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Walsh, Kerryann and Elmslie, Leona (2005) Practicum pairs: An alternative for first field experience in early childhood teacher education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 33(1):pp. 5-21.

Accessed from   http://eprints.qut.edu.au

Full title	Practicum Pairs: An Alternative For First Field Experience In Early Childhood Teacher Education
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Word count	Abstract = 96 Body (excluding references) = 6512

ABSTRACT   *This paper focuses on partnership between pairs of students in early childhood education during a teaching practicum in preschools and kindergartens. One hundred students enrolled in early childhood preservice teacher education programs at a large metropolitan Australian University were paired and placed in kindergartens and preschools with host teachers. The project aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of host teachers and students involved in the paired practicum which was evaluated qualitatively using semi-structured surveys of host teachers and students. This paper identifies eight practices and two principles making this paired practicum successful or not successful.*

Introduction

This paper examines the trial of a new initiative in early childhood teacher education programs at an Australian University in which early childhood education students were paired for their first 20-day practice teaching block (practicum[1]) in preschools and kindergartens. This project was implemented at a time when the University was on the brink of a reconceptualised teacher education program with a re-envisioning of the "old technology" of practicum towards a more relevant engagement in professional workplace learning (Groundwater-Smith, 2000, p.5; Groundwater-Smith, Deer, Sharp & March, 1996). This project was also implemented within a broader agenda involving ideological aspirations to reconceptualise the preparation of future early childhood educators (Goodfellow & Sumsion, 2000) and functional aspirations to flourish collegial partnerships between the University and early childhood settings in the community.

Recent government and industry commentary on higher education are emphatic about the need for universities to graduate professionals equipped for the demands of rapidly changing work environments (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002; Commonwealth Department of Science, Education and Training, 2002; Education Queensland, 2001). Graduate attributes such as the ability to communicate effectively, to respect diversity and difference, and to work productively in teams, are valued as important skills, which can be honed at university and then applied in workplaces of the future (Ministerial Council On Education, Employment, Training And Youth Affairs, 1999; Sinclair, 1999).

Importantly for early childhood education, collaboration and partnership are well established within epistemology, scholarship and policy in early childhood education. Interpersonal and group skills (McLean, 1991) – what Goodfellow (1995) refers to as "groupness" (p.14) are claimed as essential features of early childhood education environments. Building partnerships is upheld as one of the key components of an effective preschool curriculum (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1998). In policy, collegial partnerships, that is, partnerships involving teams of practitioners, parents and other professionals (from community service organisations, teacher aides, assistants, administrators, directors, licensees and other workers) are considered to be essential for the development of responsive preschool programs that can lead to improved outcomes for children (Education Queensland, 2000; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996). It follows, therefore, that practical experience in

developing positive and productive working partnerships is necessary for early childhood students, and that a logical site for this experience is the practicum.

Anecdotal evidence from our University suggested that pairing students for practicum was intermittently undertaken on an ad hoc basis in early childhood, primary and secondary field experiences. There was no evidence of outcomes and relatively little was known about the practices and principles that should guide student pairing for practicum in general, or in early childhood contexts in particular.

To establish a theoretical basis for pairing, we turned to the literature on cooperative work with peers in higher education, which is informed by a corpus of literature in cognitive and social psychology based on the work of Vygotsky (1962) and Piaget (1971). These theorists proposed that higher levels of performance on tasks could be achieved with peer support and assistance. Some examples of the application of this theory include those relating to *peer coaching* (Ackland, 1991; Wynn & Kromrey, 1999), *peer tutoring* (Falchikov, 2001), *reciprocal peer coaching* (Ladyshewsky, 1999, 2001), *peer learning* (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001) and *cooperative learning* (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). Such applications propose that cooperative work with peers holds the potential to promote a sense of self-efficacy, foster critical reflection and reassessment of students' ways of thinking, and facilitate creative generation of new ideas and problem-solving (Boud, 2001; Falchikov, 2001; Ladyshewsky, 1999).

Wynn and Kromrey (1999) highlighted the value of peer coaching in early field experiences in teacher education in their four-year study of practicum students prior to their final field experience in elementary schools in Florida, USA. This study tested the transfer of instructional strategies from the university environment to field experiences in classroom contexts, and examined participant perceptions of the approach. Prior to beginning their placements in schools, student teachers engaged in on-campus coursework classes about instructional strategies, and were trained in peer coaching techniques in practical sessions. The authors found benefits of peer coaching during the field placement in schools such as: the development of support and collegiality; improved lesson planning, preparation and presentation; and expansion of opportunities for reflection and self-analysis. Furthermore, peer coaching during the practicum was perceived to have benefits beyond the field experience itself. It was considered to have an overall positive impact on students' practice teaching experiences and professional development.

Early childhood educators in Western Australia have contributed the most relevant work on pairing students in field experiences in Australia to date (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997; Maloney & Campbell-Evans, 1998). In their study of third year students working collaboratively to plan, implement and evaluate a unit of work during a four-week primary practicum, these researchers found that working in pairs was a less stressful practicum experience for students because they felt supported and shared responsibilities. Furthermore, students reported that they acted as motivators for each other.

In adopting pairing as an initiative in this trial, we too hoped to enhance the opportunity for student teachers to engage in teamwork, collaborate in curriculum decision-making and develop practices for critical reflection (Walsh & Elmslie, 2002; Walsh, Elmslie & Tayler, 2002). Our evaluation, however, focused on the study of pairing to better understand what worked and what did not work, in the spirit of improving the conduct of the practicum and contributing to broader discussions about the importance of reconceptualised field experiences in teacher education programs.

Our trial involved pairing one hundred early childhood education students for their first teaching practicum in preschools and kindergartens in the Brisbane metropolitan area in Queensland, Australia. The evaluation aimed to map the perceptions and experiences of host teachers and students involved in the paired practicum. The focus of the entire project was three-fold: to document the ways that pairs worked together; to articulate the outcomes of pairing; and to identify the practices and principles making paired practicum successful or not successful. The findings reported in this paper, however, focus on the last of these three.

The Pilot Project

One hundred student teachers from a class of three hundred were paired at forty-eight preschools and kindergartens in Brisbane[2]. Host teachers were recruited via a letter of invitation followed by personal telephone contact. Student teachers did not choose their partners, but were paired according to their preference for sites at which to undertake the practicum and these were usually in close geographical proximity to their homes[3]. All

student participants were female, which generally reflects current trends within the field
(OECD, 2001).

Student teachers were oriented to their paired practicum via a workshop day. This
involved providing a background to teamwork and working with peers, and tutorials
designed for students to get to know each other, and to begin observing and planning
together. Host teachers were invited to attend one of seven symposia held at different
locations throughout Brisbane. The symposia content included readings on cooperative
teaching, suggestions for ways that pairs could work together and information about
University expectations and the host teacher's role. Teachers who were unable to attend
a symposium were sent information about strategies to support student teachers working
in a pair, and received telephone contact from the Paired Practicum Project Officer[4] to
discuss this information.

The Evaluation Design

To design the evaluation of this trial we adopted a qualitative action research approach
using the plan, act and observe, and reflect sequence (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).
Action research begins with the explicit desire to transform practices and advance
understanding about an innovation or initiative (MacNaughton, 2001). In the spirit of
evaluation, research on the paired practicum trial was seen as a way to build knowledge
about pairing to inform future practice. As Groundwater-Smith (2000) contends:

> Doing something does not necessarily mean learning from something.
>
> Experience is not of itself a good teacher. The doing needs to be analysed,
>
> queried, interrogated and reflected upon in public and accountable ways (p.5).

The perspectives of the participants, that is host teachers and students, were considered central to this project. Therefore, a qualitative survey instrument utilising rating scale responses and short answers was considered to be well suited to generating the perceptions and experiences of participants. Data collection involved three components:

1. semi-structured telephone interviews - with host teachers from all placement sites at the mid-point of the practicum;

2. semi-structured surveys requiring short written responses and rating of the quality of experiences on rating scales – with participating students, host teachers and university mentors at the end-point of the teaching practice; and

3. three case studies - of student pairs in the final week of their practicum.

For this paper, data are drawn from the telephone interviews (response rate of 100%) and semi-structured surveys (response rate of 64% for host teachers and 38% for student teachers). Qualitative survey responses were analysed, thematically, by grouping similar responses and coding them to capture shared understandings of participants' perceptions. Generally, we followed Strauss (1987) in looking for:

- interactions among actors (what we term 'the ways pairs worked together');

- consequences (what we term the 'outcomes' of pairing); and

- conditions (what we term 'practices and principles' making paired practicum
  successful or not successful)

The findings presented here focus on the third of these.

Findings

In general terms, host teachers and student teachers were satisfied with their experience of participating in a paired practicum. A greater proportion of students than teachers reported satisfaction with pairing. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of student respondents indicated that they had a 'good' or 'excellent' experience on their paired practicum and sixty-two percent (62%) of host teachers rated this as a 'good' or 'excellent' experience. Eighty-two percent (82%) of students said they would like to participate in a paired practicum again. Themes that emerged from the data in relation to practices and principles making paired practicum successful or not successful are reported below.

Practices and Principles Making Paired Practicum Successful or Not Successful

Eight practices and two principles were identified from the data as key factors contributing to the success of a paired practicum. Practices are practical elements that, once identified, can be provided by participants in the practicum – the University, host teachers and student teachers - to enhance the experience. Practices include: preparing for practicum; briefing and debriefing; starting positively; creating a supportive learning environment; assessing students fairly; thinking laterally about ways that pairs can work together; ensuring adequate time for host teachers; and considering the school/centre

context. Principles are determining values underpinning the practicum that, if present, can enhance the experience. These included: the importance of student compatibility; and the need to anticipate and affirm student differences.

Practice 1: Preparing for Practicum

Both host teachers and students recognised the importance of preparatory work prior to the beginning of the practicum. Preparatory work had four components: professional development for host teachers in the form of teacher symposia; preparation for students in the form of a workshop day; clarity of expectations and consistency of information across the two groups; and opportunities to get to know each other prior to beginning practicum.

The first component, the host teacher symposia, was provided out of school hours. Forty-two percent (42%) of host teachers attended the symposia and considered that it provided valuable preparation in pre-empting issues that may arise on the practicum. This function was considered secondary, however, to the benefits of listening and responding to other teachers' ideas about hosting student teachers, and talking with university staff directly about the practicum:

> The symposia was valuable, it put the prac into perspective for me. It was great to talk to other teachers and listen to their expectations of their students. I had never done that before and I would like to do that again. (Teacher)

The second component involved students' attendance at a pre-practicum workshop day. Host teachers, more so than students, considered this prepared students well for the experience by equipping them with information about expectations. For the students, however, the University-initiated workshop day was considered most beneficial because it provided an opportunity for pairs to get to know each other, and to begin to understand how they may support each other, pool their ideas and give constructive feedback.

The third component was clarity of expectations and consistency of information across the two groups of participants. Host teachers were informed of the content of the students' workshop day at their symposia. Students were informed about the types of issues discussed at the teacher symposia. The host teachers indicated that knowing how students had been prepared for the practicum was helpful because they then held clear expectations of the students' learning requirements. A practicum information booklet distributed to all participants included information on roles and responsibilities, requirements of the practicum, examples of types and standards of expected written work, and details of processes for student assessment (students were assessed individually on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis[5]). Host teachers and students stressed the need for clear guidelines about the specific requirements of a paired practicum. This included detailing how many and which types of learning experiences should be undertaken jointly or individually, and specifying the types of record keeping and documentation (observations of children, developmental profiles of children, plans for learning experiences) that should be kept by the students.

The fourth component was perceived to be more important for students than for host teachers. It was important for students to not only get to know each other, but to meet and get to know their host teacher before the practicum began. Usually this began with an after-school pre-prac visit wherein participants would engage in some preliminary negotiations about the practicum such as starting and finishing times and dress standards, as well as sharing personal goals for the practicum. Host teachers would often share information about the centre environment and clientele. Students who went on to work well with their partner explained that attending this first meeting together was very important to the success of pairing because they felt that they began on an equal footing.

Practice 2: Briefing and Debriefing

The most commonly cited practice contributing to the success of paired practicum was the provision of briefing and debriefing sessions for all participants: the host teacher, both students and, in some cases, the assistant or teacher aide. Opportunities for the host teacher and two students to discuss and evaluate their daily work (e.g. observations of the children, interpretations, and follow-up plans) were crucial. As one teacher noted:

> It was very important to have opportunities at break times to discuss programs, raise questions, extend understanding of teaching responsibilities with each other and then with classroom staff. (Teacher)

Specific agendas in these meetings involved sharing observations of children, jointly planning follow-up learning experiences[6], and providing constructive feedback in relation

to each other's teaching. These sessions led to productive outcomes as indicated in the following:

> The students had observed the interest of the children in small box collage at the indoor work table. They discussed constructively how they could extend the children's interest in this area. After two days of busy 'box collection' the students presented the children with a huge variety of large, medium and small boxes, collage, glue, masking tape and paint. This was all done on the outside veranda much to the delight of everyone involved. [It was] a great learning experience for the students as well as the children. (Teacher)

Although these types of joint discussions were very important, host teachers also recognised the need to arrange individual discussions with each student. This enabled host teachers to discuss potentially sensitive feedback with individual students and to avoid any competition between the students:

> I found that if one student worked very well with something it was hard to give them sufficient credit for that without the other student being put under pressure to compete or come up with a new idea. (Teacher)

Host teachers were sensitive to the tension created by the need for pairs to work in partnership and it was clear that some teachers had even agonised over how to best present feedback to students in ways that would not damage their self-esteem. For example:

> It was difficult when I was taking the students individually to discuss their
>
> experiences and techniques, especially when the other knows I'd be making
>
> negative comments. (Teacher)

The focus on student's self-esteem was prominent in the data and is worthy of future

investigation.

Practice 3: Starting Positively

The students identified two dimensions to the practice of starting positively. The first

dimension was about starting together on the same date and at the same time (i.e. not

having one student trying to catch up). As students were concerned about the potential

for competition, they recognised that one way this could be managed was through

commencing together from the first day of the practicum, or moreover, the pre-practicum

visit. When students began together they reportedly felt they were treated more equally.

The second dimension was about beginning to work together from the start of the

practicum and participating in a positive joint teaching experience early in the practicum.

These could be simple exercises such as:

> Setting up an obstacle course together for a student who had low upper body
>
> muscle tone – heaps of discussion and planning and innovative ideas. (Teacher)

More complex experiences were also described such as:

> One student told the story while the other student worked the puppets. One student made the puppets and the other made the theatre box and scene – good cooperation was needed between the students. (Teacher)

Practice 4: Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Students and host teachers made similar comments about the need for a supportive learning environment during the practicum. Each group stressed the importance of the role of the other in creating this milieu. Host teachers emphasised the students' contribution by stressing that pairing worked well when both students had a positive attitude towards learning, and when they were helpful and respectful towards each other and the teaching staff. Host teachers perceived that students giving each other appropriate, constructive and positive feedback contributed to a harmonious environment wherein students were enthusiastic, showed initiative and desired to get the most out of practicum. They also commented that success depended on students demonstrating a commitment to the profession.

Students stressed the host teacher's role in creating a supportive learning environment. Students concluded that for pairing to be successful, the host teacher should be willing to take on pairs and committed to the idea of pairing. In some instances, students, either rightly or wrongly, perceived that their host teacher was finding the supervision of two students burdensome or challenging and they projected there were consequences for them. For example:

> It seemed to put more pressure on the teacher to have two students. (Student)

and

> I feel that having two students may place extra pressure on the supervising
>
> teacher as he/she has to take out extra time to meet and discuss our folders and
>
> progress. [This meant] less time for in depth discussions. (Student)

For pairing to work well for them, students thought that teachers had a responsibility to create the conditions under which ideas and experiences were valued and shared. Furthermore, students viewed host teachers as the defining element in arranging the support for independent and interdependent teaching practice in that they needed to create opportunities for a balance of individual and shared learning experiences for student teachers. Host teachers were therefore challenged to be flexible and to organise their program differently to maximise teaching and learning opportunities for the children in their classrooms and the student teachers.

Practice 5: Assessing Students Fairly

Assessment was the aspect of the paired practicum that was perceived as most problematic. Both host teachers and students saw that there was a conflict wherein the pairing process encouraged teamwork yet students were assessed individually on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis. Sometimes students reported feelings of competition and comparison, which arose as part of the process of assessment, and this created tensions for them and their host teachers. With pairing, it was often difficult to avoid instances where students' progress was compared, overtly or covertly. When either or both students perceived competition and comparison, host teachers were concerned that

they were showing favouritism or comparing the students to the point where one student may feel less adequate when they were praising the other student. The sentiments contained in the following student's statement were common, especially when the pairing was not going well:

> The teacher compared me to my paired student like it was a competition rather than a learning experience. (Student)

Practice 6: Thinking Laterally About Ways That Pairs Could Work Together

In planning learning experiences with two students however, teachers demonstrated some innovation, e.g. assigning students each a 'home' class for which they were responsible for leading the planning and documenting:

> We run a half day sessional preschool. Student one was responsible for the morning group for half of the three-week block and student two was responsible for the afternoon session. They then swapped over so they could experience both groups (one was more challenging). This helped them to feel 'in control'. (Teacher)

Other arrangements included the students swapping groups:

> There are times during the day when we divide the children into two groups as we have a mixed age group. During these times, one day for example, one student would read the story to our kindy children and the other student would be working with our small preschool group. The next day they would swap. Likewise we divided the group for 'show and tell', which meant that the students

both had a group they were responsible for and they would alternate the next day

so they could experience each group. (Teacher)

Thinking laterally about ways that pairs could work together involved abandoning

assumptions about the need for students to have regular practice teaching the entire class.

We interpret this as a kind of cultural shift in conceiving that it would be appropriate for

the students to practice teaching smaller groups. Some host teachers and students

devalued pairing because it did not provide enough opportunities for regular practice in

managing large groups of children.

Practice 7: Ensuring Adequate Time for Host Teachers

Overall, the host teachers reported that hosting a pair of students was more demanding

than hosting an individual student. More time was required for consultation with two

students, and for reading and commenting on two students' written work each day as

evident in the following teacher's comment:

Lack of time for feedback – particularly time to read through two folders and

plans during the day and give adequate feedback. (Teacher)

More strategies were required to support students individually, for example when the

students had specific learning needs or when one student requested a private discussion.

Some teachers were challenged to the point of frustration by having to repeat information

to both students on separate occasions. Others found ways to minimise this, especially

when they hosted two particularly cooperative students:

The students worked well together, discussing and sharing details and ideas.
They would have an idea of what they wanted to implement and then approach
me. (Teacher)

Practice 8: Considering the School/ Centre Context

The practical constraints of classroom size and/or adult to child ratios were considered by
some teachers to influence the centre's ability to effectively accommodate two students.
Some host teachers felt that children were negatively affected by more than usual
numbers of adults in the program. For example:

The high ratio of [staff, parents and students], compared to children in the room
at the one time, could be a problem. (Teacher)

In our environment when the groups are confined in an enclosed area for stories
and group times, having two extra adults didn't work well as the children were
vying for their attention, wanting to sit on their laps etc. (Teacher)

It was the view of host teachers that the physical classroom space its size and
constellation needed to be large enough to accommodate two student teachers.
Furthermore, the particular group of children must be considered suitable for having
additional adults in the program. Therefore, even though teachers may have a
commitment to pairing, they indicated that their class size and constellation would
sometimes require that they deviate from this commitment to ensure the well-being of
their particular class or group. This is interesting given that higher adult to child ratios

would normally be perceived as a benefit to children in a class. Based on the host teacher's comments, however, this needs to be properly considered in the decision to pair or not to pair and further explored in future research.

Principle 1: The Importance of Student Compatibility

Student and host teacher comments included their recommendations for future paired teaching practice and from these comments we ascertained that student compatibility occupied much of their thinking about the degree of success of the paired practicum. Students felt that pairs should be more familiar with each other before beginning practicum. They thought they should have a better understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and were emphatic in stating that they needed more opportunities to get to know each other prior to beginning practicum. Host teachers also detected this and remarked that common interests, backgrounds, and commitment to early childhood teaching were important dimensions to compatibility.

Student responses enabled us to establish a number of issues relating to compatibility that will provide a foundation for future pairing. These included the need to minimise vast or 'marked' differences in:

- attitude (for example avoiding pairing students with vastly different work ethic);
- personality (for example avoiding marked differences, such as pairing dominant students with quiet students);

- experience (for example avoiding marked differences so that students do not feel intimidated, although pairing an experienced with an inexperienced students was noted in some cases to be positive and in others to be negative);

- level of academic achievement (in some instances more able students felt that they 'carried' their less able counterparts);

- age (pairing an older student with a younger student was also noted in some cases to be positive and in others to be negative);

- background (for example pairing an International student with a local student); and

- place of residence (pairing students from the same area enabled them to travel together thus allowing more time to get to know each other and discuss their experiences).

For the students, having something in common enabled them to begin learning about the other's perspectives:

> Learning how to work together – need for cohesion and cooperation. Accepting each other's ideas and [being] open to discussion. (Student)

Host teachers also confirmed that it was the 'marked' differences between students that made working with pairs difficult. Most notably this was when one student worked harder than the other student, when one student was not a team player and wanted individual recognition for the ideas they contributed, when one student shared ideas and did not receive ideas in return, or when students overtly declared that they preferred to

work independently. This could be exacerbated when one student was absent because of illness and then returned finding the working relationship had changed, and when students noticed parents had varying responses to each student.

But this was not enough. Students emphatically stated that they needed further opportunities to meet with their partner prior to the start of the practicum.

Regarding the methods for selecting pairs, the students suggested that part of the preparatory work for the practicum in future could include them selecting their own partner for the practicum or electing to participate or not participate in pairing. As one student explained:

> Although I got on well with my pair, it would have been better if I had chosen who I wanted to be paired with. One problem was that she was a lot more confident than me and I didn't seem to be listened to as much. I also felt the teacher may compare us and feel I wasn't as good. However, this did have an advantage of forcing me to have more confidence. (Student)

Principle 2: The Need to Anticipate and Affirm Student Differences

Although student compatibility was considered to be an important component in the success of the practicum experience, student differences were also considered by host teachers to add both richness and diversity to the task of supervision. In some circumstances however, student differences were considered negatively. For example:

> Their very different personalities and expectations made it difficult for them to
>
> work together. (Teacher)

To be more successful, some students considered basic differences lead to problems in

communicating with each other. This student lamented:

> …[we needed similar] levels of commitment, enthusiasm and passion for
>
> teaching… willingness to share ideas and contribute fairly. (Student)

Host teachers and student teachers, in the majority, suggested that student compatibility

would support collaborative partnerships. However, there was also a strong sense that

pairing students with different strengths so they can learn from each other was also a

benefit of the pairing initiative for the host teacher's own professional development:

> It was valuable in that I had to relate very differently to each of my students as
>
> each had very different personality styles, beliefs, and communication skills.
>
> This forced me to be very aware of individual differences and capabilities. I had
>
> to adjust my expectations in certain areas when speaking to each student.
>
> (Teacher)

Being able to understand another person's point of view also emerged as a key factor in

mediating difference. The importance of empathy in this experience was highlighted in

such comments as:

> I was able to compare / share understandings of children, observations and
>
> planning and see the different techniques and strategies of my partner. (Student)

These types of comments signalled situations in which difference may be able to be used as a potential learning experience.

Discussion

The evaluation of this paired practicum provides valuable insights into the perspectives of host teachers and students who were participants in the project. Overall, most participants reported the paired practicum was a positive experience and many indicated they would like to try a paired practicum again. The findings from this project direct a range of future practical considerations to enhance pairing of student teachers on their first teaching practicum. The findings draw our attention to the learning opportunities that pairing generates and to important considerations about how to best prepare host teachers and students for this experience. These future considerations have been elaborated here in the form of eight practices and two principles, which were identified from the data as key to the success of the paired practicum. The findings of this trial support Wynn and Kromrey's (1999) notion that pairing students is appropriate early in their course before they are expected to take sole responsibility for the class. Evidence from our trial shows that some pairs worked together more effectively and productively than others, and this was dependent upon a number of factors. Clearly, there are advantages to different types of pairing and these require further investigative research (Wynn & Kromrey, 1999).

Significant issues of sameness and difference between students emerged from the trial and require serious consideration in future research. This issue has recently been explored by peer learning advocates, Sampson and Cohen (2001), who explain that twin challenges of *difficulty* and *potential* are present within the diversity exhibited by student peers. They suggest that peer learning in teaching practice prompts reflection about how to use differences between students productively and with relevance to the task of teaching. It also promotes the need to avoid behaviours that mitigate against learning such as stereotyping and oppression. One of the ways these challenges may be overcome is in constructing pairing so that cooperation, working together, mutuality and shared responsibility are emphasised. They suggest that ways of working together that celebrate differences and avoid negative expressions of difference must be embedded in preparation programs and in briefing and debriefing times. To do this, they argue, difference must be considered implicit so that it can be acknowledged as integral to the experience, and so that productive ways of working with difference can be forged.

While student differences must be expected and many positive learning experiences occur as a result of these differences, host teachers and students in this study proposed that collaboration was supported where students have something in common. In considering the factors that are important when pairing students, Sampson and Cohen (2001) stress that the introduction of pairing needs to be carried out carefully to ensure that all participants have time to adjust. To this end, the findings of our pilot project support student teacher pairs having frequent opportunities to meet and get to know each other on several occasions prior to the start of their practicum. Additionally, our study

revealed that student pairs appear to benefit from commencing practicum together (i.e. on the same day) and participating in a positive joint teaching experience early in the practicum. Furthermore, host teachers' feelings of comfort about the initiative were identified as important for successful experiences. We acknowledge the cultural shift involved in introducing an innovation in a field that has relied on traditional approaches for a long time and realise host teachers require support and time for adjustment. As Groundwater-Smith (2002) reflects:

> Teaching is unquestionably physically, emotionally and intellectually challenging work… taking on teacher education students and understanding the nature of their practicum program and its underlying rationale must be perceived by teachers as sufficiently professionally rewarding for them… (pp. 6-7)

An important outcome of the paired practicum trial was that it focused our attention on student assessment. Although students were paired for the practicum, their assessment was carried out individually. Sometimes students reported feelings of competition and comparison which arose as part of the process of assessment, and this created tensions for them and their host teachers. However, assessment is a necessary function of higher education. As Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2001) state, assessment in higher education has the "dual function of judging for the purpose of providing credentials and for the purpose of improving learning" (p.72). For credentials in early childhood education, it s important that student teachers are given honest, reliable and realistic assessments of their progress, and that students who are clearly unsuited to a career in teaching are made aware of this. To improve learning opportunities during practicum, Boud, Cohen and

Sampson (2001) suggest that deep and meaningful learning can result from student's self-assessment and reflection and imply that peer learning has considerable possibility to elevate critical reflection and perspective taking.

To achieve this however, attention must be given to the "creation of a climate for learning and assessment that encourages reciprocal communication and openness to feedback" (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001, p.74). It follows that the major responsibility for the creation of this climate rests with the host teacher, as pointed out by the student responses in this evaluation. However, more collaborative views of the role of host teachers in teaching practice are emerging which point to new partnerships that attempt reciprocity (Gitlin, 2000; Thomson, 2000). By reciprocity, these authors mean that the responsibility for knowledge in the host teacher-student relationship is not the sole responsibly of the host teacher; students must also share their knowledge. Such views are supported in conceptual approaches to collaborative learning by Johnson and Johnson (1990) who propose that basic elements of a collaborative learning situation include positive interdependence and individual accountability, i.e. building a supportive learning environment is the responsibility of all participants.

The assessment issue is further complicated by host teachers' views about assessment. Host teachers tended to eschew notions of competition and comparison, and were conscious of the effect of competition and comparison on student teachers' self esteem and their ability to work together. Consequently they worked to build and maintain the students' self esteem by regularly monitoring each student teacher's confidence levels.

Host teachers' reactions to competition and comparison alert us to their sensitivity to the importance of student teachers' self esteem and we wondered if this was a direct application of their knowledge of the importance of developing healthy self-esteem in children. This is certainly a topic worthy of future study. It is important for host teachers to act responsibly and ethically towards the students they are hosting, and to know that the provision of specific feedback from host teachers can assist students in their development. The issue lies, perhaps, with how we prepare and equip host teachers to judge and communicate student progress. Using principles of adult learning and conceptions of adult self-esteem on practicum should be further explored. Sharing this information with host teachers in preparation for student placements may also help to make student assessment a less onerous and daunting task for host teachers.

The practical demands involved in hosting a pair of students must also be recognised. Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that where individual students have high needs in relation to learning it may be better for them to be positioned in an individual placement rather than a paired placement. Additionally, many teachers identified that hosting a student pair involved greater demands on their time. Therefore, management strategies to minimise this issue should be explored with teachers and students in preparation for future pairing.

We also discovered that for pairing to succeed we needed to provide a strong rationale, engage in professional development with host teachers, and teach strategies relevant to teamwork for students. The results of this trial demonstrate that a solid base for pairing

must be developed by supporting students and host teachers in their roles. As Perry (1997) notes, "the term 'collaboration' is sometimes used in a way that suggests that it is a natural phenomenon and that schools or centres are, by their organizational nature, collaborative enterprises… [but]… many skills and abilities are required in order to collaborate" (p.142). Following the trial we conclude, like Boud (2001), that pairing of students for practicum can be better supported if the concepts underpinning cooperative learning and working in pairs are embedded in the academic component of practicum coursework rather than remaining the sole province of the practicum itself. In this way, working together may become more integral to student thinking and practice.

Conclusion

Without wanting to overclaim the effects, there is compelling evidence that pairing student teachers for this practicum was valuable. The project generated a body of qualitative data that can be used to immediately inform the future pairing of students for practicum; we now know more about what facilitates successful pairing and what conditions may constrain this success and we know more about the demands such an initiative places on host teachers and students.

Future research on pairing should consider comparing the quality of experiences of host teachers and students engaged in paired and single placements; assessing the advantages and disadvantages of different types of pairing; identifying pairing combinations that are most successful via case studies; and ascertaining the impact of explicit teaching of peer learning within the academic component of practicum coursework undertaken on-

campus. These types of studies will contribute further to advancing our understandings about pairing as an innovation in practicum.

NOTES

[1] *Practicum* is a term used in this paper to denote compulsory field experiences in schools and early childhood centres. It is acknowledged that the terms field experience, field studies, professional experience or workplace education, are also used to denote this experience.

[2] Other students undertook practicum in single placements, that is, where one student is placed in a classroom with one teacher or two teachers job-sharing one teaching position.

[3] Where possible, consideration was given to placing graduate students together, given their specific pedagogical needs (Healy, 2001).

[4] The paired practicum project officer was a registered teacher engaged in multiple roles as a liaison and support person for host teachers and student teachers, and as a research assistant for the evaluation of the trial.

[5] The practicum is not graded. Students were assessed on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis at the end-point of the practicum in a *final evaluation*. A formative *interim evaluation* was completed for each student at the mid-point of the practicum. As part of the *interim evaluation*, students were encouraged to complete a copy of the interim evaluation form themselves as a reflective exercise. They then met individually with the host teacher for a discussion of their strengths and areas for further development. Students were provided with written and verbal feedback from host teachers throughout the practicum.

[6] *Learning experiences* is a term used to denote individual, small group and whole group encounters, which may include, but are not limited to formal *lessons*.

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