I went from being very excited to being very disappointed. I was trying to emphasize reflection on the part of the student teacher. I really struggled with that and as the practicum evolved it didn’t really happen. So, it became a greater struggle. When we got to the point where I had to write an interim report it was almost like we were in parallel universes. I don’t have a clear understanding why it all happened. I really started to wonder what was going on? What was I doing wrong?

—Lisa, a cooperating teacher, reflecting on her student teacher’s practicum

Teacher education represents a continuum of career-long engagement by teachers in professional development activities designed to extend and enrich their pedagogical practices. An early but critical phase in that continuum is the practicum. The practicum is a common and critical feature of most, if not all, pre-service teacher education programs. The component of pre-service teacher education that I would like to “turn on its head” is directed at the assumptions and responsibilities associated with the professional development of cooperating teachers.1

Cooperating Teacher As Teacher Educator

photo by Valerie Triggs
To set the context for this writing, I need to situate my own practice as a teacher educator. I spent eleven years as a cooperating teacher in a secondary school setting in Australia and during that period supervised twenty student teachers. Although I didn’t fully realize it at the time, I knew very little about teaching and learning, and even less about teaching others ‘how to teach.’

However, working with student teachers profoundly changed the way that I thought about teaching and learning in school settings. My early experience with the student teachers in Australia continues even today to give meaning to and shape my career. For example, my current work at the university is almost exclusively devoted to understanding and supporting student teachers and cooperating teachers in practicum settings.

An important realization that emerged from my experiences in practicum settings is that there are three distinctly different conceptions of the work that cooperating teachers do. These conceptions signal the various assumptions that teachers and teacher educators have about practicum settings and more importantly what is expected of those working in such settings. Different expectations require different levels of professional preparedness. One of the earliest conceptions of their work is cooperating teacher as classroom placeholder (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Three Conceptions of the Work of School Advisors](http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n03/articles/clarke/clarke.html)

In this conception of their work, the cooperating teacher exchanges places with the student teacher and then exits to the staff room, prep-room, school office, etc., for the remainder of the practicum. A role akin to an absentee landlord. This conception assumes that the student teacher, almost immediately upon entering the school, is able to take full responsibility for teaching a class of pupils. In conversations with advisors who use this approach, I have found that it often mirrors the way that they experienced their practicum and in adopting this approach they are modeling a practice that served as their entry to the profession. The literature suggests that the ‘classroom placeholder’ approach to practicum advising is rare in practicum settings today (e.g., Borko & Mayfield, 1995, RATE IV, 1990).

Some distance along the continuum and perhaps the most common conception in recent years is cooperating teacher as supervisor of practica. Embedded in this view is the assumption that cooperating teachers oversee the work of student teachers. Specifically, students acquire what they need to know about teaching on-campus while the role of the cooperating teacher is to observe, record, and report on the success or otherwise of the application of that knowledge in the practicum setting (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Although the level of engagement between the student and cooperating teacher is considerably greater than that for the ‘placeholder’ conception, the work of the cooperating teacher is principally as overseer.

In contrast to these two conceptions, I believe a more productive rendering, and one that exemplary cooperating teachers exhibit in their interactions with student teachers, is cooperating teacher as teacher educator (Browne, 1992; Grimmett & Ratzlaff, 1986; Knowles and Cole, 1996). Being a teacher educator demands, among other things, a level of engagement with student teachers that far exceeds that of a classroom placeholder or supervisor of practica and is akin to that of a ‘coach’ [4]. I believe the conception of coach—one who works closely in the immediacy of the action setting, encouraging and eliciting the sense the learner makes of his or her actions and providing advice and expertise to guide the learner’s developing repertoire, embodies the nature of the relationship rendered by this conception. Being a teacher educator within the context of a practicum setting requires that cooperating teachers be knowledgeable about and conversant with the teacher education literature and current debates about knowledge generation in practicum settings. Their work with a beginning teacher is a practice that is characterized by complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict (Schön, 1987). This work demands that cooperating teachers:

- be grounded in the immediacy of the action setting (Russell, 1997);
• work side-by-side with the beginning teacher, not from above or from afar (MacKinnon & Erickson, 1988);
• be co-investigators into the practice that is being learned (Brooks, 1998);
• know when to watch, listen, speak, and act and be able to judiciously use each of these at different times and as appropriate to the needs of the beginning teacher (Kettle and Sellars, 1996); and
• be inquirers into their own practice as cooperating teachers and actively seek opportunities to inform that practice (Loughran, 1996).

The paradigmatic shift that is called forth by this consideration is that cooperating teachers are teacher educators in much the same way that their university counterparts regard themselves at teacher educators, albeit with different responsibilities and roles to play.

The Failure to Ensure the Professional Readiness of Cooperating Teachers

I believe that the vast majority of cooperating teachers in the British Columbia (BC) context (Clarke, 2001, in press) and elsewhere strive to be teacher educators. Further, there is little dispute, among cooperating teachers or educational researchers, that cooperating teachers require specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities for their role as teacher educators in practicum settings (Anderson, Major, and Mitchell (1992).

However, it is also widely acknowledged that the current practices for ensuring that cooperating teachers are professionally prepared for their work are woefully inadequate, and fail to address some of the most basic issues associated with the advisory work these teachers undertake when working with student teachers (Glickman & Bey, 1990; Knowles & Cole, 1996). Stories of capable student teachers whose practica have been compromised by the supervisory shortcomings of their cooperating teachers are not uncommon.

Even in situations where the practicum is deemed successful by both the cooperating teachers and their student teachers, the cooperating teachers regularly concede the need for more substantive preparation for the advisory responsibilities they undertake (Clarke, 2001). This challenge is played out against the backdrop that student teachers regard the practicum as the single most important element of their Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990)—the B.Ed. degree in Canada, as in many Western jurisdictions, is the main qualification for entry to the teaching profession (Canadian Teachers’ Federation, 2005).

The lack of professional readiness of the part of cooperating teachers is not a new
phenomenon. This situation has become so widespread throughout Canada (Knowles & Cole, 1996) and beyond (Liston, 1995; Zeichner, 2002) that, with few exceptions, it has become the norm. Attempts to address this issue, by and large, have failed. I use the word ‘fail’ to deliberately highlight the seriousness of this situation. In the absence of any substantive professional development for their role in the practicum, cooperating teachers rely on their intuitive sense of what it means to supervise student teachers drawing largely on their own practicum experiences when they were student teachers (Knowles, & Cole, 1996). As a result, the quality of the practicum experience for student teachers varies considerably from cooperating teacher to cooperating teacher.

Many cooperating teachers do a remarkable job given the limited professional development they have undertaken for the task. However, many others struggle with what it means to be a cooperating teacher and recognize that they lack the skills and abilities necessary to maximize the practicum experience for both themselves and their student teachers (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001).

So, why the failure? There are a number of possible explanations for the limited success in addressing the issue of professional development for cooperating teachers (Cotton, & Fischer, 1992). Three possibilities are ever present in current practicum settings. One, when universities call attention to the need for cooperating teachers to be professionally prepared for their work in practicum settings, they run the risk of being perceived as meddling in the affairs of schools and being condescending or judgmental. Due to the large number of practicum placements required for the B.Ed. degree each year, universities cannot afford to alienate teachers nor be seen as being overly selective about the classrooms (or schools) in which student teachers are placed.

Two, it has been suggested that there is a widespread reluctance at the policy-making level within the teaching profession to regard the work of cooperating teachers as being distinctly different to that of their daily work with children. The phrase that “a teacher is a teacher is a teacher” is often used to support this position; the argument is that all teachers by virtue of having completed a B.Ed. degree are sufficiently prepared and should be permitted, without prejudice, to supervise student teachers on practicum. For example, this situation is the norm in British Columbia despite the fact that Section 47A of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) Member’s Guide explicitly supports a process for “the selection of cooperating teachers” (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 2006, 152).

Third, school administrators—principals and vice-principals—are reluctant to distinguish between those on their staffs who should or should not be cooperating teachers for fear of transgressing collective bargaining contracts between employers (school districts) and employees (teacher associations) (Clarke & Riecken, 2001); the contracts prescribe in detail the parameters of the relationship between the two groups.

Barriers, such as these, are frequently cited and used to justify inaction on the issue of the professional development of cooperating teachers. However, I believe that this failure is more deeply embedded in traditions of teacher education than the above explanations reveal. I argue that the predicament we find ourselves in arises from an assumption that the B.Ed. degree is the sole responsibility of universities and colleges of education (hereafter referred to simply as ‘universities’).

One reason that contributes to this widely held assumption is that universities are the final arbiters of the B.Ed. degree. Following directly from this assumption is the expectation that all things related to the B.Ed. degree, including the quality of instruction and supervision within the degree program, are the responsibility of the universities. In responding to this expectation, universities require instructors to have an advanced degree in their area of specialization. However, establishing minimum requirements for supervisors is an entirely different matter.
Universities offer programs and courses on supervision but few cooperating teachers avail themselves of these opportunities (Clarke, 2001). University workshops (often held in schools districts) address supervision issues and attract a greater number of participants. However the limitations of one-off workshops are well documented (Fullan, 1991). Finally, universities circulate practicum handbooks that provide supervision guidelines but unfortunately in many cases these handbooks, distributed to both cooperating teachers and faculty members, remain unopened and unread gathering dust on bookshelves and desks (Raths & Lyman, 2003).

In challenging the norm outlined above, I am suggesting that the failure to ensure the professional development of cooperating teachers lies not in current attempts to address this issue but in a serious flaw in the assumption that the B.Ed. degree is the sole responsibility of the universities. This assumption is blind to the fact that, across Canada, at least 35% of every student teacher’s B.Ed. program is spent in an elementary, middle, or high school classroom under the direct supervision of a cooperating teacher (Clarke & Bariteau, 2006). Therefore, while universities might be the final arbiter of the B.Ed. degree, the preparation of student teachers is a joint responsibility of schools and universities. Both institutions are responsible and accountable for substantive components of the degree.

An unfortunate legacy of the assumption that the B.Ed. degree is the sole responsibility of the universities is that teachers in schools and their organizational representatives (collectively hereafter referred to simply as the ‘profession’) have not been regarded as being responsible for the professional development of cooperating teachers (Cornbleth, & Ellsworth, 1994). This view may have originated in earlier times when the practicum was a much smaller component of the B.Ed. degree. It is hard to sustain now given that the profession is responsible for over one third of every B.Ed. degree program in Canada (Clarke & Bariteau, 2006). No matter how well intentioned, guidelines such as Section 47A of the BCTF Member’s Guide or courses and workshops provided by universities count for very little without the commitment of the partner organizations and the participants themselves.

By challenging the assumption that the B.Ed. degree is the sole responsibility of universities, I deliberately turn the problem of the professional development of cooperating teachers on its head and come at it from the opposite direction: that of the profession. Clearly, the universities need to play a role in the professional development of cooperating teachers and ideally both the profession and the universities should work collaboratively in this endeavour. However, if we continue to assume that the professional development of cooperating teachers is the sole responsibility of universities then, by virtue of the inherent flaw in that assumption, the net effect on the professional development of cooperating teachers will, at best, be marginal and, at worst, rendered simply as a ‘window dressing’ exercise.

In short, I am arguing that the professional development of cooperating teachers needs to be located substantially within the profession itself. This does not mean that it should stand apart or alone from other stakeholders but it should be emphasized that continuing to locate the practice in one place and the responsibility for the professional development necessary for that practice in another is nonsense; nor is it consistent with the concept of a profession where self-governance and self-regulation are paramount (Brown, 2001).

This proposal calls into question larger issues including the relationship between the profession and universities, of the purposes of teacher education, and the various interests that that particular endeavour serves. However, in this paper, I deliberately focus my attention on those who are almost entirely responsible for teacher education in practicum settings (i.e., the cooperating teachers) and their preparation for that role.
A Network of Cooperating Teachers

I recognize that this proposal is a radical shift in thinking about the professional development of cooperating teachers and, given the conservative nature of teaching and teacher education, is ambitious in the extreme. Further, to the best of my knowledge, a substantive commitment by the profession to the professional development of cooperating teachers has not been explored in a Canadian or a similar context elsewhere. Moreover, such a proposal would require the cooperation of teachers’ associations, district staffs, and university faculty members. My belief in the need to explore this proposal is so strong that unless the first steps are taken in considering this possibility then I believe lamenting the inadequate preparation of cooperating teachers will continue unabated.

The question is:

What would happen if cooperating teachers actively inquired into and took greater control over their own professional development as ‘school-based teacher educators’?

This question presupposes two things: (1) that cooperating teachers have an interest in inquiring into their advisory practices, and (2) that they wish to take greater control over their own preparation for their work with student teachers. Is there evidence to support these suppositions? I argue that there is. However, before addressing the issue of evidence, I want to suggest that the answer to the first question foreshadows the answer to the second. If professionals inquire into their practice they are, by their very actions, taking control over their own professional development. Put simply, then, the question becomes: Are cooperating teachers inquisitive about their advisory practices?

Recently, I distributed a survey to an entire cohort of cooperating teachers that the University of British Columbia (UBC) draws upon in a single year (Clarke, 2001). The survey was mailed to 1319 cooperating teachers: 487 elementary, 80 middle, and 752 secondary school teachers. Thirty-two surveys were returned unopened or incomplete. Of the remaining 1287 surveys, 778 completed surveys were returned (61%). Four questions on the survey are particularly relevant to this paper. One question addressed the issue of feedback-on-practice to cooperating teachers. It should be noted that no jurisdiction in Canada provides direct and specific feedback to cooperating teachers on their advisory practice (Clarke & Bariteau, 2006). In the BC survey, 85% of the cooperating teachers indicated that they wanted feedback on their practice as advisors. This result, alone, is a strong indicator of the desire of cooperating teachers to inquire into their practice.
Another question asked if there should be any formal requirements for those wishing to become cooperating teachers. At the present time, the only requirements for teachers who wish to become UBC cooperating teachers is that they have a BC teaching certificate and that they enroll a class (at the elementary, middle, or secondary school level). A further question asked the teachers if there should be some sort of selection process for those wishing to become cooperating teachers. Currently, for UBC cooperating teachers there is no selection procedure for those wishing to take on this role. All that teachers need to do is to demonstrate that they have met the above requirements and then volunteer for the role.

However, the cooperating teachers’ responses to these two questions paint a very different picture: 82% believe that there should be formal requirements and 85% believe that there should be a formal selection process for those wishing to become cooperating teachers. These response rates are not trivial. In a context where there are no distinguishing criteria and the absence of a selection process for those wishing to work with student teachers is a reality, the voice of BC cooperating teachers is loud and clear: there is little support for the status quo.

Finally, appended to the survey was a question inviting cooperating teachers to participate in an in-depth study of their advisory practices. The in-depth study involved video-taping their conversations with student teachers over the course of a 13-week practicum. In addition, as part of the study, the cooperating teachers were to watch these tapes and comment upon their interactions with their student teachers (Clarke & Erickson, in press). The in-depth study required a significant commitment on the part of the cooperating teachers that went well beyond their regular work with student teachers on practicum. I had hoped that a few teachers might agree to participate. To my surprise, 254 cooperating teachers responded to the invitation. If, as I have argued elsewhere (Clarke, 2003), inquiry is a defining feature of professional practice, then I take the BC cooperating teachers’ response to my invitation as indicative of their desire for substantive inquiry into their practice as ‘school-based teacher educators.’

The combined results from the survey give voice to cooperating teachers’ concerns in ways that have not been documented before. Further, the strength of their voice is evidence of their interest in contributing to the larger conversation about: (1) what is required when they take on the role of cooperating teacher; (2) how can they best be prepared for that role; and (3) what are the implications for determining suitable practicum placements for student teachers. The teaching profession, through the work of cooperating teachers, is engaged “in the generative process of producing their own future” (Lave and Wegner, 1991, p.57). As such, the profession plays a vital role in pre-service teacher education.

The B.Ed. degree, contrary to prevailing conceptions, is not the sole responsibility of universities. Current views about the professional development of cooperating teachers rest not only on an outdated but a flawed assumption. I contend that substantive change will only occur when the professional development of cooperating teachers is located more fully within the profession itself. The significance of this shift will be realized when the practice and the preparation for that role are interblended (Cohen, 2005) and inquiry into and the development of both occurs side-by-side.

The profession needs to recognize, organize, and regulate the work of cooperating teachers. This is an ambitious undertaking, and no doubt will be fraught with different tensions between universities and the profession as a, hopefully, collaborative dialogue on the professional development of cooperating teachers emerges. At the very least, I believe that the profession needs to lay the groundwork for such an exploration and that teachers themselves need to be given the opportunity to discuss what they consider to be the critical parameters of their work with beginning teachers.
The development and evolution of a network of this type represents a significant shift in thinking about the role of cooperating teachers within teacher education. Further, a network of cooperating teachers would alter the way that teachers themselves make sense of, negotiate, and locate themselves within teacher education. Such a network might address questions that desperately need to be asked but for a variety of reasons (some of which are alluded to earlier) are studiously avoided or ignored altogether for fear of giving offence, establishing difference, or transgressing boundaries.

Questions such as: What does it mean to be a steward of the profession? How can feedback-on-practice be provided to cooperating teachers? and What makes a particular classroom context a suitable placement for a student teacher on practicum? I acknowledge that this paper is deliberately provocative, but my fervent hope is that it will both invite and encourage debate and conversation and trigger a collective undertaking by the profession and the universities to address the issue of the professional development of cooperating teachers.

[1] In other contexts cooperating teachers are referred to as sponsor teachers, school associates, practicum supervisors, etc.

[i] For further elaboration on our use of the word 'coach' we refer you to Hatch (1993) and Clarke, (1997b). We use the word 'coach' with caution, and would be happy to entertain other possibilities.

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Anthony Clarke is primarily interested in teacher education and in particular, the relationship between universities and schools within the student teaching context. Recent works include an edited volume by Farr Darling, L, Clarke, A., & Erickson, G. (2007) titled Collective Improvisation: Sustaining a Cohort in Teacher Education. (Kluwer Academic).