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2007

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Developing a Professional Identity: First year preservice teachers inschool experience project

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Abstract

It has long been recognised that the process of 'becoming a teacher' is complex. The aim of any teacher education program therefore should be to provide 'high quality learning' (Killen 2005) that entails both theoretical and practical components. These components need to be clearly linked for as Cole and Knowles (2000) claim there is an unmistaken gap between what teachers are taught in pre-service teacher training and what they are expected to do at the 'chalk-face' in the beginning of their professional experience. In response to this obvious challenge current reviews of, and research into, teacher education, have paid particular attention to issues concerning the practical component, commonly known as 'the practicum' (Ramsey 2000, Perry and Allard 2003, Vick 2006). However the traditional 'practicum' where preservice students are 'supervised' by classroom teachers seems to be insufficient in responding to challenges raised. This paper explores how the Faculty of Education in the University of Wollongong attempted to change the traditional 'practicum' by setting up 'inschool experiences' for first year preservice teachers across their first session in their BEd program. These experiences activated the process of bridging the gap between theory and practice for the preservice teachers and most importantly led to the beginnings of preservice teachers developing a professional identity of what it means to 'be a teacher'.

Introduction

It has long been recognised that the process of 'becoming a teacher' is complex. The aim of any teacher education program therefore should be to provide 'high quality learning' (Killen 2005) that entails both theoretical and practical components.

However, Cole and Knowles (2000:9) claim that there is an unmistaken gap between what teachers are taught in pre-service teacher training and what they are expected to do at the 'chalk-face' in the beginnings of their professional experience. Indeed Danielson (1996:2) goes as far as to question novice teachers' ability to even manage 'over 3000 nontrivial decisions daily' as they begin their teaching career. Moreover Danielson (1996:5) argues that the move to a classroom teaching position for a beginning teacher is often a 'jump into the unknown, a matter of survival amid the myriad questions and concerns it presents'. Such statements challenge teacher educators, be they at university or school level, to consider how such a gap can be reduced. Equally as important is the need to consider how stronger links can be made between pre-service training and beginning teachers' professional practice.

We acknowledge that this is not a new area of research, however in recent years it has taken centre stage as governments and bureaucracies focus on 'quality teaching' and the professional knowledge teachers need in order to be 'quality teachers' (Danielson 1996; Darling-Hammond 1997; Fullan 2000; Benham Tye and O'Brien 2002; Nelson 2002; Stronge 2002; Invargson & Rowe 2007). The basic assumptions of the Australian Federal Government report, *Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future* (DEST 2003:149) indicate that 'high quality teachers make a significant and lasting contribution to young people's lives,' and that 'beginning teachers still have much to

learn about their craft and how to be effective in teaching'. The report is very comprehensive with a strong emphasis on the induction of beginning teachers and the need for ongoing professional learning for all teachers. It argues that for beginning teachers it is imperative that support is provided so that they can build on their pre-service foundational knowledge as 'teaching is a dynamic and lively profession. Initial teacher education cannot be expected to suffice for a whole career or even extended periods' (p154). However the question must be asked: what can be expected of initial teacher education?

When articulating what constitutes a 'quality teacher' therefore, we must also examine what constitutes quality pre-service training of 'quality teachers' (Stronge 2002). There is a certainly a growing expectation from employers, schools and beginning teachers themselves that pre-service primary teacher training will prepare graduates pedagogically; will ensure they have adequate content knowledge across the curriculum areas; and will provide them with a repertoire of teaching strategies (Ramsey 2000; Stronge 2002). More than ever preservice teachers themselves expect that as newly beginning teachers they must 'hit the ground running'. They are aware that they need to have sound pedagogical, theoretical and subject specific knowledge that goes beyond survival.

For instance the NSW *Model of Pedagogy* proposed by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, (2003:7) expects all its teachers to be able to understand and use pedagogy that has three dimensions: namely 'intellectual quality', 'quality learning environment' and 'significance'.

Quality teachers, many argue, also need a sense of professionalism and strong professional identities (Sachs 1999; Fullan 2000; Darling Hammond 1997; Hooley 2005). 'Teachers' identities are deeply implicated in their teaching' (Nieto 2003:16) and therefore need to be acknowledged and nurtured. Brott and Kajs (nd) claim that a person's professional identity development involves individual maturation processes that begin during training for the profession. Furthermore they suggest, 'these processes can be viewed as the experiences that help the practitioner wed theory with reality (np)'.

Sachs (1999) claims that 'identity and practice mirror each other' (n.p.). Sachs strengthens these views by citing Wenger (1998: 149) who argues 'there is a profound connection between identity and practice.'

Preservice education, we argue, has the responsibility therefore to not only produce quality teachers but quality teachers who have strong professional identities. It seems logical therefore that such development begins as early as possible in the preservice program. The development of such identities will necessitate immersion in 'reality'; namely schools and classrooms as early as possible.

Current reviews of, and research into, teacher education have for some time now paid a great deal of attention to issues concerning the practical component of teacher education, commonly known as 'the practicum' (Ramsey 2000; Perry and Allard 2003; Vick 2006). The common theme throughout this literature is the dissatisfaction with the outcomes of teacher education programs, and in particular, the practical component. There is a general argument that programs are 'too theoretical' (DEST

2002: 99), with insufficient emphasis on 'real situations' (Ministerial Advisory Council on the Quality of Teaching 1998, Section 2). However while the practicum has been a particular focus in current times, Vick (2006:182) points out the concerns expressed are not new. His research demonstrates that 'between 1900 and 1950 teacher educators … sought to develop programs that balanced and integrated theory and practice'. Yet in spite of these ongoing requests Vick contends there have been few solutions and little has changed in today's programs.

The Victorian Inquiry into Preservice Teacher Education (2005:139) concludes,
> Teaching practicum (or professional experience) is at "the heart" of pre-service teacher education. The craft and professional demands of teaching are so complex that it is impossible for pre-service teachers to fully appreciate the demands and the dimensions of the profession, unless they are immersed, throughout their professional studies.

A second critical factor in teacher education that has received a great deal of attention in recent years has been the transition experiences of first years into university life (Turbill 2002). Perry and Allard (2003) argue that for first year students to make a successful transition they need to build relationships with peers, with their lecturers and with the wider academic community. In the case of students within a teacher education program such relationship building must also be extended to the school community. First year students therefore must develop not only a personal identify of a 'university student' in their first year but a professional identity of 'becoming a teacher' (Turbill 2003).

Opportunities to provide a balance of theory and practice means that teacher education programs must therefore reach beyond the university setting and into the settings of schools. Providing practical experiences in the field where the student teacher is allocated to a supervising teacher for a block period to 'practise teach' is not enough. Students within a teacher education program also need to experience 'real situations' where they can build connections to the profession in which they are learning, where they can become part of the school's community and develop professional relationship with teachers in non-threatening settings. It is in these settings that student teachers' professional identities will begin to develop and mature.

In response to these challenges a group of academics working with the Primary and Early Childhood Education Program at the University of Wollongong collaborated to introduce a project that became known as the 'First Year Inschool Experience'. This project and its outcomes are now discussed.

The First Year Inschool Experience Project[1]
The project aimed to respond to the major issues discussed above as well as build stronger school/university partnerships by recognising and using the expertise of practicing teachers in the learning of first year students. Specifically it aimed to place First Year Primary and Early Childhood students in Primary Schools for 10 consecutive Wednesdays in Autumn session 2006. Students operating as 'teaching assistants', it was envisaged, would benefit greatly from gaining knowledge of 'how schools do business'. Understanding the culture of schools, their purpose and how things are organised would provide the students with a solid foundation for their respective courses and begin the process of developing professional identities. Such

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[1] This project was funded by a University of Wollongong Challenge Grant.

immersion it was believed would also provide students with greater opportunities to make connections between the theories and pedagogies of the Key Learning Areas they would be learning at University and the teaching practices they would see in the classrooms. It was also believed that student teachers would begin to learn first hand appropriate classroom organisation and behaviour management strategies. The project therefore acknowledged the important role that practicing teachers can (and must) play in the overall education of future teachers. Practicing teachers, it was envisaged, would act as role models and mentors of the profession for the student teachers.

Critical to the project was the allocation of an academic to each of the schools involved. The eleven 'Academic Mentors' were all involved in the teaching of the first year program, and so were cognisant of the theoretical information that students were learning in their University courses. Each Academic Mentor was responsible for a cluster of 5-6 school and approximately 25 student teachers. Visits to the schools were made as often as possible, weekly in the first period of the project. Academic Mentors also organised an after-school Cluster Meeting in the middle of the project in order to gain feedback from teachers and In School Coordinators regarding their views on the project.

The ten weekly school visits transitioned into a two week (10 days) supervised practicum block in June. During this period student teachers were allocated to a supervising teacher in their allocated school and fulfilled the usual requirements of a supervised practicum. Supervising teachers were paid the award rate during this component.

Students were allocated to schools in groups of 3- 6 per school. The number was dependent on the size of the school and the request of the school's Coordinator. Students were required to attend their allocated school each Wednesdays for the normal school day and to participate in the normal routine of the school. This day was viewed as a component of a subject called Curriculum and Pedagogy I. The first year timetable was organised to have Wednesday with no University commitments.

During the 'school visits' it was important that student teachers were provided with a range of experiences and opportunities. However student teachers were not to be viewed as a teacher's aide in a school. It was agreed between the NSW Teachers' Federation and the NSW Department of Education and the Wollongong Diocese Catholic Education that student teachers may support teachers in ways that the Principal or Coordinator believed were learning experiences for the student teacher yet also supportive of the class teachers. Tasks therefore included working one-on-one with a child, supervising small groups, reading to a group or the whole class, helping to prepare school plays, musical concerts, and other experiences such as excursions and school camps.

Evaluation of the Project

The Project was evaluated from the very beginning using qualitative methods of observations, interviews and a survey. An open-ended survey was given to all students in their final week of session. Data were collected from all stakeholders involved. These included:

- Academic Mentors' informal conversations with student teachers, School Coordinators and class teachers during school visits
- Academic Mentors' discussions with students in tutorials within the University setting
- Cluster Meeting Workshop with School Coordinators and class teachers
- Survey given to all students in the last tutorial of session
- Email survey from Academic Mentors

These data have been analysed using a constant comparative process (Strauss & Corbin 1990, Cresswell 2003). The students' survey responses were coded and then tabulated so they could be reported in graph form.

Results

The project was evaluated highly by student teachers, schools and the Academic Mentors. The inschool experiences clearly fulfilled the aims of the project as Graph 1 demonstrates.
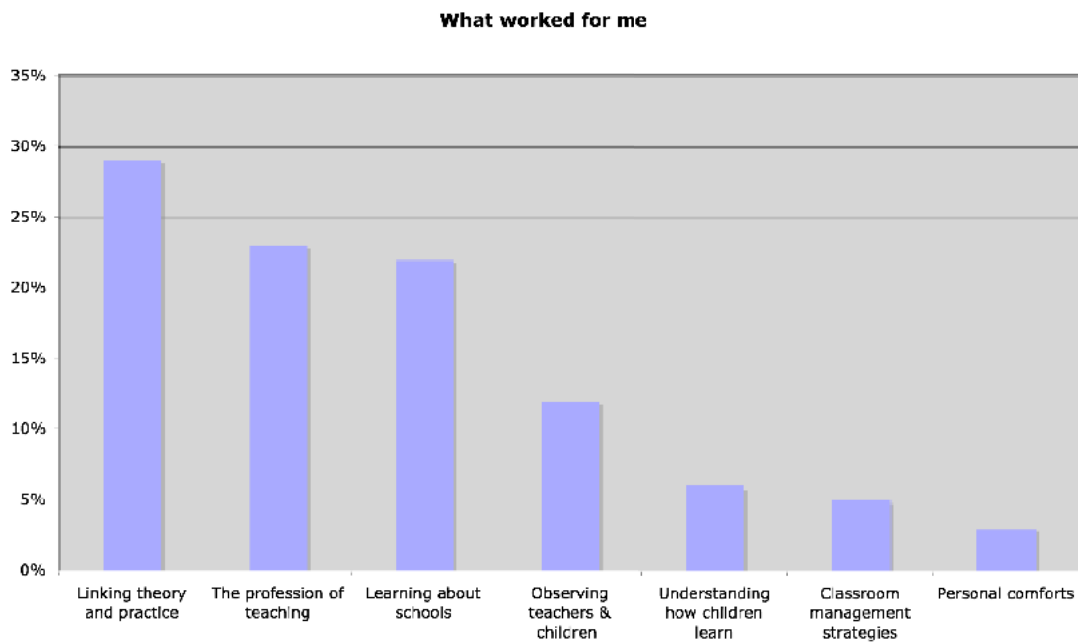
What worked for me

Graph 1. Percentage distribution of the 407 responses from the 219 students to the question 'what worked for me'

The findings clearly demonstrate that the opportunities for the student teachers to 'soak up the school culture' also led to them beginning to identify a 'professional identity of becoming a teacher' (Ramsey 2000; Turbill 2003). It is also apparent that these experiences provided the students with critical opportunities to make connections between the theories of learning and pedagogy and how these are enacted in the classrooms, providing 'high quality learning' (Killen 2005). Figure 1 is a visual representation of the interaction between the settings that operate to develop a 'professional identity' in student teachers.
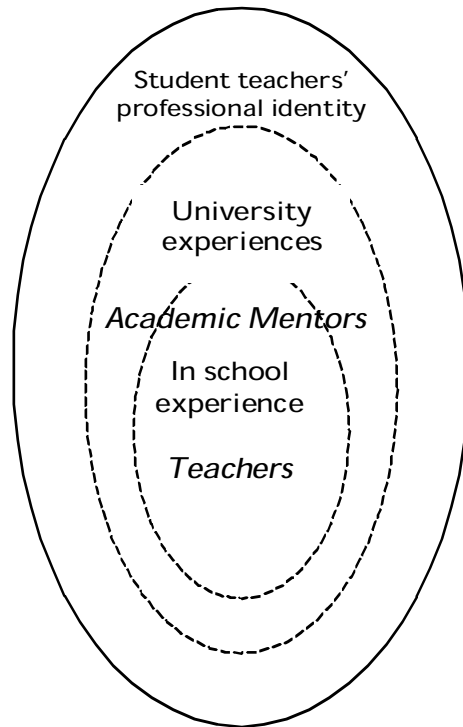
Figure 1. The complexities of 'becoming a teacher' within two settings

For student teachers developing a professional identity of 'becoming a teacher' is not only critical but central to the whole complex process. The experiences provided in the school setting presents the student teacher with 'real situations' (Ministerial Advisory Council on the Quality of Teaching 1998, Section 2) so that their learning in the University setting is not 'too theoretical' (DEST 2002:99). These 'real situations' need to be 'pressure free' so that student teachers and class teachers can build relationships that are not based on assessment but on support, demonstration and mentoring. The within school visits clearly served this purpose.

This project demonstrated that in such a setting student teachers learn so much more than they can learn in the university setting alone. The partnership between the two settings therefore is vital if the theoretical aspects of what is presented in the university classes are to connect with the practical and pedagogical aspects of schools.

A vital link in this partnership is the role of the Academic Mentor. The Academic Mentor has the capacity to bring the 'university' into the 'school' and after visiting the school setting, the 'school' into the 'university'. The professional dialogue between the Academic Mentor and the teachers strengthens communication, clarifies issues and misconceptions as well as shares professional pedagogical understandings. It is imperative therefore that the Academic Mentors visit the school settings regularly. It is also important that this person be someone who is genuinely interested in current pedagogical issues and changes within (in this case) the K-6 Primary curriculum and educational perspectives. Equally as important is that this role be acknowledged as an integral component of the academics' workload.

Conclusions

If student teachers are to graduate having understood and be able to practise the complex professional demands of teaching the outcomes of this project clearly demonstrate that immersion in school settings as soon as possible in their preservice training is highly beneficial. If as Nieto (2003:16) argued, 'teachers' identities are deeply implicated in their teaching' then supporting the development of professional identities of student teachers must become an integral part of any teacher preparation program. To this end there is a need for strong school/university partnerships that acknowledge the expertise and knowledge of the teaching profession in the professional learning of student teachers, and that go beyond the 'supervised practicum'.

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