



# School administrators and university practicum supervisors as boundary brokers for initial teacher education in Chile



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Expanding the roles of school principals in the practicum to include their work as instructional leaders.
- Boundary processes to bridge between schools' and universities' communities of practice.
- Placement of teacher candidates in schools involves boundary works for supervisors and school administrators.
- Supervision of teacher candidates in school involves boundary work for supervisors and school administrators.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 16 March 2014  
 Received in revised form  
 11 February 2015  
 Accepted 17 February 2015  
 Available online 11 March 2015

### Keywords:

Pre-service teacher preparation  
 School principal  
 Practicum supervisor  
 ITE practicum

## ABSTRACT

The study examines school administrators' perspectives on a central problem of the school-based component of initial teacher preparation: the distance between schools and universities. Data obtained through in-depth interviews and focus groups with administrators (N = 51) from 36 schools were analyzed using Wenger's (2000) theory of inter-organizational learning. Findings suggest that an expansion of the roles supervisors and school administrators have traditionally played in the practicum may help reduce this gap. As brokers for their respective institutions they can coordinate actions by gaining access to the meanings each community assigns to practices and acknowledging the competence each brings to the practicum.

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## 1. Introduction

Around the world, current reforms in initial teacher education advocate expanding the school-based components of the curriculum (practicum or clinical preparation) and decreasing university-based coursework (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011). Studies spanning across different countries have concurred in identifying a number of tensions in the work that schools and universities need to coordinate so teacher education becomes a shared enterprise. Often there is a lack of clarity and awareness of the roles played by each institution and its respective actors, a lack of shared goals, disconnections in how each institution defines competent teaching,

and a lack of policies to support schools' involvement in initial teacher education (Brisard, Menter, & Smith, 2006; Kuter & Koç, 2009; Moran, Abbott, & Clarke, 2009; Mutemeri & Chetty, 2011; Southgate, Reynolds, & Howley, 2013; Zeichner, 2010, 2012). These studies provide examples of how these problems are intensified, as the university (often represented by the practicum supervisor) has only a slight presence at the schools (Cuenca, 2010; Gürsoy, 2013; Nguyen, 2009; Uusimaki, 2013).

To address these problems, researchers and policymakers have argued for changes in how universities relate to schools, suggesting the development of partnerships with a focus on a shared commitment to pupils' learning (Allen, Ambrosetti, & Turner, 2013; Musset, 2010; NCATE, 2010; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2012). Studies on school–university partnerships tend to concur that one of the most intractable issues is the feasibility of developing a project that aligns the needs and expectations of all parties (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2008; Leonard, Lovelace-Taylor, Sanford-Deshields, & Spearman, 2004; Teitel, 2001). A key for this alignment

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is the development of common knowledge at the boundaries between professional practices enacted in schools and those enacted at the universities (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Edwards, 2011; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013; Wenger, 2000).

Although research on the practicum has largely neglected school administrators, their role as instructional leaders suggest that their participation in the practicum could make a significant contribution to develop this common knowledge. The current study reports findings from in-depth interviews and focus groups held with 51 school administrators who discussed their and the university-based practicum supervisors' participation in the practicum activities implemented in their school. Their perspectives about the distance between schools and universities were analyzed through Wenger's (2000) theory of inter-organizational learning.

## 2. The practicum in initial teacher preparation: bridging two social learning systems

Wenger (2000) posited three distinct modes of belonging through which people develop and show competence to participate in social learning systems: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Social systems are structured by three elements that shape and are shaped by participation in these systems: communities of practice, boundary processes among communities, and identities. Given space restrictions and the premise of this study that the practicum operates at the boundaries between universities' and schools' respective organizations, next we attend to the boundary dimensions of the framework.

Wenger (2000) advanced several conditions to engage in the kinds of boundary processes that enable people to develop competence to participate in another community and expand what is understood as competent in one's own community. These conditions include: a shared interest around an activity, open engagement to address real differences, finding common ground in interests and needs, and recognizing the competence of others. The work done at the boundaries by university supervisors, university and school administrators, cooperating teachers, and teacher candidates involves three processes: coordination, transparency, and negotiability. With these elements Wenger proposed a matrix to examine how the three modes of belonging affect these qualities of boundary processes.

### 2.1. Coordination

Coordination encompasses schools accommodating the practicum-related practices developed at the university as well as universities accommodating those developed by schools. This assumes that members from these communities carry on joint activities and resolve differences based on sufficient understandings of their respective perspectives (Wenger, 2000). This represents a challenge, as several studies have noted a lack of clarity surrounding the expectations and responsibilities of those involved in supervising teacher candidates. Often these issues lead to very different interpretations of what practices are required or desirable from the various members of each community (Allen et al., 2013; Bradbury & Koballa, 2008; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Chambers & Armour, 2011). Beyond role clarification, concerns have been expressed over the amount and quality of preparation universities plan for the development of supervisory practices (Bates, Drits, & Ramirez, 2011; Chambers & Armour, 2011; Cuenca, 2010; Levine, 2011; Orland-Barak, 2005).

### 2.2. Transparency

Coordination does not entail a need to understand the logic or assumptions of the practices involved (Wenger, 2000). Boundary

work that gives access to the meanings, commitments, norms, and traditions constructed for the practices developed by each system enables an understanding of their common ground. Bates et al. (2011) linked the quality of the supervisory experience to supervisors' awareness of their professional knowledge and to making explicit to teacher candidates the model of teacher learning that underpins their practices. Reconciling definitions of competent teaching developed at the university with those adopted by a school has been shown to be a source of conflict among university supervisors and cooperating teachers (McDonald et al., 2013). In the practicum, lack of transparency inhibits confrontation of the tacit and unrecognized models of professional development that guide the actions of cooperating teachers and university supervisors (Bullough & Draper, 2004). Wenger's framework reminds us that this conflict is not among individuals within the triad, thus it is unlikely to be resolved by attempts to align them in isolation from their respective community.

### 2.3. Negotiability

Boundary processes that support mutual learning need to provide a two-way connection (Wenger, 2000). For example, the university may provide schools with a very detailed description and rationale of the tasks required from cooperating teachers. Most likely, these will be reconstructed based on school-level contextual factors that are congruent with the practices and identities within that community. This reconstruction, however, needs to be a joint process to minimize contradictions that divert teacher candidates' attention from their learning and their pupils' learning (Bullough & Draper, 2004). Chambers and Armour (2011) examined the contradictions experienced by teacher candidates during the practicum when the university handbook was not aligned with the roles they observed enacted by cooperating teachers and university supervisors. Candidates were not adequately supported when cooperating teachers believed that it was the role of the university, not the school, to help candidates develop professional knowledge.

### 2.4. Brokering across boundaries

In Wenger's (2000) framework, bridging across communities of practice requires intentional work involving "people who act as 'brokers' between communities, artifacts (things, tools, terms, representations, etc.) ... and a variety of forms of interactions among people from different communities of practice" (p. 235). Brokering enables the introduction of elements of one community of practice into another as people share artifacts and interact to coordinate, make meanings transparent and negotiate spaces for joint participation. Goldring and Sims (2005) examined a university–community–district partnership to develop school leaders in the Nashville area (United States). One of the key findings was the importance of multiple layers of leadership and the existence of a bridging role for negotiating the

uneven paths that so many inter-organizational relationships usually stumble on. ... The bridger role was a boundary spanner that helped collect, share, and process information. As a result of the boundary spanning role, trust developed quickly, and turf wars never emerged. (Goldring & Sims, 2005, p. 245)

Research studies that have used the notion of boundary work in the teacher education context have most often drawn from cultural historical activity theory (Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Basmadjian, 2007; Edwards, 2011; Kerosuo & Toiviainen, 2011; Zeichner et al., 2012). Studies grounded in the theory of communities of practice have used the metaphor of boundary work to examine teachers'

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