

1C:\WORD5B\NORMAL.STYEPSONLQ2ä@ô†-/yáÛµµTHE BENNETTSWOOD PROJECT: AN EVALUATION OF SCHOOL-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION

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ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT:

The Bennettswood Project commenced in 1989 in response to course evaluations which indicated that students would like more time in schools. The students also indicated that it was difficult to relate the college based instruction to their work in schools. This response is well supported by the work of Yinger(1987), who argues that the problem which underlies traditional teaching in teacher education is a problem of language. Students learn a form of "technical knowledge" or textbook knowledge which "promote(s) abstract definitions and meanings at the expense of providing particular instances" (p.296). Furthermore, students may be uncritical of such knowledge until they begin teaching and recognise the mismatch between theory and practice. Yinger goes on to ask:

How then is the language of practice learned if it cannot be learned from textbooks in formal school settings? ...it may be learned by doing - by becoming involved in the rich and uniquely complex context of real practice. ... actual practice is a powerful learning context because it puts the learner in contact with an array of knowledge and information not available second-hand. (p.279)

In 1989 a group of 50 second year students who were enrolled in the core course, Organisation for Learning and Teaching, participated in the Bennettswood Project. The project aimed to overcome some of the problems of traditional teacher education discussed by Yinger, and identified by the students themselves. The participants attended a lecture at College followed by a visit to the nearby Bennettswood Primary School where they worked with one or two children on an on-going basis. This weekly contact with the children was capped by a block round in which the students collaboratively planned and taught lessons across the curriculum in the grade with which they were involved.

Following evaluations of the project, it was decided that the project proceed in 1990 with the following changes:

- * that students be involved in the project on an elective basis, with the understanding that one block practicum would occur at Bennettswood Primary School working with the other project participants.
- * that Organisation for Learning and Teaching be linked with a curriculum area to give a context for what is essentially a process oriented course. The curriculum area chosen was Language and Literature.

OBJECTIVES:

Drawing on a number of reports on teacher education produced in the 1980's (see Young, 1990 for a summary), a number of key objectives was formulated for the project. The objectives were conceptualised to redress the shortcomings of Australian preservice teacher education programs asserted in the reports and supported by the student evaluations referred to above. The objectives are to:

link theory and practice; share responsibility for teacher education with the profession; utilise available resources, skill and knowledge of practising teachers; build reflection-on-practice into programs; provide effective classroom experiences for student teachers.

PROJECT EVALUATION:

A. SOURCES OF DATA:

1. Interviews with 8 of the students who participated in the project in 1989. The interviews were conducted following the students' teaching practicum in 1990, the final year of their course.
2. Practicum report forms. A content analysis of the report forms of the 8 final year students was undertaken, to monitor the students' progress in the traditional practicum program.
3. Written course evaluations. A content analysis of the 1990 student course evaluations was undertaken, to monitor progress toward the project's stated objectives.

B. RESULTS:

1. Student Interviews.

Eight students who had participated in the project in 1989 were asked to reflect on their learning in the light of a subsequent teaching practicum experience, six months later. The students were asked to consider what they had learned during the project about a number of aspects of teaching and teacher thinking, which they felt had positively influenced their recent teaching experience.

A summary of this initial longitudinal data suggests that students believe they learned a great deal from the on-going, weekly contact with a child. In particular they learned to understand and value individual differences among children, and to plan for and respond to these differences even when teaching a large group. They commented on the valuable learning which occurred for them when planning on an on-going basis, and they valued the opportunity to relax while teaching an individual child or small group. Watching their peers teach was also considered to be a valuable experience. Students reported that all of this learning had positively influenced their teaching a whole class in a normal block round, six months later.

On the other hand, there was, at the time of the practicum, a sense of ambivalence, even negativity among the students about replacing one normal block round with team teaching and individual tutoring experiences at Bennettswood. In retrospect, about half of those interviewed continued to believe they had been disadvantaged by lack of individual, extended whole group teaching. They reported initial lack of confidence and lack of classroom management techniques as disadvantages when returning to teaching a large group on their own. What evidence is there for this? It was felt that an analysis of the students' practicum reports from the year following participation in the Bennettswood Project would provide valuable data.

2. Practicum Report Forms

Report forms of the eight students who were interviewed in the year following their participation in the Bennettswood Project were analysed. Over two teaching practicums the students received three or four report forms. Thus, between the eight students there were 30 report forms analysed. The forms were analysed for comments which placed particular emphasis on students' strengths or weaknesses. The focus was on areas highlighted by those students in their interviews (see the summary in the previous section). For a comment to be rated it had to be stated beyond what was required in the Victoria College diagnostic report forms.

A summary of this data indicates that a special strength of all eight students was an ability to recognise and respond appropriately to individual differences in children. Some reports also made special note of the students' ability to plan flexibly according to the on-going learning in the classroom. The students as a group also tended to show notable degrees of reflectivity in relation to their growing development as teachers. On the other hand, half of the interviewed students received at least one comment which indicated that they initially had some difficulties in managing a large group of children, either in terms of behaviour, or in terms of their own time management. There was limited evidence to indicate that students lacked confidence when teaching a whole class over an extended period of time; on the contrary, almost half of the students in question received comments making special note of their confident approach to teaching.

Students at Victoria College graduate with a composite rating of their performance on the final three blocked practicums. They are rated on a 6 point scale, ranging from unsuitable to outstanding. The final rating of the eight students interviewed was as follows: Outstanding: 2 students Excellent: 4 students Very Good: 2 students.

3. 1990 course evaluation responses.

Forty two of the students who participated in the project in its second year of operation (1990) were asked to comment specifically on the value of the weekly teaching sessions with a child and the value of the blocked teaching practicum.

Overall the 1990 students were extremely positive about the value of the on-going teaching program. Like their 1989 counterparts, they believe they have gained insights about individual children which will positively influence their teaching in the final year of their course. They have come to value the experience of team teaching and felt more relaxed than on a traditional blocked teaching practicum. There was still a concern expressed regarding the lack of opportunity to teach a large group of children on their own, over a sustained period of time. Nevertheless, all but one student indicated that they would recommend the course to other students.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE EVALUATION RESEARCH:

The data analysed in this paper is only a part of what has been collected. Other data includes students' profiles of the children with whom they have worked, further 1990 course evaluations, children's evaluations of their tutors, and students' comments on the relationship between Organisation for

Learning and Teaching and Language and Literature.

In 1991 it is planned to compare the 1990 students' performance in the practicum with a control group which did not participate in the Bennettswood Project. Drawing on the data analysed in this paper it should be possible to design a questionnaire for all supervising teachers and visiting College lecturers which focuses more specifically on the issues raised in this preliminary research.

CONCLUSIONS:

A key objective of the project was to build reflection on practice into the students' thinking. A number of the students reported feeling "more relaxed" while teaching at Bennettswood. This comment related to both arenas: the weekly tutorial sessions with one child, and the blocked practicum time. No doubt the luxury of teaching on a weekly basis with only one child, and not being constantly watched, was a great relief to some of the participants. But they also had a whole week to think back on what had occurred, and to make forward plans in the light of the experience. Students also felt that not being required to teach for long periods each day during the blocked practicum was a relief. Perhaps when students reported feeling "more relaxed", they were, in part, referring to the time they had to reflect, so often missing in the traditional student teaching experience. Students were often seen gathering in the college rooms, debriefing sessions which they had just taught, and planning together the follow on lessons. They discussed incidents which had occurred in their teaching, forming hypotheses about cause and effect.

A number of models of teacher reflection have been described in the literature; models which might be used to strengthen this aspect of the Bennettswood project. Zeichner and Tietelbaum (1982) have utilised enquiry tasks, and Yinger (1987) has used reflective journals. Internship programs (Young, 1990) have the element of time for reflection built into the structure. While the Bennettswood Project students kept reflective journals, these may need more structure in the future, and should be analysed as part of the evaluation research. In addition, future research needs to examine the impact of time for reflection on teacher thinking. And for the students to value this exercise it needs to be more explicitly built into the practicum curriculum for all Victoria College students.

Both groups of students from whom the data was drawn commented on the value of team teaching and observing their peers teach. It is difficult to assess exactly what the nature of that learning is, and how it transfers into the more traditional teaching experience of a blocked practicum. It should be added that the 1990 students observed two teachers teaching cooperatively in a demonstration lesson at another school. This experience is built into the Victoria College practicum program for all students in their second year. However, this year the timing of the demonstration lesson happened to occur early during the Bennettswood blocked practicum, and appeared to have a significant impact on a number of the students, who then experimented with team teaching in a cooperative way. This probably accounts for the large number of 1990 students who reported that they had learned a great deal from team teaching. It certainly raises questions about placing students alone in a classroom with only the supervising teacher for repeated experiences in the practicum.

