Practice Teaching: A Comment and a Partial Solution*

Norma I. Mickelson
university of victoria

In his article, Clifton (1979) argues that practice teaching is a marginal situation in which student teachers do not fill roles which allow them adequately to legitimate their behavior. Furthermore, he contends, student teachers tend to feel like they are imposters, mainly because they do not have authority in the school and they do not know the rituals in the classroom. Thus the established goals of practice teaching are negated. According to Clifton, the solution is to ensure that practice teaching is of longer duration than at present, and is integrated in better ways with school situations (Clifton & Covert, 1977). In order to achieve this integration, however, Clifton provides a quantitative solution to a qualitative problem — practica should begin when schools first commence in the autumn and continue throughout the year. The only specific suggestion given, in addition to longer periods of school experience in order to improve the situation, is to structure the experience so that students are seen to hold official positions in the school and are recognized as being competent by both co-operating teachers and pupils — a solution which may be very difficult to achieve, of course, if the student turns out to be less than competent!

Church and Regan (1979) also argue the need for a new approach to teacher education stating that extended internships should become the heart of teacher preparation programs. They feel that modelling would then form one of the basic tenets of teacher education programs and that extended internships, under the guidance of selected professionals, would ensure the welding of theory into practice. Just what theory and what kinds of practice are not stated. There is no question, however, that such extended internships would satisfy the notion of longer and possibly more integrated practica, and would provide the kind of reality therapy advocated both by Clifton and by Church and Regan.

The idea that student teaching should be lengthened and centred in the reality of the school situation is currently in vogue, but it is a simplistic solution to better teacher education and thus is sadly deficient. It is my contention that more is not necessarily better and that a longer practicum

*This comment is made on a previously published article by Rodney J. Clifton, "Practice Teaching: Survival in a Marginal Situation," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1979, *4*(3), 60-74.

may, in reality, be worse than its shorter counterpart. For one reason, too many student teachers are placed in classrooms where they observe outmoded models of instruction which cannot be justified by even a cursory knowledge of basic learning principles. Probably, in fact, the shorter the practicum in these situations, the better! As Mickelson (in press) has noted, poor instructional models are often particularly evident in the field of reading. In class after class, one can observe practices such as "reading around the circle," phonics drills being taught in isolation as ends in themselves, and children plodding through countless workbook exercises. One does not have to be a sophisticated observer in such classes to detect the boredom of pupils as they plod through "readers" answering factual comprehension questions for stories many of them could have read with understanding before the so-called reading lesson began. To place student teachers in such classrooms for extended periods of time would do little more than reinforce the status quo — modelling would indeed be an important concern — and would result in a situation which would not only negate the goals of student teaching but, in a larger context, the whole purpose of education. If, in the education of teachers, a longer practicum is advocated in preservice education, the *quality* of the experience must be such that the teaching models to which the student teachers are exposed are worth emulating — for without question they will be copied. Rather than simply placing students in schools for extended periods of time as one solution to better teacher training, faculties of education must attempt to develop models of teacher education which will introduce the student to optimal classroom situations and which will improve already existing practices. In order to do this they must incorporate co-operative, inservice programs into their teacher preparation programs, and must ensure that all concerned — faculty members, sponsor teachers, and student teachers — are involved in the planning and implementation of the program. Only as the classroom context itself is updated and improved can appropriate reality situations be provided which will give the student teacher and the faculty member appropriate learning models for the future.

In dealing with the problems enunciated by Clifton, but in recognizing that a longer practicum is only one facet of a possible solution, the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria has implemented two internship programs (Note 1). The development of these programs is a continuing process by which changes are made when and as they are deemed necessary by all concerned.

The basic principles of the internship programs are summarized as follows:

— Integration of theory and practice are essential elements.

— The programs are a co-operative effort of everyone involved. This includes development, implementation, and financing.

— Liaison between the university and the school district is active and effective in bringing about changes where these are considered appropriate by all concerned.

— Because the programs operate in a reality context, the changing nature of teaching and expectations for teachers are able to be continually revised.

— The programs are centred in the local school districts and are housed in the schools.

— The selection of candidates is a joint endeavor among all participating groups.

— Both academic and practical excellence is maintained.

— The development of supervisory skills is actively undertaken as a cornerstone of the programs.

— Integration of preservice and inservice education occurs.

— Program evaluation forms an integral part of the yearly plan for each program.

In addition to focusing on the qualitative aspects of the programs, two different time sequences are used for the extended practicum. In one of these programs, students spend eight months (September through April) in the schools. In the other, students spend one half of every day in the classroom for the entire school year. The other half day is spent taking their required university courses which are taught by university instructors who travel to the schools. In both programs, students are considered an integral part of the schools — they attend all staff meetings, for example, do their share of supervision, and generally participate in all school activities. In these programs, at the commencement of the school year instructional teams are established, each team consisting of a faculty member, the student teacher, and the classroom teacher. In addition, liaison teams are formed which involve local trusteees working together with university faculty members and classroom teachers. Inservice is integrated into the programs so that the expectations of the student teacher, the classroom teacher, the faculty member, and the trustees are congruent. Clinical supervision and evaluation form an integral part of the programs and lead to various program modifications which include both instructional strategies and the involvement of the students in the life of the school.

To date, the programs have received strong endorsement from district personnel and from trustees. The interns themselves agree that the programs provide a good understanding of what it is like to be a teacher. In the one program, in fact, 90% of the students agreed that they had become a part of the school community and that they were accepted by the staff of the school. Furthermore, district personnel noted that the presence of interns provided opportunities to try new ideas and teaching tech-

niques, and that university personnel enhanced their own professional development and educational awareness.

The foregoing provides only a brief description of two programs which have been developed, not only to extend the practicum in teacher education programs, but to improve the quality of the classroom experiences. Unless the quality of the practicum takes precedence over the quantity issue, the success of teacher education programs in the future is doomed to the same status that it enjoys in the present. In fact, if quantity is given precedence over quality, and if the practicum is extended without due care being given to the nature and type of the classroom experiences to be encountered by student teachers, we may find that the situation will get worse instead of better.

REFERENCE NOTE

[1] Detailed information is available for both programs and will be provided on request.

REFERENCES

Church, J., & Regan, R. The need for a new teacher education program. *CEA Newsletter*, March 1979, p. 3.

Clifton, R. A. Practice teaching: Survival in a marginal situation. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1979, *4*(3), 60-74.

Clifton, R. A., & Covert, J. R. The effects of an experimental program on the motivation and self-concept of student teachers. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1977, *2*, 23-32.

Mickelson, N. I. The need for a new teacher education program: A comment. *CEA Newsletter*, in press.

Norma I. Mickelson is a Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia v8w 2y2.