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## ‘The theories make you pay more attention to how things happen’: The impact of theory on the practice of pre-service teachers in their role as student mentors

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### Introduction

An avalanche of government reports in Australia in recent years claim that pre-service programs are ‘too theoretical’ with ‘insufficient emphasis on real situations’ (Vick, 2006, p. 181). The relative balance of theory and practice in teacher education forms part of a global debate which after three decades Orland-Barak and Yinon, (2007, p. 957) argue has made major contributions to teacher education. Segall (2001, p. 225) argues, however, that ‘the role and degree that theory and practice ought to play in teacher education classrooms . . . continues to be contested and unresolved’. Korthagen, Loughran and Russell (2006, p. 1036) agree that little progress has been made. Increased government intervention in teacher education has resulted in pre-service education institutions increasingly responding in behaviourist ways (Cochran-Smith, 2006) evidenced, for example, by a return to the discourse of ‘teacher training’ (Smith, 1992, p. 396). Embedded in notions of ‘teacher training’ are a too narrow focus on curriculum issues, classroom survival strategies and ‘correct’ responses to government policy. Teacher training, according to ten Dam and Blom (2006, p. 657), focuses on producing ‘skilled’ practitioners rather than on building professional theory. One response to the debate has seen pre-service education moving to a school-based model even though Beyer and Zeichner (1982, p. 18) argue research indicates that field-based teacher education tends to result in the development of ‘utilitarian’ models of teaching.

This paper examines a way in which ‘the rich possibilities’ (Korthagen et al., 2006, p. 1029) for teaching practice within a university-based teacher educa-

tion program provides students with increased practice as well as with what Korthagen and Kessels (1999, p. 4) call 'a broader view on education'. The first section of the paper examines the structure and rationale of the program in which the research was situated and this is followed by a discussion of the research methodology. The second section of the paper examines the research findings beginning with a brief overview of the general impact of theory on the research participations. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of phenomenology and risk sociology, two theoretical perspectives that students argued had the greatest impact on their practice.

## The Program

*Mentoring in Education Contexts (Mentoring)* is a third year education elective unit of study available to all pre-service teachers at the University of Sydney. The unit has three principal objectives, first, it provides academic support to pre-service student mentors engaged in mentoring first year students in the transition to university (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Rowling, Weber, & Scanlon, 2006; Scanlon, 2004). Second, it offers 'classroom-like' practical experience to the student mentors. Third, it affords a way of integrating theoretical and practical knowledge. These objectives are achieved through the program structure in which practical classroom experience is gained through workshop facilitation which students perceived as an authentic field experience within the supportive environment of the university. This encourages the development of what Shulman (1987) calls professional content knowledge, which Smith and Levi-Ari (2005, p. 271) argue can only be developed through active teaching. The theoretical components are addressed in lectures and seminars and the integration of theory and practice results from extensive reflective activity.

Reflection as 'intentional activity' (Brockbank & Gill, 2006, p. 27) from the 1980s became fundamental to teacher education as a way of encouraging students to take a broad view of teacher education as they engage with issues wider than classroom strategies and government policy and make the connection between theory and practice (Orland-Barak & Yinoi, 2007). If experience is to be the starting point for learning then it must be accompanied by reflection (Smith & Levi-Ari, 2005). Therefore, pre-service teachers, Bullough and Gitlin (1994, p. 79) argue, need to be involved in ongoing reflection about self and about the contexts in which they work. They argue the proper aim

of pre-service education is to assist beginners confront, and in some ways to reconstruct, themselves and the contexts in which they work.

This approach ensures a focus on what ten Dam and Blom (2006, p. 648) call the 'tasks of teachers', and it was these tasks that were fundamental to student mentors' classroom-like experiences. The mentors work as a team to identify appropriate pedagogical strategies for each workshop while each mentor develops a detailed lesson plan. There is a two step reflective process following the workshop. Firstly, the mentors review these plans evaluating what worked well, what did not and why and what they would do in the future. Secondly, the mentors reflect on their experiences through the lens of relevant sociological theories presented in lectures and seminars. In this way student mentors gain classroom-like experience and reflect on these experiences using theoretical constructs which place their experiences not only within the classroom but within a wider social context.

The program structure aims to balance and blur the distinction between theory and practice. A dichotomy challenged, for example, by Carr (1986, pp. 177–178) who argues that ideas about the nature of educational theory are always ideas about the nature of educational practice and always incorporate a latent conceptualisation of how, in practice, theory should be used. All educational theories are theories of theory and practice. To engage in educational activity always presupposes a theoretical scheme. Moreover, as Reagan (in Yost, Sentner, & Forenza-Bailey, 2000, p. 40) argues, it is programs in social foundations and philosophy of education which are critical to higher order thinking.

The sociological theories examined in the unit are conceptualised as a series of frameworks within which experience might be viewed. These theories have the potential to provide student mentors with tools to interrogate critical issues in education, such as the purpose and functioning of educational institutions, the construction of roles within these institutions, the place of knowledge, the identification of prominent discourses as well as being a way of framing professional practice and understanding students. The theories are a way of understanding the impact of contemporary society on everyday life. It is a way of engaging what C. Wright Mills (1970) called the 'sociological imagination', when individuals connect their experiences with wider social issues.

## Methodology

The data on which the discussion in this paper is based represents only a part of the results of a qualitative research project. There were 30 research participants all of whom completed anonymous program entry and exit surveys and eight took part in two 120 minute interviews. Of the students who completed the surveys only one was male and all of the students who participated in the interviews were female. All were in the third or fourth year of a pre-service teacher degree.

In the entry surveys and interviews, the participants responded to a broad range of questions, including, their reasons for mentoring, their conceptualisation of mentoring and the individual characteristics critical to the performance of the mentor role. The exit surveys and interviews examined how the experience changed students' earlier conceptualisations of mentoring. (These issues are examined in Scanlon [forthcoming]). This current paper is concerned only with student responses to the role of theory in their professional development. The richest data source was from the semi-structured component of the interviews which encouraged students to reflect on those aspects of *Mentoring* which were most relevant to their professional development.

The interviews were transcribed and from the transcriptions 'meaningful chunks' (Seidman, 1998) were identified. These chunks were classified as major emerging themes. The first theme was the general application of theory to practice and in this category students referred to theory providing them with a better understanding of themselves and an understanding of others, in particular other students they encounter in their roles as mentors and teachers. The second was the application of specific theoretical constructs to individual practice. Overwhelmingly students selected phenomenology and risk sociology as the principal theoretical constructions which provided them with a better understanding of their professional practice. Before examining these specific theories, students' general responses to the theoretical component are examined below.

## Integrating Theory and Practice

Overall students responded positively to the way integrating theory and practice contributed to their development as teachers. They found theory

useful in understanding contemporary issues, in encouraging reflection and exploring issues of practice and as a way of understanding classroom behaviour. For example, Cathy said there had previously been a focus on ‘the history of education and how we got here’, whereas *Mentoring* ‘is about looking at how we are now’. This contemporary focus made theory relevant because Cathy could relate theory to the current demands of classroom teaching because it encouraged an analysis of teaching situations, ‘I can find myself applying these theories to practice, questioning why a particular thing occurs in the way that it does’. Cathy explained that the bridge between theory and practice was provided by weekly mentor workshops and academic seminars which ‘gave me a practical application for the ideas’. The concurrent integration of theory and practice was critical for Cathy, as were the seminars which facilitated her understanding of practice through theory as ‘the subject lets you see the links between theory and practice’.

Gloria responded to the integrative approach of *Mentoring* because it was different from what she called the ‘the text-book’ approach to teacher education, an approach she described as ‘simple and logical ... about things you already know’.

It [*Mentoring*] gives you something to explore ... I’m learning different things and I am quite involved ... I’ve actually done something that I can use to guide me in the back of my mind when I’m teaching.

The integrative nature of the program enabled Gloria to engage with the theoretical content, investigate its relevance to practice and, even more importantly, is something that she will retain and reference as a teacher. Similarly, Narelle commented in the integrated approach – ‘the stuff I’ve discovered in this program has made me think like a teacher’.

Una also found the theoretical component of the program valuable ‘as a person, just to know these things and to think about them’. Nonetheless, as a pre-service teacher, theory made her realise ‘you’re not always going to be going in just that one direction’. What theory does is to open possibilities. Hannah made a similar comment when she said *Mentoring* had not changed her as a teacher but had had an impact on her as a person because it connected her ‘to various points in society’. Olivia found

theory helped her to understand people and specifically ‘the behaviour of students’. These pre-service teachers found the theoretical component of the course valuable to their professional development as teachers or as individuals. There were, however, students who had a different response.

Amy’s expectation of *Mentoring* was that there would be a direct correlation between program content and classroom application, it ‘would have something about mentoring programs for kids, about how you could break through to them’. While this was not the case, she found made it ‘an effort to link theory and examples’. Alice commented that while she found specific theoretical constructs interesting, nonetheless ‘It was so separate from what we were doing in mentoring’. She explained that this may have resulted from the fact that she had not previously ‘approached anything in quite that way before ... I never really thought about it in terms of things that could relate to teaching’. One of research participants categorised students who did not relate to the theory as ‘those who didn’t get it’. These students, she argued, focused on classroom strategies and had what she called the ‘show me your lesson plan’ approach to teacher education, which she felt was ‘missing the point’.

## Reflection on Specific Theoretical Perspectives

As well as general comments regarding the integration of theory and practice, students also made reference to the way they used specific theories to understand their practice as mentors and future teachers. In the following discussion, each of the theories is first briefly introduced before examining students’ interaction with this theory in their work as student mentors. The theoretical components examined here are those overwhelmingly selected by students.

### *Phenomenology*

The phenomenological approach adopted in the program was based on the work of Schutz (1964, 1970), Schutz and Luckmann (1973) and Berger and Luckmann (1966). Phenomenology was presented as a framework through which individual experience could be examined using key concepts, such as, ‘life-world’, ‘definition of the situation’, ‘ideal types’ and ‘stocks of knowledge’. Introducing students to notions of phenomenology was risky because it is not a popular way to approach pre-service

teacher education and was unfamiliar to all students. Moreover, the unfamiliar discourse of phenomenology was potentially confronting. Not all students were comfortable with this framework and some found the readings particularly challenging. Nonetheless, many others adopted the framework as a way of understanding their own experiences in facilitating mentor workshops and the experiences of the first year students they mentored. Nonetheless, integrating theory and practice from this perspective was initially difficult for some students, as Alice explained.

I couldn't put phenomenology in a practical context for the longest time. You know, I thought that the mentoring was over here, and phenomenology was over there. I thought it was just a theory, but now, I can refer to things like the definition of a situation easily.

Over the course of the semester, however, Alice found specific concepts useful in understanding her own practice and phenomenology became 'a frame that I'm viewing my mentoring in'. Alice moved from viewing practice and theory as separate to considering phenomenology as a valuable frame of reference for her practice and as a possible reflective frame for teaching. Gloria was unlike Alice in that she found phenomenology immediately relevant because she said it was like 'you already know that kind of stuff, but you do need to be reminded'.

Phenomenology, I love it, because I got it. It was an eye-opener letting you know where things are coming from. When I'm talking to my friends in the program, we can actually just bring it up in normal conversation. It does actually lend itself to very normal conversation.

Phenomenology had a broad appeal for Gloria because of its 'ordinariness', its 'normalcy' and hence its ready application to practice and its inclusion in 'normal conversation'. Moreover, it also alerted Gloria to the fact that individuals define situations subjectively based on their whole 'stock of knowledge'. It was also a relevant way of framing classroom experiences because of its focus on the particularity of experience.

Phenomenology is about thinking really closely about little things that most people really do miss. Most people don't fully know what they're bringing to a situation. It's, you know, your

whole historiography of yourself ... what you bring to that day really depends on what has happened to you until that moment.

Not only does phenomenology focus on biographically determined situations, for Gloria it directly relates to professional practice through its ability to sensitise – ‘it just makes you aware of the things that are going on in the class’. What she found particularly valuable was the notion of ideal types because she recognised the variety of students she would teach and said, ‘I don’t want to just make them these ideal types. I really want to be able to treat them like individuals’. Cathy considered phenomenology as a lens through which teachers can see the unexpected.

Teachers always make generalisations about where the class is from ... making those assumptions is so damaging, because you have this view where you don’t really see the kids who are different from your ideas, because you don’t really expect to see them.

Teachers who are only ‘whole-class oriented’ risk adopting a collectivist perception which acts as a camouflage, preventing teachers seeing the unexpected in their students.

Hannah’s response to phenomenology was to find ‘the ideas exciting’. Not only that but ‘Schutz has helped me a lot in that I can say, “I can see why this is happening”’. Again, there is an emphasis on the phenomenological focus on situational analysis which was perceived as assisting individual educational practice.

I will refer to phenomenology later on, maybe sometimes just in my own thinking more than anything else. I know now that I can think, ‘Oh, that’s what Schutz refers to’, rather than, ‘Am I the only one who thinks this way ... only one who thinks about these things?’

Theory, specifically Schutzian phenomenology, provided Hannah with the reassurance that she was not alone in her thinking. From her experience, Hannah provided an example of how phenomenology gave her a way of understanding classroom experiences when she realised that she expected Year 7 students to be shy because this was her own experience of school. However, she said when she went on prac, ‘I thought, this isn’t the classroom that I pictured it to be’. She said:



Schutz's interested in exactly what happens and why, and I think that's going to be useful to me as a teacher. It's seeing the workings of the situation. Schutz is so interested in the fine details.

Amy commented that 'every teacher should learn about phenomenology' because it encourages thinking about individual biases. She explained 'a lot of people have this one perception of everything ... you don't just have one way that everything works all the time'. Phenomenology, she argued, has the capacity to provide access to multiple world perspectives and so enhance professional practice.

Una found phenomenology difficult to grasp, 'I didn't really get it until so late on in the program.' What made phenomenology difficult was the esoteric discourse. Nonetheless, Una did find the 'definition of a situation' a relevant way to understanding professional practice. For example, she explained that in the classroom this might mean different teachers defining something with the same group quite differently, and how those different definitions will seem 'okay' to different people. Una used the example of the conflicting definitions of the mentoring situation made by her companion mentors and the impact of this on the mentor workshops. Una shared the workshop with two other mentors, at 9am on Monday mornings, 'an energising sort of time where you are gearing up for the week ... a new beginning'. However, 'the other two mentors saw it as a drag'.

### *Risk*

'Risk sociology', as conceptualised in the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), was another theoretical lens suggested as a means of examining practice. Beck argues that since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century humans have been exposed to risk on an unprecedented scale. As a result, he contends modern societies are no longer 'class societies' concerned with the distribution of socially produced wealth and related conflicts, but have evolved into 'risk societies' – societies concerned with the distribution, prevention and minimalisation of risk. Giddens takes a somewhat different stance, arguing that it is not that there are greater risks but that it is thought that there are greater risks. The 'youth studies' literature focuses on young people and risk where it is argued, for example, that young people have to negotiate previously unknown risks (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).

Amy used notions of risk to understand herself in the sense of being the first in the family to attend university and one of only 22% of students from her high school who completed senior school. University was more risky for her because her 'subjective reality' was significantly different from her friends who were not first in the family and who had attended schools where retention was 100%. Cathy, like Amy, appreciated the different perspective that the conceptualisation of risk gave her and which encouraged her to reflect on her practice as a teacher. Theories 'make you pay more attention to how things happen and why high school students are taking the risks they're taking'. She also gained a better understanding of transition which she had previously seen as 'individual for everyone' but now saw as a 'risk' for everyone.

Coming to university is hard because you feel that there's nowhere to go back to. Regardless of whether you've been wanting to go to uni your entire life, when you get there, it's normally pretty different to what you think. You're at risk.

Alice found the concept of societal risk, that is, risk in its 'entirety', more useful than the more narrow 'youth at risk' concept. The notion of societal risk focused not only on the awareness of risk but also on 'ways to manage and cope with those risks'. Risk in the broader sense focused her attention on considerations of, 'what sort of risks you face as a mentor and what sort of risks mentees face as students'. Extrapolating from this and applying it to professional practice implied for her, 'You have to try to search for the sense behind everyone's behaviours'. Gloria applied the notion of risk to professional practice in both mentoring and teaching and argued that it is impossible to warn mentees or students of the specific risks they are likely to encounter, 'because risk is individualised'. Therefore teachers should 'teach students how to make better decisions, how to deal with risks'. The overall benefit for Gloria in studying 'risk' was that 'it just helps you to put each student into perspective, into the context of the world'.

There were some students who were concerned with the negative connotation of the word 'risk'. For example, Hannah saw risk as a problem of labelling: 'it's too rigid ... all you think of when you think of risk is just stopping, stopping, stopping it'. There was, however, also a positive

way of thinking about risk 'like, taking risks as being fine so you grow up to deal with it'. Risk can be viewed as opportunity, as part of the positive transition to adulthood. Alice was similarly concerned with the negative connotation of 'risk'.

We do have a huge desire to control risks ... one thing in the literature is that risk is always perceived as being negative. There are very few examples of risk as positive thing, as opportunity. It's always risk as threat, as harm, as danger, as heartbreak.

As well as integrating theory and practice, Hannah also reflected on the very use of the word and its unnecessarily negative connotations.

## Discussion

Fullan (in Segall, 2001, p. 225) argues that integrating theory and practice in teacher education is a 'desirable, if elusive goal'. It is a balance that Segall (2001, p. 225) argues is still contested and unresolved. The research findings examined in this paper contribute to the debate by arguing that there are 'rich possibilities' (Korthagen et al., 2006, p. 1029) for teaching practice within the university. These possibilities go some way to redressing the theory/practice balance in university-based teacher education. In the case of the current research project teaching practice was afforded to pre-service teachers in their role as mentors facilitating first year transition workshops. In this role students developed pedagogical strategies, became familiar with workshop content, devised lesson plans and evaluated and reflected on these plans through the lens of sociological theories. It was reflection which bridged the gap between theory and practice. Theory was a trigger to reflection and enabled students to convert naïve 'knowledge about' professional practice into contextualised 'knowledge of' practice. This integrative approach to theory and practice does not reduce teacher education to the acquisition of so-called recipe knowledge or what students in this research referred to as the 'show me your lesson plan' or 'text-book' approach. Reflection, as Schon argues (in Hatton & Smith, 1994, p. 35), is a way of distinguishing professional from non-professional practice.

The theories that students encountered in the unit of study were not specific to teacher education. Instead they were general sociological theories

intended to focus not only on individual professional practice but to locate that practice within the wider contemporary society. The research participants provided a snapshot of the kinds of theories they found useful to practice and how these theories were used by them to understand practice. Phenomenological sociology was used by students in a range of different ways. There were students for whom the theory was a frame of reference and helped 'explain the way things are'. It also 'opened possibilities' in the sense that it challenged pre-existing ideas and gave students 'something to explore'. It also induced a professional state of mind in that it encouraged students to 'think like a teacher' and it was something that will stay in the 'back of my mind'. It provided students with an educational discourse critical in the development of professional practice.

Phenomenology also focused students' attention on broad contemporary educational issues, encouraging them to reflect, for example, on the way individual biographies impact on practice. Because of the emphasis on the contextual nature of experience, phenomenology alerted students to the subjective nature of experience and the way subjective experience impacts on context as much as the context impacts on the individual. Within the context of the classroom phenomenology, because it focuses on the 'fine details' of situations, assisted the participants in understanding student behaviour. It was not useful for all students as some found the discourse confronting and this inhibited their 'getting it' as a useful theory.

Notions of risk sociology inclined students to reflect on their behaviour as students and pre-service teachers and from this to extrapolate the risks that their own students confront. Students who engaged with this theoretical perspective embraced the universality of risk which was in contrast to the particularistic 'at risk' approaches they had hitherto encountered. Because of the universality of risk, the participants felt encouraged to develop in their students ways to deal with risk on both an individual and societal level. This was significant because risks could not be foreseen, hence the need to focus on problem solving strategies to better deal with risk. Students also felt that notions of risk gave them a broader understanding of the world of young people and to make sense of what is behind risk. Understanding risk also provided the possibility of seeing some risks as opportunities.

The integration of theory and practice harnessed students' reflective capacity as they engaged in continued evaluation of their contextualised

practice, a practice Bullough and Gitlini (1994) suggest is critical for beginning teachers. Reflecting on their own practice through a specific theoretical lens engaged students in the critical task of ‘self-directed theory building’ (Korthagen et al., 2006). The integrative approach examined here provides pre-service teachers with classroom practice in a supportive environment which encourages reflection and the creation of professional knowledge based on experience.

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