1. BECOMING A UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR

Troubles, Travails, and Opportunities

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to do supervision? What exactly is my role as a supervisor of pre-service teachers? Am I even doing this right? In addition to the fairly significant reduction in pay, these several questions were just a sample of the constant sources of worry that surrounded me as I left the high school social studies classroom to assume the role of university supervisor. The recollections collected below represent my experience of the process of becoming a university supervisor and my efforts to make sense of that role.

This reflective chapter traces my development as a university supervisor over a two-year period. In the first section, I detail several of the obstacles that I encountered in negotiating the norms and expectations of a teacher education program, my transformation from classroom-based teacher to field-based teacher educator, and my awkward attempts to navigate the sometimes competing interests of stakeholders affected by work as a university supervisor. Section two builds on those and other initial themes and explores the manner in which I came to internalize and understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the ongoing process of becoming a university supervisor. The final section of this chapter unpacks new understandings surrounding the value of collaborative inquiry, dialogue, and program design in the context of developing and problematizing effective field-based supervisory practices.¹

TROUBLES

Trial by Fire

Given the critical importance of the field-based experiences in teacher education, it is somewhat surprising to find that so little in the way of university supervisor training is available. Beyond a casual introduction to the mechanics of field supervision, I do not recall any sort of formal induction to the work when I was asked to supervise student teachers as a graduate assistant. I was oriented to the pre- and post-assessment processes that our program adopted, as well as the Likert-type assessment tool that was to be completed twice per semester. I was also offered samples of introductory

¹ A. Cuenc (Ed.), Supervising Student Teachers: Issues, Perspectives and Future Directions, 3–20. © 2012 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.
letters that might serve to establish contact with student teachers and with our school partners (i.e., cooperating teachers). To be sure, my colleagues, both faculty and fellow graduate students, were more than open to any questions or advice that I might have solicited. The trouble for a new supervisor, of course, was that I was largely unaware of what sorts of questions I should be asking and what sorts of situational conflicts might arise.

Despite my novice position as a university supervisor, I also did not lack any conception whatsoever of supervision; I was not, to say it another way, a completely blank slate. In the first place, at the time that I took on the new role I was not far removed from the experience of student teaching myself. As a part-time doctoral student and a converted anthropologist, I completed the student teaching semester only three years earlier in the very program I found myself working with as a university supervisor. Naturally then, I had some conception of the program goals and the relationships expected between cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and student teachers in the field. In addition, as a part-time graduate student and a full-time, secondary-level social studies teacher during the years immediately preceding my initial experience as a university supervisor, I had held a variety of roles associated with the “training” of new teachers. Given my ties to the university, I was often asked to serve as a cooperating teacher. I frequently opened my classroom to both practicum students and to student teachers. And finally, I also worked with several other graduate student peers in the doctoral program to establish a research agenda in the area of mentoring and supervision, specifically, the pairing of student teachers in the field. With that in mind, through my varied experiences as a cooperating teacher, a graduate student, a former student teacher, and researcher, I had developed some understandings of the program framework and the processes associated with teacher education. Interestingly enough, and despite all of these rich and varied experiences, I entered my new role as university supervisor with a great deal of hesitation and uncertainty. While I was in a position, given my background, to act as field-based teacher educator, gauging the effectiveness of the processes that I initially adopted, not to mention the suitability of those processes in a particular teacher education program, was quite challenging.

Unpacking Program Themes

The teacher education program that I was affiliated with as a graduate student was committed to creating a certain type of social studies educator. Although our work was organized around several dozen components pertaining to teacher effectiveness, we were particularly committed to five core themes. In no particular order, the core themes of the program were diversity, collaboration, critical reflection, active student engagement in worthwhile learning, and rationale-based practice. Together, the themes intended to promote a sort of reform-minded social studies education, one