

## EXPLORING OTHER PRACTICUM POSSIBILITIES: AN ACTION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

**Daniel B. Robinson** and **William Walters**  
St. Francis Xavier University

### ABSTRACT

*This article summarizes an action research project undertaken at a teacher education institution in Canada. The action research was implemented in an effort to respond to initial observations related to some practicum limitations. In an effort to seek a 'solution' to these limitations, a modified practicum model was piloted with a small group of mentors (teachers) and protégés (students). Results suggest that the 'intervention' introduced within this pilot practicum did have positive results—especially as they relate to encouraging mentor-protégé relationships and enabling school-site acclimatization and acculturation. In light of these findings, concluding thoughts and future recommendations are offered, for both our own institution as well as others.*

**KEYWORDS:** Action research, Practicum, Mentorship, Teacher education

All of Canada's 62 teacher education programs include a practicum of some sort (Falkenberg, 2010; Van Nuland, 2011). Depending on the institution, these practicums may enjoy other labels. For example, somewhat synonymous terms include 'field experience,' 'internship,' and 'student teaching' (Robinson, 2014; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008). Whatever the label, they are observably mainstay features of all teacher education programs—though the number, length, and structure of them may differ between institutions and provinces (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008; Van Nuland, 2011). Some teacher education programs may offer or require a lone practicum while others may offer or require four or more. The length of these practicums similarly varies; some are for as few as five weeks while others

may be for more than twenty. Structural differences among them are too numerous to list. Indeed, no two practicums are the same.

Pre-service teachers, teacher education programs, and government ministries all attest to the central role and importance of these practicums (Hess, 2001). As Rozelle and Wilson (2012) have observed, the importance of student teaching (and the practicum more generally) “goes almost unchallenged” (p. 1196) by many. For example, pre-service teachers consistently highly value the practicum, often attributing to it greater relative status than most—if not all—other elements of their teacher education programs (Britzman, 1991; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). School and university supervisors also often privilege the role and importance of the practicum (Allen, Ambrosetti, & Turner, 2013). All government ministries require the successful completion of practicums for teacher certification (Van Nuland, 2011). Clearly, there are many players within teacher education who would suggest that the practicum—something Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) labelled the “most pervasive pedagogy in teacher education” (p. 42)—is one of the most important pedagogies within teacher education.

Given the variability in practicum models (e.g., with respect to number, length, and structure) as well as the important status it maintains within teacher education programs, we recently engaged in an action research study, implementing a ‘pilot’ practicum model with a group of our pre-service teachers. The introduction of this pilot was not only in response to the observation that other models exist and that the practicum is an important element of our teacher education program. Rather, we were also purposely responding to our initial observation related to some potential program limitations. That is, we were seeking to find a ‘solution’ to these limitations by modifying our existing practicum model. These were related to improving our practicum with respect to encouraging mentor-protégé relationships and enabling school-site acclimatization and acculturation.

#### **RELEVANT LITERATURE**

Restructuring or reorganizing a teacher education practicum is not an altogether unique occurrence. That is, others have engaged in similar exercises (Hudson & Hudson, 2013). Recognizing the limitations of “block practicum placements in schools occurring on either side of [the] university semester” (Graham & Thornley, 2000, p. 235), Hudson and Hudson (2013) studied a restructured program that placed pre-service teachers into schools for many days before university coursework began. This placement continued with weekly school visits prior to the end of coursework and the beginning of the practicum. They found that both mentors and protégés believed the restructured model helped in a number of respects, related, for example, to personal-professional skill development and understanding system requirements.

The relationships between mentors and their protégés are exceedingly important. These relationships can have transformative effects upon both mentors and protégés (Izadinia, 2015a; Johnson, 2015). Successful mentor-protégé relationships have the potential to help pre-service teachers develop confidence, power, and/or agency while unsuccessful

mentor-protégé relationships risk inhibiting pre-service teachers in these same areas (Beck & Kosnick, 2000; Liu & Fisher, 2006; Patrick, 2013; Ticknor, 2014; Williams, 2010). While many might suggest a number of possible elements essential for enabling positive relationships, Izadinia (2015b) found that the three most important elements were related to encouragement and support, open communication, and feedback. While traditional practicums, by their very nature, require formal mentoring relationships to be established (which may have both positive and negative outcomes), it has also been found that there are possible positive outcomes when less formal, or informal, mentor-protégé relationships are established (e.g., outside of an official practicum) (Evans, 2000). In both these formal and informal situations, interpersonal relationships based on mutual trust, collaboration, support, and recognition have been found to be essential (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010).

Hudson and Hudson's (2013) research found that protégés participating in a restructured practicum model believed the experience helped them to better understand the school context. More specifically, they believed the experience helped them to better understand the roles and responsibilities of school staff, school practices and policies, and how school aims ought to impact teaching and learning. It is worthwhile to note that mentors, generally, reported greater agreement related to these sorts of outcomes.

Wooldridge and Yeomens (1994) have suggested that school-site acculturation is both tacit and purposeful. Whether tacit or purposeful, pre-service teachers seeking to acclimatize and acculturate themselves with a school context and culture must face, head-on, "the anxiety normally associated with joining a new staff" and the "stress of being perceived as a novice amongst experts" (p. 144). Just as Hatch (1999) has observed that pre-service teachers might experience socialization into the teaching profession by default or, preferably, by design, opportunities for acclimatization and acculturation might similarly be left to chance or purposeful action.

## **ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS**

### **Positionality**

Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest action researchers ought to consider, and make explicit, their positionality when engaging in action research. Recognizing that Herr and Anderson, themselves, acknowledge that these six categories of positionality are not entirely discrete (and that action researchers may move between categories of positionality as they engage in the cyclical process), we suggest our positionality might best be viewed as being between 'insider' and 'insider in collaboration with other insiders.' Viewing our positionality as insiders certainly aligns with our view of this work as being especially familiar to those engaged in self-study (particularly when 'self' is meant to be our own program rather than our own being). However, the practicum is not only the university's program. It also 'belongs' to the schools that provide the environment, students, and the mentors. It is largely because of this observation that we, here, purposely recognize that we were not entirely on our own for this action research initiative. That is, we have

welcomed collaboration by others (particularly our mentor teacher colleagues) through our recruitment, intervention, and pilot planning processes.

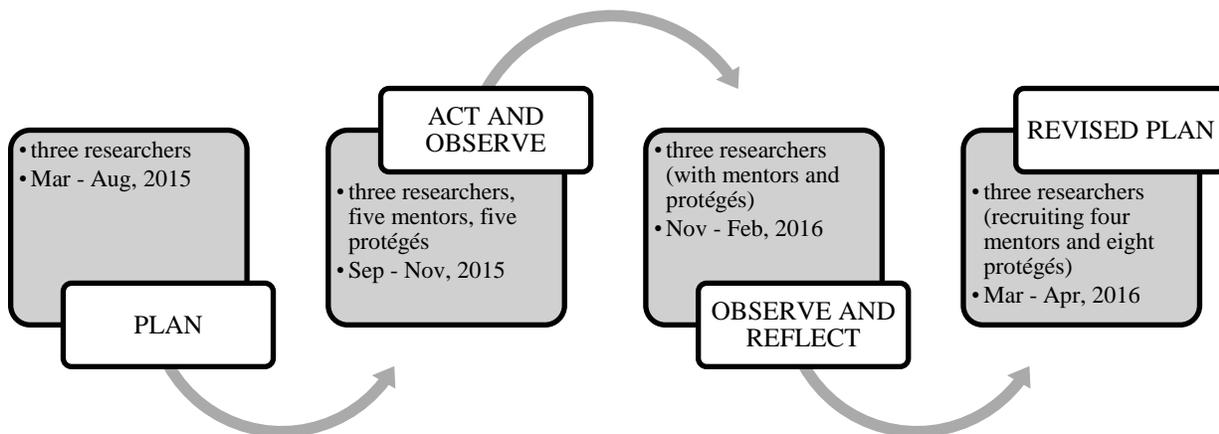
### Research Context and Participants

We recruited five local mentor teachers to participate in the pilot practicum. These mentors were selectively chosen based on four important criteria: 1) they had a history of being mentor teachers for our university's program for at least five years, 2) they were highly regarded by ourselves as being very capable mentors, 3) they taught at schools within very close proximity to our university, and 4) they indicated a willingness to take on the extra responsibilities related to implementing the pilot practicum.

We invited all pre-service teachers within one 'teachable' stream (physical education) to participate in this pilot practicum. (We chose this subject discipline because we both teach within this discipline.) The five pre-service teachers who had the best fit (e.g., would be teaching physical education in the next practicum, needed a local placement, had flexible schedules that would allow for participation, etc.) were chosen. Four of these pre-service teachers were second year students while one was a first year student.

### Action Research Plan

Our current two-year teacher education program includes four practicums—one in each of the four terms. First-year students complete their first five-week practicum at the end of term 1 and teach for 25% of their mentors' full teaching load. They return to the same site for six weeks for their second practicum at the end term 2, teaching for 50% of the time. The pattern continues with a new mentor teacher in the second year, with teaching time increasing to 75% and then to 100%.



**Figure 1.** Action research process

The pilot practicum required mentors and protégés to meet weekly during every week preceding their initial fall practicum. That is, while all other pre-service teachers would attend regular classes and begin their practicum in mid-November, these five protégés spent time with their mentors in their schools during the nine weeks that they were also completing their coursework. Protégés were encouraged to spend between two and four hours with their mentor every week, though they were also asked to ensure that they met

for a minimum of one hour each week. Protégés and mentors were given considerable freedom with respect to these meetings. Together, they were to negotiate the tasks and happenings that might occur during these visits (suggestions included team teaching, professional discussions, planning, etc.).

Protégés maintained a weekly journal for the duration of this pilot period. Protégés and their mentors participated in interviews immediately after the pilot period (and before the 'regular' practicum began). Information gathered from the journals and the interviews informed the researchers' reflections and revised plans. Figure 1 illustrates this action research process while Table 1 provides additional information related to the actions involved.

**Table 1: Action Research Participants, Actions, and Foci**

Date	'Active' People	Actions	Action Foci
Mar., 2015	Researchers	Researchers: establish phase 1 pilot	PLAN
Aug., 2015		intervention, recruit mentors, recruit protégés	
Sept., 2015	Researchers,	Mentors and Protégés: Implement phase 1 pilot	ACT, OBSERVE
Nov., 2015	Mentors, Protégés	Protégés: complete and submit weekly journals	
Nov., 2015	Researchers,	Researchers: Interview mentors (individually) and	OBSERVE,
Feb., 2016	Mentors, Protégés	protégés (in focus groups)	REFLECT
Mar., 2016	Researchers	Researchers: establish phase 2 pilot intervention,	PLAN
Apr., 2016		recruit mentors, recruit protégés	
Sept., 2016	Researchers,	Mentors and Protégés: Implement phase 2 pilot	ACT, OBSERVE
Nov., 2016	Mentors, Protégés	Protégés: complete and submit weekly journals	
Nov., 2016	Researchers,	Researchers: Interview mentors (individually) and	OBSERVE,
Dec., 2016	Mentors, Protégés	protégés (in focus groups)	REFLECT

### Data Collection

The three sources of data included protégés' journal responses, protégés' focus group interviews, and mentors' individual interviews.

**Protégés' journal responses.** The protégés' journals included the following introductory information/prompt:

This is a unique pre-practicum experience in which protégés and mentors teach and learn together—in the mentors' school sites—during the term preceding the regular practicum.

During this time, the protégés and mentors will negotiate together the potential teaching and learning opportunities to be taken on with one another. For example, possible teaching and learning opportunities might include:

- protégés assisting mentors in extracurricular activities (e.g., school athletics, intramurals),
- protégés shadowing mentors in class,
- protégés assisting mentors in class (small-group teaching, short duration whole-group teaching), and
- protégés and mentors co-planning and/or co-leading learning activities in the school community.

Protégés are expected to be with their mentors every week until the regular practicum begins. The minimum weekly contact time is 1 hour and the suggested weekly contact time is 2-4 hours. Protégés will be expected to keep a brief journal, summarizing their weekly interactions and learning.

For each weekly response, protégés were asked to provide a summary of mentorship activities and personal learning (as well as a record of hours of contact time).

***Protégés' focus group interview.*** Within a week of the completion of classes (and just prior to the official beginning of the practicum) all five protégés participated in a focus group interview. Focus group questions were related to teaching competence, teaching confidence, and the pre-practicum period. The questions posed to protégés included:

- How did your mentor help to develop your teaching skills (and in what ways do you now feel more competent)?
- How has this experience helped you develop as a teacher (and in what ways do you feel more confident)?
- In what ways was being with your mentor ahead of time better prepared your mentor and yourself for the upcoming practicum?
- What would you say is the greatest value in being with your mentor ahead of time during the period preceding the practicum?

***Mentors' individual interviews.*** All five mentors were invited to participate in individual interviews; only three were able to participate. These three interviews were also completed just prior to the official beginning of the regular practicum. These questions were related to teaching identity, teaching practice, and the pre-practicum period. The questions posed to the mentors included:

- Can you describe ways in which you were able to develop the competence of your protégé in her/his teaching?
- Can you describe ways in which you were able to develop the confidence of your protégé in her/his teaching?
- In what ways has having your protégé in your class better prepared her/him and yourself for the upcoming practicum?
- What would you say is the greatest value in having a protégé with you for a period preceding the practicum?

### **Data Analysis**

All qualitative data (from protégés' journals and transcribed interviews) were originally analyzed by one researcher who searched for key issues, similarities, differences, recurring ideas, and relationships. As outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Creswell (2005), these results were coded in this initial analysis. This required repeated statements or statements with similar meanings to be highlighted with appropriate codes. After several readings, visible content information enabled the identification of coded responses related to the previously identified categories (i.e., encouraging mentor-protégé relationships and enabling school-site acclimatization and acculturation). Subsequently, the other two

researchers reviewed the coding and categorization processes and conclusions. Once consensus amongst the three researchers was achieved, finalized coded themes within categories allowed for analysis and interpretation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was granted by our university's Research Ethics Board (REB) as well as by the schools' central school board office. All *Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Public Works and Government Service Canada, 2005) ethical guidelines were strictly followed (e.g., with respect to consent and maintained confidentiality). Accordingly, all names of protégés and mentors within this article are pseudonyms.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Mentor-Protégé Activities**

It is first important to note that of the five protégés, three spent considerably more time than the required one hour per week with their mentors. The other two generally spent only the one-hour per week minimum (or one and a half hours) with their mentors *most* weeks. We also found that most pairs missed one or two weeks of meetings due to other uncontrollable circumstances (e.g., university commitments, illness, etc.). The three protégés who spent more time with their mentors sometimes spent entire half-days or full days with them. It is clear to us that these three established much more meaningful relationships with their mentors. It is also worth noting that the two mentors who opted out of the individual interviews were also the mentors of the two protégés who spent minimal time with their mentors. Indeed, they both suggested they would have little to offer as they felt they had spent an inadequate amount of time with their protégés.

The protégés journal responses detailed some common ideas. These included: sharing and negotiating expectations; classroom assistance; extracurricular engagement, and 'testing' in-class learning.

***Sharing and negotiating expectations.*** All initial meetings were spent discussing expectations mentors and protégés had for one other, as well as their expectations for the pre-practicum pilot. Having this early opportunity to connect was a welcome occurrence for protégés:

My first visit with Elizabeth [mentor] was a nice way to break the ice with her.... It was nice to ask her questions. We discussed how I can get involved with the school and how I can incorporate French into my lessons. (Maria, journal response)<sup>1</sup>

Protégés suggested that having these opportunities to share and negotiate expectations would also allow them to be able to better understand their expectations for one another

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<sup>1</sup> All journal responses are included here verbatim. Any errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, or syntax are the students' errors.

during the regular practicum. This, they suggested, would prevent unwelcome stress down the road:

By going in early, I am able to see what is expected and how to use the tools rather than learn on the spot in the first week. This could avoid some unneeded stress early into practicum. (Nelson, journal response)

Some of these initial sessions related to sharing and negotiating expectations seemingly allowed for the almost-instant formation of a strong mentor-protégé relationship:

We spent the hour getting to know each other.... She asked me about my perceived strengths and weaknesses.... I can already tell we will develop a strong relationship and that I can learn a lot from her. (Katrina, journal response)

While Katrina shared that observation after her first visit, near the end of the pre-practicum period, she added:

In terms of my CT [cooperating teacher] relationship, my relationship with Nancy is already better than my relationship with my CT last year at the end of my second practicum.

By her last visit, Katrina found:

It definitely is going to be nice to come into practicum on the first day already basically being friends with Nancy [mentor] and having familiar faces in my classroom. While the literature supports the development of collegial mentoring partnerships, we cannot ignore that, structurally, a supervisory component still exists. This intervention is less formal than the official practicum, at which time the university asks the mentor to provide specific feedback in any number of pre-determined areas. This research could be extended to investigate changes in the mentor-protégé relationship during and after the official practicum.

***Classroom assistance.*** Protégés took opportunities to assist their mentors as they prepared for and taught their classes. These opportunities to be an “assistant” might seem to be less-than-challenging, but protégés clearly found them to be both challenging and rewarding:

I made sure to take advantage of the day and I came into the gymnasium with Claire to set up her planned activities for the morning and helped her explain and run the stations used in a soccer skills lesson. There was slight apprehension in me as the first class came into the gym, but as soon as it was my time to talk, I was quickly more comfortable with eager and excited eyes on the new teacher. (David, journal response)

Protégés also found these opportunities to assist their mentors helped them develop a necessary rapport and relationship with both their mentors and their soon-to-be students:

I am thankful to have the opportunity to get to know the students and my mentor a little more each week, to build a rapport that is essential in the classroom and gymnasium for every teacher. (David, journal response)

Protégés also found these classroom assistance opportunities to be helpful—with respect to preparing them for success in their eventual “real” practicum:

Today was a great day. I helped out in minor ways and worked with students with an injury. I think the students were interested in my cast and it was an easy conversation to have with students. It also helped relate to the students with injuries and we became a group and completed some tasks together. I think going in each time I am able to meet new student and have a familiar face in the class that can help during the first week during practicum. The more I see a particular strategies used it gives me a few ideas to use when it is time for me to step in. (Nelson, journal response)

Still, some cautioned that taking on classroom assistance responsibilities, without sufficient scaffolding, could have potentially negative consequences:

No problem in “supervising” the group on the field, I was just unprepared and unsure of all the rules they have when on the field. I thought it may lose a small piece of their respect/attention in the long run since I went along with whatever they said for the most part. (Nelson, journal response)

***Extra-curricular engagement.*** Protégés and their mentors also found opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities. Moreover, protégés recognized the importance of volunteering to take on these extra responsibilities while in a school, as a pre-service teacher or as a teacher:

[While supervising the breakfast program], There were students that I taught from the previous week saying hello and new-to-me students wondering who I was. It really is nice to feel a bit of recognition when I will be spending all of time here in the coming months. The program is a really beneficial way to be more involved in the community and show administrators and other teachers in the school your willingness to be active in the school as well. (David, journal response)

Others were making an attempt to get involved in extracurricular activities but were unable to do so:

Trying to see if there is any after school activities that need extra help, as I really want to be involved after school. So far I haven't heard anything but I'm sure during practicum I'll be able to find something. (Katrina, journal response)

**'Testing' in-class learning.** The usual schedule or practicums has pre-service teachers in schools only after their classes have finished (or before they begin again); they are never in a school while they are also enrolled in classes. Some protégés found opportunities to try out ideas they had learned within their university classes the previous week within their schools:

After having a lady come in to our Phys. Ed class the previous week from Groove Edgeucation, I was highly motivated to use the valuable resources and activities she gave to Chris [university instructor] for us to use in school. I used the time this week to lead the classes while Claire [mentor] observed and provided feedback. I had such fun and felt really confident in how I lead the classes. (David, journal response)

One protégé (the lone first year student) initially found it difficult to see possibilities to link her in-class course content with her observations with her mentor:

I realized that nothing we do in class is in anyway preparing me for being in front of the class. (Monica, journal response)

This perception is in contrast to data collected from our education students as a group, who consistently rate the program highly. An exemplary teacher mentored Monica in her first few months of teacher education. Her mentor likely provided practical in-class teaching skills that were *perceived to be* more relevant to a pre-service teacher than the theory-based content delivered by her professors.

### **Mentors' Insights**

***Mentor-protégé relationships.*** All of the mentors discussed the benefits of having the protégés spend time with them and in their classes prior to the start of the official practicum. As there was no formal evaluation of protégés during this time, the extended practicum allowed mentors and protégés to focus on teaching, learning, and building relationships. In all mentoring partnerships, positive working and personal relationships were established. Mentors did not see their role here as one in which they were a teacher to a student; they felt that the mentoring relationship was more one of equals. On the basis of this collegial relationship, mentors felt especially comfortable in sharing their pedagogy, with the result for the mentors often being an opportunity to reflect on their practice. This reflection was often done with protégés, providing a learning opportunity for both mentors and protégés.

Claire: I noticed some practices that I've had when I see David do it when I'm actually sitting back and watching. I say, "Oh yeah, that doesn't work." So we

do talk about that. I made that mistake and now that I see that you're doing it, maybe we have to change things a little bit.

These strong interpersonal relationships were formed on mutual respect. As mentor Chris commented, "I'm not their boss. We are working together." Based on this trust, mentors and protégés could collaborate and support each other in their teaching.

Chris: Today, actually, we taught the same lesson to different groups and in between classes I stopped her and said, "Did you notice how you modified that?" She's like, "Yeah, I just needed to add a little bit more." And I said, "Look at this side, see how I modified that?"

Clearly mentors valued the relationship with their protégés. The time spent prior to the official practicum in a less formal setting allowed mentors to build positive personal and professional relationships with their protégés.

***School-site acclimatization and acculturation.*** As relationships were built with their mentors, protégés were also acclimatized to classroom routines, the culture of the school, and the nature of each class. As protégés began their placement during the first week of the semester, they became a regular part of the class—not a short-term addition as in a traditional practicum. The pilot practicum allowed protégés to form relationships with students and staff. Moreover, without the pressure of a formal traditional practicum, mentors could take the time to introduce protégés to school policies and procedures. Mentors were scaffolding protégés' entry into their classroom and the school. Mentors felt that this socialization of their protégés into the school over several weeks allowed protégés to focus on their teaching as they already knew classroom routines and student names. Claire provides specific examples of the benefits of the pilot practicum in acclimatizing protégés:

I feel like we developed a rapport with one another. I got a chance to talk about what he could be teaching, share my resources with him, and observe the classes. He got to see a lot of the students that have special needs and how it would adapt for those students. Meeting the staff, meeting the students, and getting to know their names.

All of the mentors recognized the value in acclimatizing protégés to the school and their classroom. Further, socialization of the protégés to the culture of their school and to teaching, in general, was seen by all mentors to support the development of protégés.

***Other insights.*** The pilot also led to concerns of teacher isolation. Discussions of how their reflection informed the protégés' practice led to a concern of isolation for mentors. Oftentimes, physical educators (especially in small schools) are teaching by themselves, working in a gymnasium that can be separated from the rest of the school. Mentors commented that having someone to share their knowledge with and to discuss teaching

physical education with was beneficial to them. Claire comments on feelings of isolation as a physical educator:

I always kind of felt just by myself. There's no one else around to talk with. [Having David there] I mean we always talk at the end of the day or in between lessons but its mostly verbal. I look forward to having a student teacher because, since I have started there has been no one to collaborate with, no one to talk to about the program. So that was the only opportunity really that I had.

Chris, in commenting on the isolation he faces as a physical educator, saw having a pre-service teacher to be an opportunity to both share and reaffirm his practice.

### **Protégés' Insights**

***Mentor-protégé relationships.*** As with mentors, protégés found that the extended practicum was beneficial in developing a positive personal and professional relationship. Mentors and protégés developed collegial relationships, removing concerns of evaluation and judgment for protégés. Maria describes the depth of relationship the extended practicum facilitated:

I more so benefited from this [program] creating a relationship with Elizabeth, because now I am going in and I am not awkward asking a question, trying to figure out who she is as a person.

The relationship developed over the 10-week period leading into the practicum put protégés at ease. As Katrina commented, "I am looking forward to that because I feel like I can be more myself with Nancy." The nature of the relationship allowed for mentors and protégés to observe and openly discuss each other's teaching. Nelson commented that discussions with his protégé were more like the kind you would have with a colleague:

We would talk about what we can do together or what he can do to help me or how I can help him, rather than I do something and then he marks it.

Protégés characterized this well-developed relationship as one in which they felt comfortable in taking a risk with their teaching and were confident in doing so. On the basis of this trust, protégés had comments similar to second year pre-service teacher Katrina:

We have a pretty good relationship already, and we have not even started practicum. It is nice to know that, I know fully what she wants from me, and expects from me, and I know that I can do what I want with the class, and she will be so ok with it. That is the confidence booster. It will be nice to see how that will influence teaching if you have a close relationship with your mentor.

***School-site acclimatization and acculturation.*** For all protégés, the opportunity to become familiar with their mentors, the students that they would teach, and the culture of

schools in which they would be teaching were reported to be the most beneficial aspects of the pilot. Protégés felt they would enter the official practicum knowing the school and classroom routines, as well as student names and how their mentors managed their classrooms. Focus could now turn to teaching and developing their skills as teachers, Katrina commented:

I know on Friday [start of the official practicum] when we go I know what to expect completely. I know what the day is going to look like, I know what Nancy is going to do and what the students are doing on Friday. Everything last year was unknown when we went on our first day of practicum.

Monica, in her first year of a two-year program, compared her situation to that of her classmates, offering, “I think especially where it is my first practicum ever, everybody else is freaking out and not sure what to do. I just can’t wait to get into the classroom.”

***Other insights.*** The pilot revealed other themes warranting further investigation. These include protégés finding it difficult to find time to go to the placement and the benefits of having the extended practicum to learn the nuances of teaching.

A few of the protégés struggled to schedule and organize their time so that they could attend their placement during the semester. Protégés recognized the value in the program and appreciated the freedom to schedule their attendance. However, they also commented that they would have liked this program to be a regularly scheduled class.

Often, pre-service teachers lack context when they first enter a practicum to observe their mentor teacher. With an extended practicum and an open, trusting relationship, protégés commented on how many small things they learned that would strengthen their teaching and their classroom management. Monica commented that they had time to have in-depth conversations about the curriculum and teaching. For example, she shared, “We had conversations about why that is important for the kids to see what they are learning and where they are going from.”

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

### **Another Cycle of Research**

Through their participation in this pilot with a pre-practicum component, mentors and protégés were able to do some important things. Protégés were able to share and negotiate expectations, engage in classroom and extracurricular activities, and implement teaching skills and strategies being taught within their concurrent teacher education classes. Moreover, and as hoped for, it also was evident that this pilot period enabled the development of mentor-protégé relationships and school-site acclimatization and acculturation for protégés. To us, these are all important benefits to this pilot process.

Still, we have found some limitations and we have some unanswered questions. The most important limitation of this piloted model is the time burden placed upon protégés.

Without ‘taking anything away’ from protégés’ already busy schedules, and without making the in-school commitment a class or program requirement, protégés shared the difficulties they had with finding time to get to their schools. This was especially difficult for the four second year students—who had a much busier schedule than first year students. The lone first year student was able to spend a number of whole days at her school site. Relatedly, the protégés who spent more than the required weekly one-hour with their mentors seemingly enjoyed greater fruits. Within our teacher education program, this model is therefore much more easily implemented for our first year students.

Our unanswered questions are related largely to our mentors. That is, though we have come to learn that protégés (and mentors) were pleased to develop professional relationships sooner, our focus largely ignored the added value (and potential strife) this period might also have for the mentors. For example, we wonder, “How does this pilot also influence mentor teachers’ identity (as teachers and mentors)?” and “How does this pilot also influence the department culture?”

In order to address the observed limitations, our unanswered questions related to the mentors and our ongoing commitment to systematically investigating our practicum practices, this upcoming fall we will be making a number of changes. These changes will be related to both the structure and data collection. Structural changes include the following:

- We have recruited protégés who will be in their first year—and who will also then have ‘free’ Fridays throughout the term.
- The term will be preceded with a whole-group meeting where expectations and roles are better initially articulated and subsequently negotiated.
- A second whole-group meeting will take place approximately half way through the intervention to discuss progress, concerns, and any necessary changes to the structure of the program.
- Rather than the one-hour minimum for contact time that was required this year, next year’s protégés will need to commit to two hours each week.
- Protégés will be required to inform the university researcher as to when they are attending the research site.

With respect to data collection, we have added two notable things:

- We will be collecting weekly journal responses from the mentors. Journal prompts will be related to a number of things but the focus will be upon the shifting of teacher/mentor identities and organizational culture. Mentors will be able to submit their responses in written form, electronically, or via recording.
- A university researcher will also be present for at least one hour of each of these weekly meetings to document observations related to mentor-protégé interactions.

### **Future Practice**

Within our own teacher education program, this sort of action research is allowing us to test potential alternatives. We suggest that wholesale programmatic change ought to be only be made with a healthy degree of caution. Exercises such as ours allows for possible

changes to be: 1) responsive to actual program limitations (rather than based upon change for its own sake), and 2) based upon sound structures and practices already found to be possible and appropriate within a program considering change. So, with our past (and future) learning related to this action research, we know that we might then suggest to our peers that elements from this pilot might well serve our entire student body. But, we are not there yet. As we consider the expansion of this model beyond the current structures, we will have to be cognizant of those students who may not be able to fit such a program into their schedule. Particularly because these students have been in university for five or six years, many may need to work to support themselves. We would not want to exclude anyone on the basis of economic need. In addition, up-scaling to include all students in our program would make it challenging to secure and arrange for the required number of mentors. Not with standing these hurdles, we will continue with our own action research—as inquiry pilot process.

Still, with this, we can offer suggestions for practice. We suggest that enabling early opportunities for mentors and protégés to meet and work together holds promise and potential. As we know and have discovered, mentor-protégé relationships and school-site acclimatization and acculturation are important elements related to beginning teachers' success. Other initiatives that aim to achieve these two things ought to be explored within teacher education programs. Also, we would hope that other teacher education programs afford the researchers who work within them the opportunities and agency to implement these sorts of pilot initiatives. We have worked in other (larger) teacher education programs where such 'deviations' from the mandated structure and script are unwelcome or impossible. Enabling those whose research focuses upon teacher education to engage in this sort of action research—with partnering schools and teachers—offers so much in the way of visioning future responsive teacher education programs.

Our hope, then, is twofold. We want our ongoing action research here to have some influence and impact upon how we (as a teacher education program) look at and structure our own future practicum experiences. We also want others to take and consider our learning and perspective—related to both our specific findings and our account of the potential of action research itself—so that they might introduce similar structures and/or action research initiatives.

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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**Dr. Daniel B. Robinson** is an Associate Professor and Chair of Teacher Education at St. Francis Xavier University. He teaches undergraduate courses in elementary and secondary physical education curriculum and instruction. He also teaches graduate courses in current research in curriculum and instruction, administration of inclusive schools, curriculum theory, and school and teaching effectiveness. Dr. Robinson's research focuses on culturally responsive physical education, gender and racialized minorities, service learning, and in-school health promotion programming.

**William Walters, PhD(c)** is an Assistant Professor and doctoral candidate at St. Francis Xavier University. He teaches undergraduate courses in elementary and secondary physical education curriculum and instruction. He also teaches graduate courses in current research in leadership and administrative theories, mentorship in school communities, and qualitative. Mr. Walters's research focuses on culturally responsive physical education, mentorship impacts upon mentors and mentees, and physical education pedagogy.

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