evident in Figure 1, which also provides a breakdown of male and female co-operating teacher participation at 5-year intervals.

The average age of male co-operating teachers was 44 and female co-operating teachers was 43. Females outnumbered males in all age categories by approximately 15%. Females were represented in larger proportions in the 25-29 category (by a margin of 22%), the 40-44 category (by a margin of 26%), and the 50-54 category (by a margin of 20%). Male co-operating teachers were overrepresented in terms of their proportion of the overall teaching population.

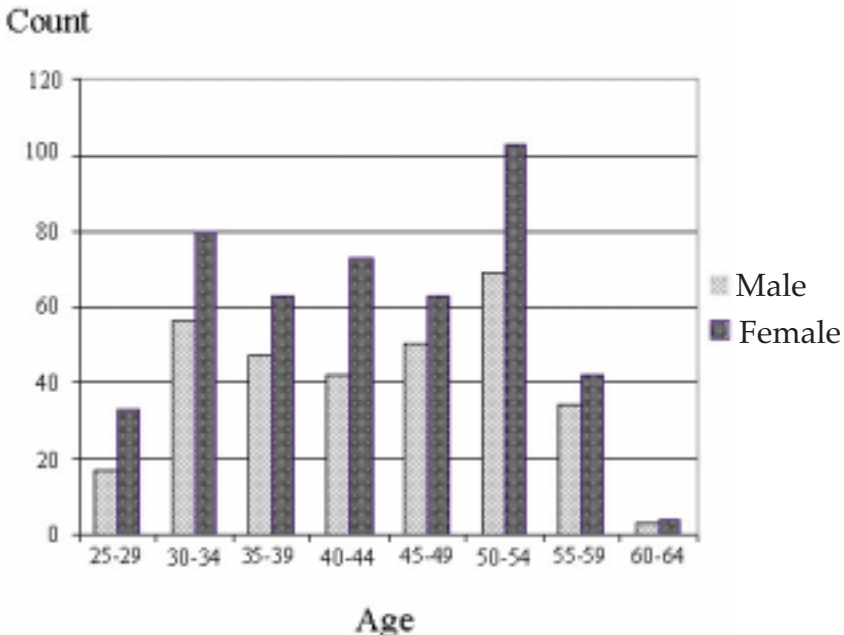


Figure 1. Age distribution by gender of co-operating teachers responding to the survey

This snapshot of co-operating teachers' ages is insufficient to determine more general trends in the age of co-operating teachers over time. It would be interesting to see if the bimodal characteristic of the co-operating-teacher population is tied to the overall teacher population or if the work of co-operating teachers tends to be an early-career and late-career phenomenon. Nonetheless, the current bimodal characteristic suggests that teacher educators might reconsider professional-development opportunities for co-operating teachers, with different emphases for the two distinctly different age groups: an introduction to advisory practices for younger teachers and a review and analysis of advisory practices for more experienced advisors.

Contrary to the expectation that females might be under represented during mid-career years (because of family leave, etc.), Figure 1 indicates that the percentage of females in the population of supervisors increases in comparison with male participation during the same period. This comparison does not dispel the earlier contention that more frequent school changes among female teachers act as a constraint to women taking on supervisory responsibilities. However, it does suggest that a range of factors, other than mid-career absence from and change between schools, is responsible for the underrepresentation of women in the co-operating-teacher population.

When we examined the age distribution of co-operating teachers, we noticed contrasting trends across districts. Districts with little or no increase in pupil enrolment and a very stable teacher population had a larger number of co-operating teachers in the older age categories. For example, one such district had 7% of its advisors in the 30-34 age bracket and 42% in the 50-54 age bracket. The opposite trend was revealed in a rapidly changing school district which had 30% of its co-operating teachers in the 30-34 age bracket and only 13% in the 50-55 age bracket. While it may not be surprising that districts with stable teacher-employment and pupil-enrolment patterns have a considerably older cadre of co-operating teachers compared with their more rapidly changing counterparts, what is new is that this issue has not been previously reported or explored in the literature. Rather, homogeneity across many advisor dimensions is assumed and appears to form the basis for most decisions about practicum issues such as professional-development opportunities and support structures for co-operating teachers. The results of this study suggest that this assumption is incorrect and raises important questions about how universities and school districts respond to the challenge of differentiated co-operating-teacher populations. These questions emerge: What is the nature of within-district mentoring opportunities for new supervisors in rapidly growing

districts? and What is the nature of the student-teacher experience in stable districts compared to such experience in districts with growing pupil enrolment and teacher employment?

### *Academic Qualifications*

All co-operating teachers in this survey had taught for at least two years before supervising a beginning teacher: the earliest teaching qualification was awarded in 1957 and the most recent in 1998. An analysis of academic qualifications shows that co-operating teachers were almost twice as likely to hold a master's degree as their non-supervising counterparts: 27% versus 15%. This particular data gives teacher educators reason to pause in the face of the claim that co-operating teachers are ill-prepared to work with student teachers (Ben-Peretz & Rumney, 1991; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Koerner, 1992). While one must be cautious in assuming that an advanced degree contributes to better supervisory practice, at the very least teachers who hold an advanced degree indicate a commitment to professional and intellectual development, highly desirable attributes for those working with beginning teachers.

Further analysis shows that 36% of male and 23% of female co-operating teachers held advanced degrees. Of the many possible explanations for this difference, one put forward in the literature is that universities have long represented values and modes of inquiry that do not lend themselves readily to participation by females (Talbert, 2000). In particular, there are numerous critiques of academia as perpetuating white male values to the exclusion of other value systems (the use of the term *master's degree* being one such example). This may explain, in part, the lower participation rates in academia if female teachers find alternative outlets for intellectual and creative expression: outlets for which the status of an advanced degree is secondary to the pursuit of the activity itself. Another possible explanation for the difference is that women take maternity or family leave, while males pursue an advanced degree. Whatever the explanation, it is curious that males were overrepresented in the supervisory population and pursued advanced degrees in greater numbers than did females.

Finally, the survey revealed that many more middle-level and secondary-level co-operating teachers held a master's degree than did their elementary-level counterparts: 36%, 32%, and 19% respectively. Because the academic qualification profile of co-operating teachers was skewed in favour of the more senior grades, it raises this question: Should there be greater emphasis on practicum-related professional development at the elementary-school level than at the middle- and secondary-school levels?



*Preparation for Supervision*

Teachers in the study were asked to indicate which of the following five options captured the nature of the preparation undertaken for their work as co-operating teachers: university courses, professional-development workshops, in-school meetings with other co-operating teachers, other activities, or no professional development at all (Table 1).

TABLE 1

*Professional-development activities of co-operating teachers*

Professional Preparation Activities of Co-operating Teachers	Percent
Undertaken One Activity Only:	
Workshop(s) only	6
University course(s) only	3
In-school meeting(s) only	28
Undertaken Two Activities Only:	
Workshop(s) and university course(s) only	7
Workshop(s) and in-school meeting(s) only	22
University course(s) and in-school meeting(s) only	3
Undertaken All Three Activities:	
Workshop(s), university course(s) and in-school meetings	16
Other Activities Undertaken	2
No Activities Undertaken	13
Total	100

As noted earlier, the literature tends to universally condemn co-operating teachers for their lack of practicum-related preparation (Dart & Drake, 1993; Guyton, 1989). The profile emerging from the analysis presented in Table 1 contradicts this assertion. UBC co-operating teachers are surprisingly well prepared. Particularly striking is the fact that approximately 47% of the respondents indicated they had participated in a formal workshop or a course on supervisory practice — the most substantive forms of preparation currently available.

Seventy percent of UBC co-operating teachers had attended on-site meetings with their fellow supervisors. While such meetings were usually informal in nature, and often more administrative than substantive, they

represented an important first step in engaging co-operating teachers in conversations about supervisory practices. Fourteen percent of co-operating teachers indicated that they had not participated in any form of professional development to facilitate their work with student teachers. When the professional-development activities are split by school level, elementary-level and middle-level teachers are more likely to undertake some form of professional development compared with their secondary-level counterparts (10% higher participation rate in university courses, workshops, and in-school meetings). These data allay concern raised in the previous section and indicate increased professional-development opportunities other than advanced degrees occur at the elementary level.

In short, these two results contradict the common portrayal of co-operating teachers, both in the teacher-education literature and from local anecdotal information. These portrayals apparently focus on a small group of co-operating teachers who are unprepared (recall that those with no preparation represented only 14% of the 1999-2000 cohort) to the exclusion of the majority who are more prepared. Such portrayals in which the focus quickly turns to challenges and leaves little room to celebrate successes is undeserved, certainly in the B.C. context, and may well be unproductive in thinking about supervisory practices. The VOSA results suggest institutions responsible for teacher education look more closely at their supervisory populations with a view to building upon the expertise that already exists. For example, in the UBC context, the faculty offers an introductory course in supervision, but perhaps the institution could offer intermediate or advanced courses in teacher education, commensurate with the level of expertise revealed by this study. As such, the institution would be honouring the knowledge and experience already acquired and also advancing the field of teacher education within current school/university partnerships. Elsewhere, we have argued (Clarke & Reicken, 2001) for the importance of promoting local teacher-educator associations, which regard teacher education not only as a serious component of regular teaching practice but an important responsibility requiring continuing professional development and reflection on supervisory practices. These directions are significant shifts, which are supported by the VOSA profile.

### *Supervision Experience*

The 778 co-operating teachers who returned the survey had supervised a total of 4616 student teachers. One hundred twenty-eight teachers (17%) had supervised one student teacher. An even number of teachers supervised two, three, or four student teachers (13% in each category).

The remaining 44% of teachers were spread across the other categories — one advisor who obtained her teaching qualification in the late 1950s had supervised 26 student teachers, the most for any advisor.

Of the 4614 student teachers supervised, 257 co-operating teachers (25% of the advisor population) had failed a student teacher — arguably one of the most challenging dimensions of the co-operating-teacher's role. Male and female co-operating teachers failed similar numbers of student teachers. It is commonly believed that co-operating teachers are much less experienced than teacher-educators in dealing with failing students. The VOSA profile highlights the contribution that system-wide analyses provide and the importance, alluded to at the beginning of this article, of constructing profiles to inform local and anecdotal information. In short, the supervisory population has a depth of experience that is rarely recognized.

The analysis of supervision experience brought to light another surprise. Co-operating teachers with no professional development were much less likely to fail a student teacher than were their more professionally prepared counterparts. Only 17% of this group had failed a student teacher versus 25% for total co-operating-teacher group. This observation holds for all co-operating teachers regardless of age. A similar trend is present with those who have had very little professional development (e.g., only in-school meetings). Using the VOSA results, that the more professionally prepared co-operating teachers are able to discriminate between strong or poor student teachers, I suggest that a number of student teachers have gained entry to the profession who might not have done so under the guidance of more professionally prepared co-operating teachers. While this number represents a relatively small percentage of teachers, it does raise the question about the wisdom of having teachers with little or no preparation for their work as co-operating teachers acting as gatekeepers to the profession.

### *Co-operating Teachers' Assumptions*

#### *Key Issues Conveyed to Student Teachers*

When the co-operating teachers ranked the three most important ideas they convey to student teachers, they indicated that preparation,<sup>2</sup> classroom management, relationship with children, and flexibility were the most important, with preparation being the single most important idea across all school levels. The gender of respondents made no difference in the ranking of the items. Other attributes that were distinctive within school

levels were “fun and enjoyment” at the elementary level, the importance of “being yourself” at the middle level, and “teaching strategies” at the secondary level.

Co-operating teachers who had failed a student placed even greater emphasis on preparation. This outcome supports the contention that co-operating teachers perceive many attributes of good classroom practice as secondary to the issue of preparation. In light of this finding, it would be interesting to review teacher-education programs and courses to determine how prominently preparation figures. In the current climate of compressed one-year programs and with individual subject-areas competing for instructional time, global constructs such as preparation or ethical practice struggle to gain a significant foothold in teacher-education curriculum. Is this a general condition and how well do universities communicate these programmatic constraints to their partners in the field?

### *Qualifications for Becoming a Co-operating Teacher*

The province of British Columbia has no formal requirements for teachers who wish to become UBC co-operating teachers. When asked if co-operating teachers should meet some form of requirement, 82% of the participants responded in the affirmative, with little difference in responses between the male or female co-operating teachers, or across school levels.

When I asked about the nature of qualifications for co-operating teachers, I was able to group 70% of the responses into four distinct categories. Overwhelmingly, the co-operating teachers indicated that teaching experience was the first requirement. The importance of having the right personality for working with student teachers was second. The third criterion was excellence in teaching. Finally, co-operating teachers insisted that those who worked with student teachers should be prepared to work hard in their role as co-operating teacher (as opposed to viewing the role of co-operating teacher as an opportunity for a rest or break from teaching).

At the current time, the only formal requirements for becoming a UBC co-operating teacher are that the teacher has a current teaching certificate, is responsible for a classroom of pupils (teacher librarians and similar specialists are not permitted to supervise student teachers on practicum), and volunteers for the task. These three criteria, while clearly important, fall well short of the requirements that the 1999-2000 cohort of co-operating teachers believe to be essential for those assuming the responsibilities of a co-operating teacher. The issue of qualifications is closely tied to the issue of co-operating teacher selection. By and large, the latter determines the former — that is, the process by which co-operating teachers are selected

circumscribes the requirements for role. UBC co-operating teachers self-select and therefore the requirements associated with self-selection govern the process — essentially volunteerism (the first two characteristics, a certificate and an enrolling class, describe the majority of the teacher population and therefore make little difference under this selection process).

### *Selection of Co-operating Teachers*

Survey responses from one third of co-operating teachers indicated that the school principal should be the sole arbiter in selecting co-operating teachers. One quarter of the teachers said that school-based teams should be solely responsible. In a surprising result, one tenth of teachers felt that the university should be solely responsible for this task. The remaining responses involved a combination of participants in the selection process (e.g., the principal and the university).

The choice for principal input into the selection process rose to 51% when all responses involving the principal were combined. When all responses involving school-based teams were combined, 37% of the teachers saw a role for such teams in selecting co-operating teachers. Finally, 23% of co-operating teachers saw a role for the university when all the responses that involved the university were combined. When broken down by school level, the only noticeable difference was in the “principal only” category where elementary-level and middle-level teachers favoured principal selection more than did their secondary-level counterparts. In short, co-operating teachers resoundingly indicated the need for a selection process that moves beyond volunteerism.

At the moment, there is no explicit role for any of the suggested individuals (e.g., the principal), groups, or a combination of these in the selection of UBC co-operating teachers. The B.C. Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) indicates it would like to establish guidelines for co-operating-teacher selection (Recommendation 25 - BCTF, 1991) but has yet to act on that recommendation. However, a recent advisory notice from the BCTF (2002) provides the first substantive attempt by teachers to address this issue in the B.C. context.

The locus for the selection process for co-operating teachers raises jurisdictional issues. Faculties of Education are reluctant to become immersed in this dynamic. For example, UBC holds that the selection of co-operating teachers falls within the jurisdiction of the teaching profession—as it is constituted in schools—and is not a university responsibility (despite an indication in this study that 23% of school teachers seek university involvement). Following this logic, the university also

argues that the selection of faculty supervisors is solely a university responsibility.

Although different players (administrative officers in schools and university personnel) informally influence the outcome of supervisor selection, this process is neither explicit nor readily available for scrutiny or examination. This situation raises the question: Is the current process reasonable, given the importance of the task for which teachers are being selected? In light of the information available from the survey, sufficient grounds exist for teacher federations, principal and vice-principal associations, and universities to collaboratively address co-operating-teacher selection to make the process more transparent to the participants and more responsible to the profession as a whole.

If factors other than volunteerism are to become a part of the selection process, it is incumbent upon the various players to consider the following features of co-operating teaching as a professional practice: a fair and equitable application process, a means by which teachers are able to develop necessary qualifications, due process in the event of conflict, and feedback on one's practice.

#### *Feedback to Co-operating Teachers*

Feedback on one's practice is an important, even essential element of professional work. Under present practicum arrangements, UBC co-operating teachers do not receive feedback on their work with student teachers. Yet 85% of co-operating teachers desired feedback. Four percent responded that they did not want any feedback, and 11% were non-committal, citing, for example, the need for clarification on the feedback process before making a final decision on this issue. The overwhelming number of co-operating teachers who requested some form of feedback comes as a surprise because this desire has not surfaced in any substantive way in the literature on co-operating teachers or the UBC teacher-education context.

When questioned about the method for providing feedback, 26% requested a survey response from their student teachers, 21% asked for a post-practicum meeting with the three members of the practicum triad (student teacher, co-operating teacher, and faculty advisor), and 18% called for a meeting between the co-operating teacher and faculty-advisor. The VOSA results demonstrate that this neglected dimension of teacher education requires urgent attention.

In an interesting cross-analysis of responses, teachers who indicated that there should be no requirements for those wishing to become co-

operating teachers (7% of the survey population) were three times as likely not to want any feedback on their supervisory practice and were twice as likely not to have undertaken any professional development for their work as co-operating teachers compared with their counterparts. Again, this calls into question the small proportion of supervisors for whom their perception of being a co-operating teacher seems at odds with being a member of a profession: acknowledgement of minimum standards, the importance of reflecting on practice, and a commitment to life-long learning.

## DISCUSSION

### *VOSA: From Practicum Supervisor to Teacher Educator*

The Voice of School Advisor (VOSA) study provides rich data of UBC's school-based partners in teacher education. The system-wide profile, rendered above, operates at two levels: the first, as a snapshot of co-operating-teacher characteristics, and second, as a more nuanced portrayal of teacher perspectives. Both reflect a shift in the emphasis of the role of co-operating teacher from practicum supervisor to teacher educator. This shift underlines a professional practice dimension that teachers perceive in their work with student teachers.

Aspects of the VOSA profile parallel general trends reported in the literature: for example, the co-operating-teacher population is predominately female, the average age is in the mid-40s, and a significant number hold advanced degrees. However, moving beyond general trends, the VOSA profile pinpoints some key characteristics: first, while more females than males take on the role of co-operating teacher, males are over-represented in relation to their overall numbers in the general teaching population. Another surprise is the bimodal characteristic of the current VOSA population and its implication for the types of support provided for supervisors. A further surprise is the overall number of supervisors who have failed a student teacher, revealing a depth of experience that has not been recognized in the literature to this point. The VOSA profile also reveals a differentiated co-operating teacher population in terms of overall age with respect to the stability of the districts in which the student teachers undertake their practica. Each of these features demands that all stakeholders review their current practices and ways of interacting with co-operating teachers. While some previously held beliefs are shown to be valid, the VOSA analysis demonstrates a number of others to be at variance with existing conceptions of co-operating teachers.

Moving from the characteristics of the co-operating-teacher population to the ways in which co-operating teachers perceive their work, the VOSA data provide evidence to reassess current thinking about the field of teacher education. For example, contrary to the suggestion that co-operating teachers tend to focus on the technical dimensions of teaching to the detriment of the pedagogical dimensions (Doyle, 1990; Garman, 1990), the VOSA results show the co-operating teachers' primary emphasis is on preparation, which they consider as the important pedagogical dimension of teaching practice. Pushing current conceptions of how co-operating teachers perceive their work further, the VOSA co-operating teachers overwhelmingly argued for clear prerequisites (82%), selection procedures (89%), and feedback processes (85%) for those who work with student teachers. While these issues are quietly mooted in the B.C. context (British Columbia College of Teachers, 1997; Clarke, 1996) and even in the wider teacher-education community (Dart & Drake, 1993; Morine-Dershimer & Leighfield, 1995), they are rarely voiced as strongly as was evident in this study. If teacher education is a form of professional practice — a specialized field of study with particular entry requirements (Hoyle, 1995), then the teachers in this study call for the professionalization of their work from that of practicum supervisor (overseeing practice) to school-based teacher educator (providing a significant educative dimension). This outcome, coupled with the surprisingly high level of professional development already undertaken by many co-operating teachers, suggests that this shift is appropriate and overdue.

The VOSA results, while specific to B.C., provide important comparative data for teacher-education programs with similar institutional and programmatic contexts, be they national or international. The number of VOSA outcomes which previously have not appeared in the literature raises questions about the ways in which common beliefs, unchecked overtime, may be at considerable variance with current circumstances. One concern is that, without system-wide data, important decisions such as the nature and substance of professional-development opportunities provided for co-operating teachers are based on outdated or potentially erroneous local and anecdotal information. Perhaps even more worrisome is the neglect that occurs in the absence of such information: for example, the co-operating teachers' expressed desire to professionalize school-based teacher education. As argued elsewhere (Clarke & Reicken, 2001), if teacher education is truly to become a significant feature of the daily work of classroom teachers — co-operating teachers as school-based



teacher educators — then concerted and continuous efforts are necessary to document and demonstrate the nature and substance of that work. The VOSA study is a response to this imperative.

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#### NOTES

- 1 In other contexts co-operating teachers are known as school-advisors (the name used at UBC), school associates, practicum supervisors, or sponsor teachers.
- 2 Preparation refers to the organization of lesson plans and instructional materials for class.

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