Supervisory Conversations: A Key to Reflective Experimentation by Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Using a qualitative approach, in this article, the author explores the conversations which take place between preservice teachers and their university supervisor, analysing sequences which serve as support for experimentation of a 'new' teaching approach and situations of knowledge construction by preservice teachers. They were asked to use cooperative learning activities during student teaching although such strategies were not necessarily modelled by their cooperating teachers or familiar to the students. As their researcher/supervisor, the author provided support in planning conferences and coaching through post-observation conferences. It is suggested that there is more to supervisory conversations than simply providing moral support for the preservice teachers or evaluation of their performance. They are occasions for knowledge construction, notably, through problem-solving and solution finding, stimulation of reflection and discussion of theory.

Introduction

In this article, I explore conversations which take place between preservice teachers and their university supervisor in order to identify and analyse sequences which serve as support for the experimentation of cooperative learning, as well as situations of knowledge construction about this approach by the preservice teachers. It is suggested that there is much more to these conversations than simply providing moral support for the preservice teachers or evaluating their performance. In this study, cooperative learning is considered to be "an instructional strategy in which students work together in groups that are carefully designed to promote positive interdependence," which is "coupled with individual accountability so that students are responsible for learning and contributing to the group task." (Abrami, Chambers, Poulsen, De Simone, D'Appollonia & Howden, 1995, p. 1). The elements reported here are part of a larger study concerned with preservice teachers' learning of the cooperative approach (Tochon, 1997-2000).larger study concerned with preservice teachers' learning of the cooperative approach (Tochon, 1997-2000).

The Need for Accompanied Reflection

Few question the belief held by student teachers that they learn a great deal from practical experience in real classrooms. Indeed, the move to longer in-school teaching practice appears to be based on the principle that learning to teach requires practical experience. However, such experiential learning is effective provided that it is "supported by a competent, experienced practitioner" (McIntyre & Haggart, 1994, p. 90) who helps the preservice teacher interpret the experience, "see the implications of various ways of working" (Maynard & Furlong, 1994, p. 75), reflect on what is going to happen or what has gone on in the classroom and what this means for future action.

Unless teaching experience is accompanied by concomitant inquiry and reflection, there is a risk that theory taught in teacher education programs, may remain inert, unintegrated into the preservice teacher's practical knowledge of teaching (Tillema & Knol, 1997). New knowledge, whether originating from university courses or from discussion with others during student teaching, must be tested and challenged in relation to pre-existing knowledge, before being integrated into the preservice teacher's repertoire (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998, Reiman, 1999). Serious inquiry by the preservice teacher into relevant new knowledge is provoked by a problem, an anomaly or a dissatisfaction for as Reiman (1999, p.610) suggests, disequilibrium is a "central process in teacher development". Who is involved in challenging and guiding the construction of teaching knowledge about a new approach? When and how does this reflection on action occur?

Supervisory Conversations

Traditionally, supervision of preservice teachers' first classroom performances has been shared by the school system and the university through the work of the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor. It is during supervisory conversations that these mentors discuss planning with preservice teachers or help them reflect upon in-class incidents. Such supervisory conversations are at the heart of the process of learning to teach. The contribution of university supervisors to this process is often questioned, although their conversations with the preservice teacher have only rarely come under scrutiny in the field of preservice teacher education research. More research seems to have been done on such conversations between supervisors and in-service teachers or between cooperating teachers and preservice teachers. This dearth of research on supervisory conversations between university supervisors and preservice teachers may help to explain the ambivalent attitude of those responsible for university training programs toward university supervision of practice teaching.

Various authors comment about what goes on in post observation conferences between cooperating teachers and preservice teachers. There seems to be a tendency to focus on ideas and activities immediately useful in the classroom (Stanulis, 1994, p.31), rather than identifying and discussing major themes or issues (Feiman-Nemser, Parker & Zeichner, 1994; Edwards & Ogden, 1998). Haggarty (1995, p. 196) also found that both the cooperating teacher and student teacher "draw largely from their own experience to the exclusion of other

sources" when discussing issues. Ben-Peretz and Rumney, (1991, p.521) remark that "in none of the conferences did the cooperating teacher mention innovations or refer to some theoretical background of teaching". Similarly Edwards and Ogden (1999) found "no evidence of student teachers extracting general principles of pedagogy from their experiences" (p. 8).

Ben-Peretz and Rumney (1991) and Feiman-Nemser, *et al.* (1994, p. 162) found that the cooperating teacher "dominated the talk, asked all the questions and offered all the suggestions" (p. 162), while student teachers were largely passive during the conferences. The focus was on performance and not on the ideas behind what the teacher did or should do. Mentors (cooperating teachers) concentrated on "polishing the visible performance of the student teachers" (Edwards & Ogden, 1998, p. 2). Little was asked of the trainee nor was the thinking of the mentor made explicit. The cooperating teachers were not soliciting reflection on teaching decisions, nor modelling it themselves. There also seems to be avoidance of confrontation. Housego (1987) remarked that: "the interaction between sponsor teachers and their student teachers reveals a conscious avoidance of conflict" (p. 251). Similarly, Haggarty (1995, p. 196), found that both participants "were very polite to each other so that any disagreements were either left unexplored or were ignored".

Thus, it would appear that supervisory conversations involving cooperative teachers with their preservice teachers are not always effective, particularly when important subjects are avoided or when more important points become lost in the flow of detailed comments about the lesson. Of greater concern is the fact that theory learned at the university is not linked to what is going on in the classroom. Equally disturbing is the fact that there is more preoccupation with the here and now of a particular classroom or with perfecting a particular skill than with the implications of what is going on, with a critical analysis of the strategies employed or with a search for alternative approaches. In the light of these observations, further analysis of such conversations appears warranted.

If cooperating teachers are not soliciting reflection and links with theory, what happens in supervisory conversations when the university supervisor is involved? Zimpher, DeVoss and Nott (1980) state that it is university supervisors who encourage the student teachers to reflect on their practice. Both Zimpher *et al.* and Deas, Harrison, Henderson, Knutton, Roberts, and Trafford (1991) indicate that it is the university supervisor who emerges as the source of links between the latest theoretical information and practice as well as an expert in methodology. MacDonald, Baker and Stewart (1995) confirm that the "counselor" (supervisor) supplies the theoretical basis for pedagogical practices. However, Borko and Mayfield (1995) found that "conversation is pretty much on the surface" (p. 514), resulting in little influence on the preservice teachers, while Veal and Rikard (1998) complained of supervisors' infrequent presence. Noting the conflicting picture of the university supervisor's effectiveness and the limited research on their interventions, in this article, I have concentrated on examining and analysing conversations between a university supervisor and preservice teachers.

Analysis of Supervisory Conversations

Various researchers have used different approaches to explore supervisory conversations. Waite (1993) analysed supervisory conferences with beginning teachers from the point of view of the type of interaction: passive, collaborative or adversarial, between the teacher and the supervisor during the exchange. Roberts (1992), used techniques borrowed from discourse analysis, concentrating on the identification of predetermined patterns in the supervisory conversation, first with regard to manifest and latent speaker intent with regard to power (supervisor) and involvement (teacher) and, later (Roberts, 1994), with regard to incidents in which the supervisor makes direct or indirect requests for action which are variously interpreted by the teacher. Haggarty (1995) employed content analysis to quantify different elements in the supervisory conferences of in-school mentors but not those of university supervisors. Clarke (1995, 1998) analysed lessons, post observation supervisory conferences with in-school mentors and discussions about these interactions using video-stimulated-recall in order to identify evidence of reflection on the part of the preservice teachers. All these authors appear to have had a pre-established agenda which directed their exploration of the data.

In none of these studies do the authors look at preservice teachers at the secondary level where the supervisor is someone from the university. Waite (1993) supervised beginning teachers. Haggarty's (1995) conversations were between in-service teachers and their supervisor. Clarke (1995, 1998) analysed conversations between preservice teachers and their school advisor (who one assumes is their cooperating teacher). Edwards and Ogden (1998, 1999) looked at preservice teachers at the primary level in conversation with their cooperating teacher.

Supervisory conversations: construction of teaching knowledge

Referring to supervision in psychotherapy training, Bobele, Gardner and Beiver (1995) point out the socio-constructive nature of such supervisory exchanges. The supervisory conference is seen as a conversation which provides the occasion to construct understandings, in which ideas can emerge collaboratively in situations where multiple solutions are possible in any given context. They underline the fact that "supervisees tend to learn and retain information and skills when they feel a sense of ownership of the behaviours being promoted" (Bobele *et al.*, p 22).

Waite (1995) touches on the same theme, discussing Bakhtin's distinction between authoritative discourse, which Waite relates to directive supervisory discourse (p.124), and internally persuasive discourse, which promotes the development and growth of the individual through the stimulation of reflection on his or her own practice and beliefs. In conformity with the latter point of view, the role of supervisory dialogue should become that of helping the teacher to see another perspective, of stimulating reflection, of encouraging the construction of his or her own teaching knowledge. It is this socio-constructive view of the supervisory conversation which was investigated in the data which was examined

for this paper. A group of preservice teachers tried to implement cooperative learning activities in their classrooms during student teaching. Analysis of both our pre and post observation conversations provides evidence of teaching, learning and meaning-making incidents which help the preservice teachers reflect on, construct their knowledge of the approach and fine-tune their practice, incidents which help to foster the use of the new teaching approach.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative approach was used including a heuristic outlook as well as techniques of ethnographic study. The heuristic outlook stems from the supervisor/researcher's questioning with regard to what is happening (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 1990) as well as from the dialogue which takes place in the supervisory relationship. The ethnographic aspect corresponds to the role of the researcher/supervisor with regard to the preservice teachers. This can be equated to that of participant observer over a prolonged period, using ethnographic techniques within an educational framework (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984). My supervisory role permitted me to follow the evolution of the preservice teachers' planning and in-class implementation of cooperative learning throughout their student teaching.

The planning and feedback conferences involved in a supervisor's work with preservice teachers fit into the category of informal unstructured participant conversation, a 'soft' interview format. The object of the discussion is clear, namely reflective support for the preservice teacher's learning of the new teaching approach. In this situation the conversation is not simply aimed at "understanding the meaning that the preservice teacher is making of her/his experience" (Seidman, 1991 p. 4) but also at helping her/him live it. The "active interview" as described by Holstein & Gubrium (1995) seems to come closest to what goes on in the normal supervisory conference. Throughout the exchange, the supervisor participates actively in the conversation in an interpretive operation which involves both participants in the same process of construction of meaning.

Several types of supervisory conversations were used in exploring how the preservice teacher learns to use cooperative learning activities in the classroom: planning sessions before student teaching, feedback conferences after in-class observation, video-stimulated group discussions and individual semi-structured wrap-up interviews at the end of the research process. The conversations with the preservice teacher were aimed at promoting learning and reflection through the use of, among other strategies: questioning, reassuring, supporting, guiding, suggesting and teaching. During these conversations, both the university supervisor and the preservice teachers collaborated in the construction of their understanding of cooperative learning and its use in the classroom.

Procedure

Each participant was asked to integrate a choice of five different cooperative learning activities into their planning from among those in Table I. The

cooperative activities were selected so as to allow a progression from easy to plan, simple to manage activities to activities which are complex to plan and manage. Despite this rationale, the preservice teachers were free to integrate these activities in whichever order they saw as most suitable for their particular context. The activities were planned by each participant according to the discipline they were teaching (History, Geography, Economics or English Second Language) and the content which was to be covered.

Table I Selection of Possible Cooperative Activities

Activity	Qualities
Think-Pair-Share (Lyman, 1981)	Easy to plan and manage
Snowball (Clarke, Wideman & Eadie, 1990)	Easy to plan and manage
Learning Together (Johnson, <i>et al.</i> , 1984)	Complex to plan and manage
Cooperative Review (Slavin, 1995)	Complex to plan and manage
Jigsaw (Aronson, 1978)	More complex to plan and manage
Group Investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992).	More complex to plan – longer term.

Participants

Over two one-year periods, fourteen third and fourth year preservice teachers participated in the larger study mentioned earlier. They were all volunteers from among the three groups of preservice teachers assigned to me as their university supervisor. Each student in accepting to participate knew that she/he was expected to plan and carry out cooperative activities in the classroom.

For the part of the study reported here, I have chosen to concentrate on the conversations which took place between three of the fourteen participants and myself. Studies of the group as a whole or of other cases are published elsewhere (Gwyn-Paquette, 2001a, Gwyn-Paquette & Tochon, in press). The choice of these particular participants was based on the fact that they were in contrasting situations, had managed to work with most of the proposed cooperative activities and had bilingual students in their classes. All three were teaching Canadian History. Alice (all names are pseudonyms) was paired for the practicum with another preservice teacher, Eloise, but their cooperating teacher was on sick leave and had been replaced by a beginning teacher. In contrast, Joan had no partner for the practicum, but worked in close collaboration with her cooperating teacher who was not familiar with the cooperative learning approach.

Analysis

Verbatim transcriptions of the supervisory exchanges with these participants constitute the corpus for analysis. Since the conversations and transcripts are in French, the reader is supplied with a translation. Inductive analysis of the transcripts was carried out through thematic analysis based on constant

comparison. The transcribed data was first coded according to the method described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), Paillé (1994) and Patton (1990), using NVivo (Richards, 1999) as a coding program. As 'patterns' emerged related codes were assigned to categories. Three major themes emerge from the data: supervisory conversations as occasions for problem solving, as support for reflection and as occasions for the discussion of theory.

Supervisory Conversations: Occasions for Problem-solving, reflection and Discussion of Theory

The preservice teachers were able to successfully experiment with a number of different cooperative learning activities. Planning conferences and post-observation conversations between the preservice teachers and their supervisor provided both the impetus for and the reflective analysis of the cooperative activities that were chosen. To a very large extent these supervisory conversations were occasions for problem solving. They supported the preservice teacher's reflection and occasionally they stimulated discussion of theory. Quite often relatively simple technical points worried the preservice teachers or disturbed the smooth progress of the cooperative activity. Occasionally, wider concerns came to the fore.

Planning conferences provided an opportunity for exchanging ideas for the organization of cooperative activities. Post-observation conversations provided multiple occasions to reflect on practice, to question what had gone on, to explore difficulties which had been encountered and to search for alternatives, for solutions. They also proved to be an occasion for both the preservice teacher and the supervisor to raise subjects of concern, to construct understanding. The discussion sometimes evoked theory. As their practical knowledge accumulated, the preservice teachers gradually developed greater ease and gained confidence in their ability to plan and manage cooperative activities, emerging from the study with positive experiences to bolster their determination to continue their use of cooperative learning.

Problem-solving: Technical support promotes confidence

Of all the cooperative activities which were suggested for the research, Jigsaw caused the preservice teachers the most anxiety. They found it complicated to plan and could anticipate problems due to student movement in the classroom which is part of the Jigsaw process. Alice and Eloise called for my help. They planned a Jigsaw activity around the themes of the decline of the fur trade, changes in agriculture, and the rise of the lumber industry in 19th century Canada. They had already chosen the texts that the students would work with, so that content was not what was worrying them. The heart of their concern was how to organize the teams and re-form them smoothly so as to waste as little time as possible, without losing control. They also were worried about whether the students would really learn the subject matter covered by the activity.

Planning movement in the classroom

Alice and Eloise had prepared numbered and coloured cards to identify the three themes they had planned. Their problem was how to plan for step 2 when the teams of experts were to get together to discuss a different theme each. How would they know where to go?

SUP: The cards are coloured according to subject?

Alice: Yes. The tables are numbered so that when the students enter the class they know where to go, but the numbers will have to correspond with the expert groups as well.

SUP: The coloured cards [for the expert groups], can be placed on the tables while the students are working [on the first step in their base group]. Then you can explain why to them.

The number of students also varied from one group to another. The solution that we found was to vary the number of expert groups according to the number of students in the class. The number of students per expert group could also vary without each group becoming too large.

In step 1, the preservice teachers wanted the students to concentrate on the texts, without their resource books, but they would need their books for the expert groups in step 2. The student teachers wondered how to manage this without the confusion of students having to go to the back of the class to pick up a resource book and, then, find their expert table. Here, we decided to make use of the presence of the student teaching partners,

SUP: Are you both going to be present in the classroom for each of the Jigsaw lessons?

Eloise: That's what I was going to say. It would be great if we could both be there.

SUP: That's it. When we try out an activity for the first time, it can be either the cooperating teacher or your partner who gives a hand. It will help you both to observe your partner. So you can distribute the books.

Alice: Yes

SUP: So it won't be the students who go and get them, it'll be someone else.

Eloise: One less movement!

This was considered an unorthodox solution by some of my colleagues, but I felt that we should take advantage of the presence of a partner in order to render the first attempts at complex cooperative activities less intimidating. In other words, why not use the possibility of help from a partner in order to increase a sense of control of the more risky part of the activity? These two student teachers might have been too anxious about management to make a first attempt at Jigsaw. The

fact that they were given permission to work together and therefore, to share control gave them the scaffold they needed to experiment.

Planning for control of learning

The second problem was how to plan for control of learning. All the students were to be able to answer questions on all three themes. Alice and Eloise wanted to make sure that everyone learned the subject matter

Alice: We have a choice in this lesson. Either we test and it counts or we do this and it counts. We have the choice. It's clear that I start from the principle that if they don't think it counts...

SUP: They work less.

Alice: So, I think it will be a group mark. They have to answer all the questions and then we will quiz them as a group. If they stay where they are, I should be able to question anyone and that person should be able to answer me.

SUP: I wouldn't move them. They should stay where they are.

Eloise: That's the question. Should we use the test as, not exactly as a threat, but? If the activity doesn't work, there is a test...

SUP: Do you need a test?

Eloise: It's to see if they've understood. The content isn't difficult but they need to understand it.

SUP: You can do it as a conclusion. It's just to identify what they have or have not understood. It doesn't count, it's for you, to see if they have understood the subject matter. That's another approach.

The preservice teachers were nervous about what the students would retain from the subject matter covered in the Jigsaw activity. They knew that there was always a question on it in the final exam. They wanted to make sure of the students' understanding and retention of the information and so had prepared a test for them. They were ready to eliminate the test but to hold it over the students' heads in case of non-cooperation. I did not get into a discussion of this particular point, preferring to get them onto another wave-length. Their thoughts about the use of the test were strictly concerned with control, control of what the students learned and of how they behaved. My suggestion was to treat the question of the 'test' differently, to use it to see what the students had retained but not to have it count. In the end they used it as an oral quiz, creating friendly competition between the various teams. In this situation, I purposely avoided discussion of the use of testing as a means of behaviour control. Our time for discussion was limited and I felt that the issue could be treated at another time. Was this a case of avoidance such as mentioned by Housego (1987) and Haggarty (1995)?

It is important to note that these two third year student teachers had not yet acquired sufficient confidence in their ability to manage student behaviour in an

unusual teaching situation, to feel comfortable with handling a lot of student movement in the classroom during the lesson. Their basic concern for control made it necessary to discuss detailed technical aspects of the Jigsaw activity, which more experienced teachers would already have known how to handle. They also wanted to use testing for behaviour management, with comprehension and retention as declared, but perhaps, secondary goals. On the other hand they could see how to divide content quite readily. Their concern for student learning of the content, however, led to anxiety over how to verify content retention. In this situation, the supervisor was helping in problem solving.

Support for Reflection About Technical adjustments

Joan had a clear idea of what she wanted her students to do during the Learning Together activity. Each team was to explore documents dealing with themes about life in Canada during the Roaring Twenties and then explain what they had discovered to the rest of the class, using a transparency that they had prepared as a visual support. However, after giving the lesson for the first time, she was disappointed with what the students had done:

SUP: You're not satisfied. Could you tell me why?

Joan: Because I have the impression that they didn't read all the documents. They had the questions and they just tried to... They are used to answering word for word in their usual exercises. They have a text and a list of questions and they just scan for the answer. The questions are in order, not mixed up. They follow the text. I have the impression that is what they tried to do and that's not what they had to do. I didn't situate them enough either.

SUP: Note that down as something to do. Ask them to read the document first.

Joan: Yes, before giving them the questions. I'll just give them the documents. There are different, little documents. I don't know whether you saw them. I didn't have time to mount them on cardboard. Sometimes there were two sheets, sometimes three. That wasn't good. It would be better to mount them on cardboard.

SUP: So, improve the presentation of the documents. Second insist they read all the documents. That can be the first step. Does each student have to read each document?

A minor problem of unmounted documents seemed to cause confusion, but more serious was the fact of not making it quite clear that each document had to be read by each student for full understanding of the activity. I agreed when Joan suggested that she establish the order of events more clearly. In this incident the preservice teacher has been able to analyse the problem herself, and my role in the conversation has been to support her reflection by paraphrasing and naming.

SUP: Good. What about time? Do you think that they had enough time for the first step?

Joan: It's difficult to say. There were teams that finished really fast and others in the big team in the corner (they didn't want to separate).

SUP: And you didn't think that they...

Joan : They were just chatting

In this sequence, I was the one to raise the subject of time for a task. Joan's answer indicates that she is aware of differences in rhythm between the teams, but she explains it as a problem of off-task behaviour in a large group. What caused the off-task behaviour? Again she seems to know that it's probably because the group was too numerous. Joan had allowed them to form their own teams:

Joan: I let them form their own teams. I felt that this would motivate them to work better. They would perhaps be less intimidated, less shy.

Her decision led to consequences that she had not anticipated – too large a group made for more off-task behaviour and waste of time. As most of the smaller groups had completed the work in less time, Joan learned to restrict the size of her teams. Joan was able to find the probable causes for her problems. All she needed was a prompt from her supervisor to stimulate her reflection, a question or a rephrasing of her idea. She was then able to work out the solutions herself.

Discussion of Theory During Feedback

Supervisory feedback conversation can also go beyond the here-and-now to look at more general issues, including teaching and learning theory.

SUP: It's important that they get a global view of what is to be done and after that we give the detailed instructions. Many of them need a global view of the task. When we only provide step-by-step instructions they are frustrated. *Why are we doing this?* That means that we need to give a global view first, general instructions and then detailed instructions. As it was, it was a bit of a mystery. They didn't know...

Joan: Yes, they didn't know why they were doing things, that's true.

SUP: Though it's also true that some students function better when instructions are given step-by-step.

Joan: Otherwise they feel lost.

SUP: That's it. That's why it's a quick global view and then we go on.

Joan: So they see what's behind it, but that right now we have this to do...

In this sequence, Joan and I are looking at some probable causes for the student's failure to do what she had expected them to do during her Jigsaw activity which served as an introduction to the effects of World War II on life in Quebec. Joan had given her explanations of what to do orally, step-by-step, that is she explained what to do before each step, but gave no overview of the activity. I brought up the idea of different learning needs so that she could see that this, in fact, was part of the problem. She understood my point immediately and was able to complete my thought about different learning styles. In this situation, she needed a diagnostic prompt before referring to theory.

Alice and Eloise planned an elaborate Think-Pair-Share activity for their classes in order to find out exactly where they were in their subject matter. Before their arrival, their classes had had several supply teachers, with the result that the student teachers were not sure of what had really been covered in the previous weeks. The students were asked to complete a chart on the different constitutions enacted in the Canadian colonies before 1867, including dates, major clauses and maps showing territorial changes. They were to do as much as they could on their own, and then they could compare and improve answers in pairs, and finally, in foursomes. The students became upset as they found that they could not entirely complete the chart.

Alice: This kind of activity has to be repeated over time, so that they see how it works automatically. Because today, the subject matter wasn't easy. The approach was new and you were there. There were really a lot of complications.

SUP: I watched what went on. You had three or four questions, which means that the explanation was adequate. Then they set to work. Then they had other questions, which was normal. Maybe you could have said something to calm their anxiety. It's because they are used to being able to answer everything, to complete the work, not leave it unfinished as was the case here. What could you have said to calm them down?

Alice: That it's something that we are going to construct progressively throughout the module. I don't think that I would redo this activity. I would choose a simpler one to get them used to the process, to cooperating.

Alice had found it very stressful to try something new with outside observers present but was able to state this clearly during the feedback conference. Alice expresses her own anxiety with the new approach, while attempting to understand why the students reacted as they did. She names all the stress she was under. I wanted to calm her fears. I tried to reassure her, while also suggesting reasons for the students' reactions. Alice was prepared to scrap the activity, but I wanted her to see that it wasn't necessarily the activity that caused the problem, but rather, the lack of explanation about the objective, about how far the students could go without help and what would happen if they didn't complete the chart. I

tried to help her change her view point, reframe the problem, look at the situation from the students' angle.

SUP: I thought it was an excellent activity. The fact that it is conceived like this, means that there would be a progression. But they aren't used to uncompleted work.

Alice: No, they didn't like having things they didn't know. *What's that? I haven't seen that.*

SUP: So the object of the activity was to construct together?

Eloise: Yes, not to wait for the teacher.

Alice: Also to get them to think: *What do I already know? There may be other things I can identify. I know things already. She will repeat the explanations. She will go over every theme. We can gradually complete the chart.*

The objective wasn't clear enough. The student teachers were reading the students fairly well, but not what had caused the upset. As soon as I mentioned the probable cause, however, Alice agreed. They had needed support in diagnosing the cause of the problem. On the other hand, once I had verbalized it, they understood immediately and were able to elaborate further and to state their intentions. They wanted the students to be able to act independently, to make use of their materials, to recognize what they already knew and to share this with their partner. This sequence showed that the preservice teachers had not only understood the principles of cooperative learning, but were also concerned about their students' ability to recognize and construct their own knowledge.

Conclusion

The relative scarcity of exploration of real supervisory conversations and their impact on changes in preservice teachers' thinking about what they do in class, has left university supervision open to criticism of its effectiveness. In the supervisory conversations that I examined, part of the discussion turns around the improvement of technical aspects of the preservice teacher's organization of the activity. Once made aware of the cause of the difficulty, the student teachers usually integrated the changes proposed and rapidly put them into action. Other excerpts show that the supervisor is prompting, questioning, stimulating the preservice teachers' reflection. Finally part of the conversation refers to principles or theory concerning teaching and learning which may correspond to or be contrasted with beliefs held by the preservice teacher (Butler & Winne, 1995). The supervisory conversation becomes an occasion for interpretation of teaching incidents, for a search for understanding of events and their causes and for finding solutions to problems, as well as for the construction and consolidation of teaching knowledge.

Alice and Eloise were able to do much of their planning for cooperative activities on their own, but needed an overview, from someone whom they considered expert on the question, to finalize the details of their organization of the activity. It is true that the absence of their cooperating teacher and the presence of a

novice substitute probably enhanced the supervisor's role in this instance. These examples, however, are more of the order of what Feiman-Nemser (1998) referred to as practical advice and promotion of technical proficiency and, perhaps, amount to what Edwards and Ogden's (1998) describe as working on the visible performance of these student teachers. Such exchanges are frequent but effective, usually producing rapid change in the preservice teacher's action in class, particularly if the problem is recognized by the preservice teacher as was the case with Joan (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

Joan was able to find solutions for her students' unsatisfactory work after prompting by her supervisor. Her reflection on the situation was stimulated or supported by my remarks. Unlike Joan, preservice teachers are not always able to diagnose the cause of less successful incidents in their teaching. Many need help in exploring possible causes, help that can come from either the cooperating teacher or the university supervisor. Similarly, they may not always have ideas for effective solutions to the problems that they encounter, in which case ideas from a more experienced resource person provide the scaffolding required for change.

The very fact of encouraging and supporting the use of cooperative learning in the classroom, falls into the category of what Feiman-Nemser's (1998) referred to as promotion of innovative flexible teaching. This is particularly evident in this report as it is the supervisor who is the main actor in supporting the experimentation of a teaching practice which is both new to the preservice teachers and to their cooperating teachers. We also see that some of the conversation either promotes thinking about more general themes such as learning style or encourages the verbalization of intentions based on theory, as when Alice and Eloise seek to provoke their students' thinking (metacognition) about what they know. Zimpher *et al.* (1980), Deas *et al.*, (1991), and MacDonald *et al.* (1995) suggest that it is the university supervisor who establishes links between pedagogical practices and theory, who helps the students relate classroom incidents to larger frames of reference. This is true in parts of the conversations I have explored. However, I do not think that this as frequent as these authors appear to indicate, nor are we necessarily referring to 'grand' theory but rather to accepted principles of teaching.

In this study in my role of university supervisor, I stimulated and supported the introduction of a teaching approach which the cooperating teachers were not using and with which the students in the practice teaching classrooms were not familiar. The preservice teachers received encouragement and help with planning and were stimulated to reflect on the results in the classroom. These discussions also provided occasions to vent their reactions and to search for alternative ways of proceeding (Gwyn-Paquette, 2001b; Gwyn-Paquette & Tochon, in press; Samaras, & Gismond, 1998; Wideen, *et al.*, 1998). In effect our conversations stimulated and supported their experimentation of a 'new' teaching approach – cooperative learning. Without such support, it is not at all certain that these preservice teachers would have tried to work with cooperative learning.

If the host teacher does not promote experimentation in varied teaching approaches, who will? I found that conversations with the university supervisor

provided occasions for problem solving, for reflection and for discussion of theory, all of which supported their construction of practical teaching knowledge of cooperative learning. I suggest that the university supervisor's contribution to innovation needs to be reevaluated, via an analysis of the relationship of supervisory conversations to the experimentation of varied teaching practices by preservice teachers. This article constitutes a first step in this direction.

Acknowledgements

The research reported in this article was supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, (410-97-1448). I am most grateful to the preservice teachers who participated in the study. Nor could I have completed this study without the careful work of Yvon Rouillard who transcribed the supervisory conversations. Particular thanks also go to F. V. Tochon for his suggestions concerning the manuscript.

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