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To cite this article: Sandra R. Stewart , Dorothy Baker & Colla J. Macdonald (1994) One Classroom Teacher's Personal Narrative of Collaborative Research on the Teaching Practicum, Educational Action Research, 2:3, 339-346, DOI: [10.1080/0965079940020303](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079940020303)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079940020303>



Published online: 11 Aug 2006.



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## One Classroom Teacher's Personal Narrative of Collaborative Research on the Teaching Practicum\*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper describes one classroom teacher's personal account of collaborative research on the teaching practicum involving a professor and two associate teachers. The teacher's narrative report describes how she became involved in the research project, various research procedures that took place during the project, and how the entire experience affected her personal and professional life. Data from surveys, journals, focus-group discussions, observation notes and individual interviews reveal that associate teachers find the teaching practicum both a beneficial and a stressful experience. By examining these issues, we are better able to understand the nature of the socialization process which occurs during the teaching practicum. By evaluating the research process from an individual narrative perspective, we hope to bring a teacher's voice to the literature, and discover the benefits of teacher research in the classroom.

I remember sitting on the green couch in the staff room with Jane, a professor from the University of Ottawa. She wants to discuss placing another student teacher in my classroom. She is friendly and bright – a happy new mother ready to share her experiences. And me? Overburdened and tired – I feel like I am a bad mother, a bad teacher, and a bad wife. I don't know if I have anything to offer a student teacher coming into my classroom.

Jane is concerned and puts aside her own stories to listen to mine. I feel the tightness in my chest and tears behind my eyes. I have not even

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\* This article is jointly authored, but Sandra Stewart is represented in the text as the narrator ('I'), Dorothy Baker by the pseudonym 'Kathy', and 'Jane' represents Colla J. MacDonald.

admitted this struggle to juggle all of my 'simultaneous demands' to myself I am bone weary. My celebration of teaching and parenting are lost. I try to tell Jane of the strenuous demands that my Master's course has placed on me. The length of the weekly readings. The weekly essays. My own personal demand for quality work. I have allowed this course to intrude on all aspects of my life. Every extra moment is given to reading and writing. Jane listens sympathetically and then asks if I would like to take a course where I could have a say in the workload? Not only set the research agenda and help to conduct it, but take an active part in each stage. Have my voice as a classroom teacher heard. It sounds too good an idea to be real. Think about it she says.

Jane has planted a small seed of hope within me. Until her visit I had been prepared to take a break from my studies – a health break to recuperate and regenerate. Mentally I was beating myself up about the decision because it would mean pushing the completion of my degree that much farther into the future.

Jane leaves an article for me to read and I share it with my teaching colleague, Kathy, who is also working on her Master's degree. Kathy and I read about the need for more collaborative research between faculties of education and school boards. The need to bridge the gap between educational theory and educational practice. And the urgency to not only add the classroom teacher's voice to the research but to encourage the classroom teacher to "create new knowledge" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). I feel new intellectual energy and excitement building. I see a place where my knowledge and questions and experience can have some value. I read about the "potential of teacher research to help in the reform of schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). I see the urgency for reform all around me but until now, I had no forum to pose my queries or demonstrate my support for change. I read about "action research" and schools as "centres of inquiry", of teachers as "reflective practitioners" and teacher as "transformative intellectual". It is powerful. I feel full and electric. I tell Jane, "Kathy and I want to do this. How do we begin?"

Kathy, Jane, and I, as collaborative researchers, begin with what we know. As teachers, Kathy and I know about having a student teacher in our classroom. As a faculty advisor Jane has a different perspective. Using these shared experiences as a starting point, Kathy, Jane, and I decide to meet basic objectives through our collaborative work.

Kathy, Jane, and I decide to research the teaching practicum with which we were all involved. The teacher education program is an eight-month after-degree course – all candidates have a minimum of one previous degree. It involves on-campus classes taught by professors and a total of four weeks of non-evaluated teaching practicums and an additional eight weeks of evaluated practicums. Each student teacher must spend half of this time in a primary classroom and the other half in a junior classroom. In this way, a student teacher may spend a minimum of two weeks and a maximum of six weeks with any one associate teacher. The student teachers are placed in the schools by a university professor who acts as a liaison

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person visiting, observing, and advising the student teacher during the practicum. Evaluating the student teacher is solely the responsibility of the associate teacher.

The three of us map out a workable means of collaborating. One that will allow Kathy and I the needed flexibility to continue to meet the demands of being classroom teachers, parents, and students in addition to allowing us to bring our own voices to the research. Through this flexible and collaborative approach Kathy, Jane, and I want to investigate what classroom teachers identify as the positive and negative aspects of sharing their classrooms with student teachers during a teaching practicum. Finally, we want to determine what classroom teachers see as stressful about the teaching practicum and what they do to deal with this stress. We flesh out our ideas and questions in two after-school meetings in my classroom. This is a change! A university professor coming to my territory to listen to my ideas!

Kathy, Jane, and I prepare a proposal for the Department of Graduate Studies, the University Ethics Committee, the School Board Ethics Committee, and for the Canadian Association for Teacher Educators National Conference in June 1993. As this is not a typical university course, the university asks questions. Jane has a meeting with Admissions, and Kathy and I wait for the verdict. Is it possible for us to receive a university credit for conducting classroom-based research on issues that are of interest to us and which influence our practice? The School Board Ethics Committee expresses concern about Kathy and my positions with our staff. Will our relationships with our colleagues be jeopardized?

In December the university agrees to accept our proposal. I will work from my own classroom. I will determine my own schedule and my own commitment. I feel a growing energy, intellectual interest, and connection. The demoralizing fatigue and depression of November have disappeared. The School Board agrees to the research confident that the safeguards we have imposed in our proposal and the consent forms will not negatively affect our relationships with our colleagues. Our colleagues on staff are intrigued, interested, and supportive of our research initiatives.

In January 1993 Kathy, Jane, and I meet at school and map out our agenda. Kathy and I will act as both participants and researchers for this undertaking. Kathy and I also invite three of our colleagues on staff who regularly act as associate teachers to participate in the research. Each of the three teachers is approached and Kathy and I carefully explain our research objectives, our methodology, and advise them of their responsibilities as participants. Kathy and I advise our colleagues that participating would involve answering a short survey, taking part in a focus-group interview, participating in an individual interview, and observational visits during the teaching practicum. In addition, Kathy and I decide to keep personal journals during each practicum session to document our experiences and express our concerns. We agree to share our journals with each other and Jane.

Each teacher is asked to sign a consent form establishing their participation in the study and their recognition of the safeguards designed to ensure confidentiality. Each teacher appears pleased to be asked to participate. Each expresses ideas about the research and feels happy to be asked an opinion. Each activity is new to me and I am gaining invaluable skills that I can use in the future when I work on my own research.

Kathy and I organize weekend time to visit the university library. We want to do an ERIC search and investigate other research that delves into the classroom teacher's role in the teaching practicum. Jane provides us with an overflowing box of articles that she used for previous research on the teaching practicum. These articles provide a working background for the research. ERIC has no descriptors for our role. 'Associate teacher' is not recognized. The classroom teacher emerges as a shadowy figure in the life of the student teacher in the classroom. A 'cooperating teacher' hovering in the background (Noffle, 1988). My own experience with student teachers tells me that I am seminal to their experience. Jane's research with student teachers suggests that the relationship created by student teacher and associate teacher is crucial to the success or failure of the student teacher experience (MacDonald, 1993). This relationship is also the greatest cause of student teacher stress. Why then, is the classroom teacher overlooked in the research?

In January Kathy, Jane, and I meet to review what we know and to establish our questions for the survey. I have never designed a survey, and it is an invigorating session of colleagues sharing ideas and questions back and forth. We work to keep the questions open-ended and try to build a picture of the associate teacher's perspective of the teaching practicum. The questions are intended to help each participant identify the negative and the positive aspects of having a student teacher in the classroom. The survey is completed by the five teachers involved.

A week later, Kathy and I meet with Jane at her home to study the completed surveys and to collate the data we have gathered. It is rich and varied. After poring over the surveys and determining the overriding themes, together, the three of us set the questions for our focus-group interview to be held in March. Jane informs us that our proposal has been accepted by the Canadian Association for Teacher Educator's National Conference in June at Carleton University. This gives our work an additional focus. The knowledge causes me to pause and reflect. I try to picture myself standing before a room of academics presenting research - my research! It is a new and unsettling scenario.

I read Richard Krueger's (1988) book on focus-groups. I have never been a member of a focus-group and have only a vague notion about their dynamics. Krueger raises the fact that the position of the moderator can jeopardize results. Will Jane's position as a university professor constrain my colleagues' voices? I discuss these concerns with Kathy and Jane. We decide to meet with the teachers informally and pose these very issues.

Kathy and I organize a lunch meeting with the three other teachers. Jane is not present. We ask them to be frank about their feelings and they

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all agree that they are comfortable with the arrangement set for the focus-group interview. In fact, they are emphatic that they want Jane present to hear their concerns. Kathy and I arrange a mutually acceptable date for the focus-group.

Kathy and I are reading and writing our journals to each other. At first I feel hesitant to express my experiences to her but as we move into the writing I feel more willing to be honest and direct. It is empowering to feel her support. It is empowering to be able to offer support in return. This strengthens our relationship within our small school community. We speak intimately to each other on paper breaking down the usual solitary isolation of the teacher and strengthening and expanding an already existing professional friendship.

The setting for the focus-group interview is the school library because it is familiar and convenient for the participating teachers. The purpose of the interview is to get information about the associate teachers' understanding of events, relationships, and ideas about the practicum experience. It also gives us an opportunity to follow-up on issues which arose in the survey. The six of us ease into chairs around a table and Jane reminds us of our pseudonyms and the rules of a focus-group interview. There is so much energy in the room. Each teacher is eager to express ideas and opinions and ask questions. Heads nod fervently when a familiar feeling is expressed. Voices interject impatiently. Everyone is animated and pumped with intellectual energy. Five classroom teachers with experiences to share and a university professor listening uncritically.

I want to share my frustrations and fears and failures with my colleagues and I am suddenly aware that I am not alone. I share this journey with them. Though I am often alone in my classroom, I am not alone in my experience, my frustrations, and my victories. I discover how varied and yet similar we are in our ideas and approaches to student teachers.

The focus-group lasts two hours. Kathy, Jane, and I have designed the questions to allow all teachers to interact with each other as well as Jane. We hope to follow-up on issues that were raised in the survey and encourage each teacher to share their individual perceptions of the teaching practicum. We want to investigate: How do teachers define roles during the practicum?; What do teachers expect of the university?; The faculty advisor?; The student teacher?; How much does personality influence the success of the associate teacher/student teacher relationship?; What are the benefits of having a student teacher in the classroom?; The drawbacks?; The stresses? The tape-recorder captures our disjointed zeal. Finally Jane calls for last comments and the tape-recorder is clicked off. So this is a focus-group! I am weary.

Kathy, Jane, and I meet for a Sunday afternoon session at Jane's house at the end of March. The transcripts from the focus-group interview sit in three large piles on the kitchen table. We begin looking for themes, trends, questions, and concerns that need addressing. I read aloud and bold significant sections with a highlighter pen while Kathy takes notes and Jane interjects as ideas emerge.

Working with what we have discovered through the survey and the focus-group discussion, Kathy, Jane, and I are able to determine the direction for the individual interviews. We develop five questions to investigate how the associate teacher deals with the stress of the teaching practicum, how personality affects evaluation, and the role the classroom teacher would like to see of the faculty advisor. Together the three of us organize times for individual interviews. Jane interviews Kathy and I before we begin to interview our colleagues at school. Kathy, Jane, and I transcribe the tapes for analysis.

With the data collection complete Kathy, Jane, and I analyze surveys, interview transcripts, observation notes, and journal writings to identify emerging conceptual categories. We read and reread data repeatedly to ensure that their intent is understood. Searching for patterns, themes, similarities, and differences we establish categories to assist with understanding and summarizing teachers' perspectives on the teaching practicum.

Analysis of the data suggests that having a student teacher in the classroom is both beneficial and stressful for the associate teacher. Classroom teachers report in the survey, the focus-group interview and in journals that they enjoy and welcome the energy and enthusiasm that student teachers bring to their classroom. As well, classroom teachers said they appreciate the new ideas and methods that student teachers share. Repeatedly, classroom teachers report that they experience personal growth during the teaching practicum through the questions asked by the student teacher concerning the teacher's classroom practice. Finally, teachers said that having a student teacher interacting in their classroom provides a unique opportunity for them to observe their children.

Kathy, Jane, and I also discover the drawbacks of having a student teacher in the classroom. These drawbacks are also identified by teachers as the stresses of having student teachers during the teaching practicum. Time emerged as a drawback of having a student teacher. Teachers reported in the focus-group interview and their journals that it takes a great deal of time to discuss issues and answer questions, and the student teacher also encroaches on personal time. I write in my journal, "Those long conversations mean time taken away from other equally important parts of the school day. They also mean no moments of solace. I need moments alone with myself to get centered and revive".

It is also a drawback and stressful to give over the classroom to the student teacher and allow her the freedom to experiment. I describe this giving over of power in my journal as "emotional undressing ... the psychological giving over of my space. We can share but the classroom is no longer my classroom. I feel a little like an intruder in my own classroom".

Evaluation is also perceived by teachers as a drawback of having a student teacher and a cause of stress. Teachers say that when student teachers change established routines that it often creates stress. It takes time and energy to re-establish routines in the classroom once the student teacher leaves.

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Conflicting expectations are also a drawback of having a student teacher and cause stress during the practicum. Personality conflicts can also have a negative impact on the classroom teacher/student teacher relationship as well as the evaluation process.

Classroom teachers identify two strategies for dealing with this stress: talking with peers and setting a focus with the student teacher for the duration of the teaching practicum. Classroom teachers suggest that the university can play an important role in ameliorating the classroom teacher/student teacher relationship and thus reduce stress. Suggestions include: continuing to use the pass/fail evaluation, encouraging faculty observation of the student teacher on a regular and ongoing basis in the classroom, using the extended practicum, emphasizing the necessity of student teachers acquiring a sense of teaching theory before entering the classroom, encouraging the student teacher to contact the classroom teacher well in advance of the teaching practicum, and reminding the student teacher to respect the etiquette and hierarchy of the school.

Our data provide us with a daunting amount of information. The university course has long ended but we are still engrossed in our research. The work we have begun this winter will extend into the warm days of summer as we meet, discuss, edit papers for publication, and present at the Canadian Association for Teacher Educator's National Conference.

And so here I am, a primary teacher struggling to bring the 'teacher's voice' to the research. One who is beginning to appreciate the potential of collaborative work, and who is discovering the power of narrative written from an ordinary classroom teacher's perspective.

I believe the benefits of collaborative research are numerous and varied. The research experience that I have gained through this work is invaluable and I will reap the benefits next winter as I toil away in my classroom working on my own thesis. The flexibility of the arrangement meant that I could determine my own schedule, my own level of commitment and work out of my own classroom. I learned that I have different and complimentary strengths. I learned to listen and to try to understand the opinions and perspectives of my colleagues. I learned to understand myself better and develop a richer sense of how I can grow personally and professionally. I learned by doing and taking an active part in conducting research.

I am now more familiar and comfortable with qualitative research, designing a survey, developing and conducting a focus-group interview, an individual interview, and keeping and sharing a personal journal. I understand the rigours of sifting through data to discover trends and themes – to let the data speak for itself. I was empowered to have a voice in a process that directly affects my belief system, my children, my career, and my life. And I understand the strength and support that exists in collaboration.



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