

The Research Files Episode 30: The highs and lows of practicum

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The practicum component of pre-service teacher education courses is an important part of preparing students for the profession. A recent Australian study shines a spotlight on the highs and lows of the practicum experience from the perspective of pre-service drama teachers. The findings have been published in the [Australian Journal of Teacher Education](#) and lead author Dr Christina Gray, from Edith Cowan University, is my guest in this episode of The Research Files.

Jo Earp: Dr Christina Gray, welcome to The Research Files. You carried out this research with Peter Wright and Robin Pascoe, from Murdoch University. What was the aim?

Christina Gray: That's right. This research is part of a wider doctoral study that I did a couple of years ago and Peter and Robin were my supervisors. The doctoral study had three broad aims: to start with it was to understand the practicum experiences of pre-service drama teachers; then to identify the key issues and challenges of the practicum; then finally I wanted to understand the influence of past experiences of drama on the pre-service teachers' beliefs and expectations of the practicum. This [journal] article really focuses on the first aim, understanding the practicum experience – the highs and the lows – with a focus on the experiences of pre-service drama teachers.

JE: You worked with 19 pre-service drama teachers and they were studying at two university education courses in Western Australia. I'm interested, what were the practicum requirements then for those courses?

CG: They differed a little, but in general the participants were teaching around one to three one-hour lessons a day. So, a full-time teacher teaches around four to five one-hour lessons a day – these participants are expected to do in general between one and three, and that includes planning the lesson, conducting the lesson and then reflecting on the lessons afterwards.

But, added to the actual teaching component, the pre-service teachers also assume other duties, like they attend meetings, they'll do recess and lunch duties, they'll do any marking, programming. And of course extra-curricular activities, like attending school socials and discos and things, and for these participants, being pre-service drama teachers, attending production rehearsals as well is a significant component of their practicum.

JE: So, similar to a lot of practicum experience but then, like you say, the extra-curricular on top of that. You carried out focus interviews and you mentioned there you were asking for views and experiences of the practicum. Four strong themes emerged didn't they?

CG: Yes, they did. First of all, I guess we'll start with stress. This was consistent across the three [focus] groups. Stress, this is picked up in previous research. For these participants came first of all from the juggle of trying to manage prac with their personal commitments.

So, their practicum commitments – as I've said planning lessons, marking, attending rehearsals and what have you. And then their personal commitments – these participants had part-time jobs and they're working between eight and 15 hours a week. So, what they were doing was attending their prac, then attending after school rehearsals, then going to their part-time job (sometimes finishing at midnight), coming home and then having to plan lessons ready for the next day. So the juggle and trying to squash everything in caused them

considerable stress.

They also experienced a lot of stress from the culture shock they experienced, working in schools that were vastly different from their previous experiences. Participants spoke about being really overwhelmed and out of their comfort zone, witnessing really poor behaviour.

Then the third source of stress was from feeling underprepared for prac. This is an important part of this research because lots of research into prac in the past just concentrates on the pre-service teacher's experience, whereas this research really hones in on what it is to be a drama pre-service teacher.

The students spoke about sitting at uni, learning out of a textbook how to teach and then being in front of groups of students feeling so overwhelmed because they hadn't learnt the unique pedagogy required to teach drama lessons. For example, a drama teacher works in an open space, mostly without chairs and tables and the kids need to really trust the teacher and trust each other to be able to do the work that's required in drama and you can't learn that in textbooks sitting at uni.

This research really focuses on the highs and lows of practicum – so the stress really is the low obviously. The *self-efficacy* was the second theme and students spoke so positively about the high value they place on prac and the capacity for them to build relationships with students and also to see a glimpse of their own future and what it's going to be like to be a drama teacher in schools, seeing the difference that their teaching had on individual students.

Some of the participants spoke about a positive key moment that really turned the experience around and gave them that boost in confidence. So, the self-efficacy – there are loads of lovely quotes and things in the article of the students and these positive key moments they experienced.

The third theme really focuses on *mentoring practices* and this probably sparked the most emotional debate amongst the students. They talked about the wonderful mentors they'd had that shared their resources and were very nurturing and encouraging to student mentors who belittled them in front of students, ignored them, expected them just to do as they did, and even exploited them.

And, it was very upsetting to sit in those interviews and to listen to some of the very poor mentoring that went on and how some students didn't return – they talked about some of their peers that they thought were going to be really good teachers that just didn't continue with their prac because of these unprofessional mentors, so that was very upsetting to see.

The final theme that came out was the *teaching craft*. The opportunity that prac provides to learn pedagogy and also to engage in the wider school community; an opportunity to really see what goes on in schools and to see the work of a teacher.

JE: Obviously there are lots of useful pointers in there in relation to drama teachers – we'll put the link in to the journal article and as you say there are quotes in there and individual stories from the participants. What about pre-service practicum experience in general though? I'm thinking that the things they highlight in relation to stress for example, that time spent planning and marking – that's not just limited to drama. Also you mentioned there the importance of a good mentor. Can this research inform other subject areas?

CG: Oh, absolutely. The research did confirm many findings from previous research, particularly the stress that they experience out on prac and the importance of good mentoring.

However, this research was really about looking at the pre-service drama teachers' experience. By really focusing in on their experience it revealed the extra-curricular component of practicum that causes the considerable pressure and stress on the participants.

This is probably more meaningful for arts teachers in general – music teachers obviously have their share of extra-curricular work, and phys ed teachers as well, with their coaching, sporting teams and what have you.

JE: Absolutely. The other thing was, although the stress and workload aspect took its toll (and this quite depressing as well isn't it) and was almost unmanageable actually for some of them, they viewed it as just an inevitable part of that experience didn't they? Now, you feel this warrants further research don't you? I suspect many teachers as well see this as just a part of the job.

CG: Yeah, look, as you say it is depressing. What I found is there's this real feeling out there that teachers [practicing or in-service teachers] view practicum as just like an induction into the profession, you sink or swim. A lot of them feel 'look, I went through hell on prac and I managed and so others will as well'.

I don't feel that is the right way to think about prac. Prac is an opportunity to have a fabulous induction into the teaching profession and learn very important pedagogy and be mentored by good mentors. It shouldn't be this horrific experience that only the fittest will survive – that's just not good enough.

As the research showed, some really fabulous teachers that would have been wonderful out there in schools just didn't survive practicum because of the poor mentors they had. It's a worry and I think it's something that I think we really need to start to change how in-service teachers feel about practicum and how they mentor their students, so that these students really thrive on prac and then they're ready for teaching.

JE: Absolutely. Well, it's been lovely speaking with you today. Dr Christina Gray, thanks very much for sharing your work with The Research Files.

CG: Thank you very much, it was a pleasure.

That's all for this episode – to keep listening or to download all of our podcasts for free visit acer.ac/teacheritunes or www.soundcloud.com/teacher-ACER. You can check out the full transcript of this podcast and related reading at www.teachermagazine.com.au where, of course, you can also access the latest articles, videos and infographics.

References

Gray, C., Wright, P., & Pascoe, R. (2017). Raising the curtain: Investigating the practicum experiences of pre-service drama teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* (Online), 42(1), 36. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2017v42n1.3>