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**From "Too little too late" to "This is the best part": Students'
perceptions of changes to the practicum placement in teaching**

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Abstract

Many educators have commented upon the lack of research into the successful operation of work-based learning programs within courses of tertiary study. There has been a long tradition of including school-based practical placements ('the practicum') into preservice teacher education courses. The length of these practicum placements is generally prescribed by teacher education accreditation bodies, but the organisation and timing of these experiences is determined by individual universities. This paper reports on a pilot study into the practicum that arose from a review of a preservice teacher education course at a regional university that, among other issues, investigated students' views on the organisation of the practicum. Students reported strong views about this aspect of the program and these views were responded to in the re-design of the course, through the introduction of a practicum placement early in the course. The new intake of students was invited to evaluate the course, to measure whether and how well the university had met the needs that the previous students had identified. The students' responses outlined a range of benefits that relate to relationships between the various stakeholders involved in the practicum, as well as issues such as commitment to the course and potential impacts on retention patterns. The students' views have encouraged us to shift our thinking away from a focus on issues such as the structure, organisation and timing of the practicum, to a more fundamental questioning of the tenets underpinning current practicum programmes. They have also prompted us to re-frame our own views of what constitutes effective learning for student teachers during the practicum experience.

Introduction

During consultations with stakeholders, as part of a review of a preservice teacher education course at a regional university, a number of issues emerged in relation to the effectiveness of the course in meeting the perceived needs of students. In particular, students identified the practicum as a major area of concern, reporting generally that the experience was "too little too late". The previous course structure allowed only for formal practicum placements from mid-way through the third year of their undergraduate teaching degree. Students reported that they felt disadvantaged, overwhelmed and generally under-prepared when entering into a structured school environment at this point. Other stakeholders including principals, teaching staff and students supported this view.

This issue was addressed in the construction of the new course by the introduction of a practicum placement in the first semester of the first year (among other changes to the course). The practicum experience now began in week three of semester one and provided students with the opportunity to link with one or two other students, ideally in a small rural school, for a concurrent (one day per week, for ten weeks) placement. Following its implementation, as a means of establishing student perceptions about the new course, the

entire first year cohort (150 students) was invited to attend a mid-semester progress review. As with the students from the previous year, the practicum was raised as a major issue for comment. The issues raised by students provided the impetus for us to study these further through this 'pilot study', which was to identify students' perceptions related to the practicum in their first year. An analysis of the students' statements showed that, although they were not specifically asked about the practicum component of the course, many of them responded along the lines of "This is the best part" of the course. Other issues related to the practicum, such as expectations, perceived roles, and relationships, emerged as themes from their responses. The students' comments indicated that although they were positive about the change in timing of the introduction of the practicum, there were other more complex issues raised.

This paper is a report on this pilot study, looking specifically at students' responses to the practicum placed within the first year of a preservice teacher education course. It will form the basis of, and assist in refining, research questions for a more formal, longer-term study of the perceptions students have about the practicum in relation to their own perceived roles as learners and as future teachers. It also explores the connections between the students' responses and the issues raised elsewhere within the extant literature on the practicum, in particular within teacher education courses.

Issues in practicum research

Pertinent issues raised within the literature on the practicum, broadly in tertiary courses, and specifically within teacher education programmes, identify concerns related to assessment, tensions, roles and responsibilities, affective responses, and the quality of learning.

Work-based learning programmes in tertiary settings

Many university courses include a work-based learning component as an integral part of a course of study, with 60 percent of all Australian degree courses having a work-placement component (Trigwell & Reid, 1998, citing Martin, 1996). In his review of the literature on the practicum in university courses, Hughes (1998, citing Ryan, Toohey & Hughes, 1996) lists the positive benefits associated with such programmes, such as gaining insights into professional practice; developing competencies through participation; developing on-the-job performance; and integration into the work environment. Hughes comments, however, on the difficulties that may arise within the practicum, such as tensions in relationships during the practicum, and divergence of interests of the various parties.

Tensions may arise from the fact that a student may be hoping to gain future employment at the work place involved, and wanting to make a good impression, and therefore may be unwilling to display lack of knowledge or skills. Many student teachers cite this tension, stating that they feel they need to be 'pretend teachers' from the beginning, unwilling to admit their weaknesses and their need to learn. According to Hughes (1998), 'The student wants to learn, but above all he/she also wants to make the best impression possible...No student in this situation wants to reveal their inadequacies and fumbling attempts at developing task skills, yet these are exactly what the employer is on the look-out for' (p. 219).

Student teachers report positive benefits from their practicum experiences, often (as this paper will show) stating that it is the most enjoyable component of the course. University

students generally report a preference for learning that is 'practical and experiential' (Clarke, 1998, p. 107). Yet, as Hughes (1998) argues, there can be tensions and challenges posed by these types of learning experiences.

Assessment and Learning

The issue of appropriate assessment of the success of the experience is open to debate, especially in the area of the teaching practicum. For example, according to Martinez, Hamlin and Rigano (2001), most of the literature on the teaching practicum does not focus on the teaching success experienced by teaching students during their practicum experiences. Instead, they argue, there is a focus on an outcomes-based approach to assessing students, where competencies and standards are used to measure student outcomes, or specific performance skills, rather than the effectiveness of the teaching undertaken by student teachers, or their own learning, during the practicum:

As we perused the current literature on supervision, issues relating to the use of information technology and refining critical reflection appear to dominate. However, while supervision literature has long embraced the competencies and standards for teachers, it gives little attention to links between teacher effectiveness and standards of achievements for learners. (Martinez, Hamlin & Rigano, 2001, p. 5)

Martinez et al. (2001) attribute the increasing pressure on schools and universities to demonstrate 'effectiveness' to economic rationalism which is marked by an insistence on 'measurements and standards' (p. 4).

Slee and Weiner (1998) challenge what they view to be the economic rationalist basis to the 'schools effectiveness' debate (Slee, 1998, and Slee & Weiner, 1998). Slee describes this as 'manufactured panics about educational standards and effectiveness' (Slee, 1998, p. 255). As part of this debate, he argues that there has been a change in the way that teaching is not only assessed, but viewed. Quoting Lingard (1995), he describes the shift from 'the teacher as an educated professional towards one of the competent practitioner' (Slee, 1998, p. 264), with an 'expanding raft of outcome indicators that permeate all levels of education work' (p. 263), reducing teaching to 'technical work'. He cites Tischer (1995) who argues that this technical view of teaching, or 'the encroachment of vocationalism', has led to the reduction of the role of the university educator in practicum mentoring and increased time devoted to school experience (Slee, 1998, p. 265).

Like Martinez et al. (2001), Wood (2000) also argues for a shift in how the teaching practicum is assessed to move away from outcomes-based, technical assessment towards what he argues are more meaningful types of assessment. He similarly argues the need to focus on the content of the teaching by the student teacher that is occurring, and students' growing understandings of teaching, rather than assessing students in a summative way against pre-determined specific criteria.

Wood (2000) comments on the tensions that occur for teaching students between their learning during the practicum, and their university learning, and argues that this tension may hinder students' learning especially when the focus is on assessment of the practicum rather than the learning within it. He reports that, in a study of students' learning in a postgraduate preservice teaching programme, the students' 'attention remains focused on classroom management issues, not the content of teaching. In some cases, the classroom experiences provided by the practicum differed so markedly in this respect from those intended by the

programme that student teachers felt able to distinguish between "real" teaching in school and teaching as it is seen to be perceived by the university-based tutors' (p. 90). He further states that the use of specific criteria can lead to a situation where, '[i]n the broader context of teacher education in the UK at the time of the study, it was possible for student teachers to be judged satisfactory against national criteria and become qualified teachers without the highest understanding of teaching' (p. 91).

Wood (2000) is also interested in examining the learning experiences of student teachers as they are experienced by them. In his study of students in a postgraduate preservice teacher education programme, he explored student teachers' understanding of teaching from an experiential perspective using phenomenographic analysis, and used these findings to inform the future teaching of the programme. He concluded that 'teacher educators need to review the objectives of initial teacher education programmes and the ways in which they assess the performance of student teachers, to be sure that the understanding they intend student teachers to achieve is measured' (p. 91). He argues for 'a focus on the object of teaching over and above the act of teaching itself' (p. 91).

Roles and relationships

Like Wood, Martinez et al. (2001) comment on the tensions that relationships during the practicum can create:

As university-based teacher educators who work in the area of practicum, we were aware of the difficulties and tensions experienced by many preservice teachers as they reported relationships with school-based teacher educators that appeared to be individualistic duels over preferred teaching styles, or psychophantic [*sic*] strategic compliance on the part of the preservice teacher to ensure good prac grades. (p. 4)

Further, they comment on the focus placed upon the practicum by students. 'We were struck by the way practicum experience often looms for preservice teachers as the only important aspect of their professional preparation' (p. 5).

The 'student approaches to learning' literature has linked issues such as the nature of assessment and teaching methods used in a course to the approaches that students take to their learning, arguing that assessment has an influence on the way that students approach their learning, whether their approaches are 'deep', 'surface' or 'strategic' (see Ramsden, 1992). The 'sycophantic' pattern described by Martinez et al. (2001) could be a manifestation of a 'strategic' approach to assessment of the practicum by the student who is aiming at achieving a good grade rather than focusing upon the learning experience itself.

Martinez et al. (2001) argue the need to 'redirect the supervisory gaze' (p. 5) so that the preservice teacher, school-based teacher educator, and university supervisor work as a team to assess the learning of the students through the learning of the children in the classroom, so that rather than an expert judging a novice, relationships become more collegial, and the practicum becomes 'an occasion for genuine learning to be teachers, not just as summative test of competence' (p. 10).

The need to shift the focus to the learning that occurs within educational environments, and away from a focus upon assessment issues, is taken up by Gore (2001). 'To produce better teachers we need to reexamine those elements of our curriculum and pedagogy that are fundamental to our work and our identities – the elements that have gone unquestioned as

we have added new subjects, explored different assessment strategies, changed the demands of field work, and so on.' (p.133) She argues for a focus on what happens in the classroom as essential for the learning of student teachers, which has implications for their 'subsequent success in bringing about high quality learning outcomes for all of their students' (p. 133).

Affective responses

What is meant by 'genuine learning'? What factors combine to promote an environment where both cognitive and affective learning are valued? As Åkerlind and Jenkins (1998) point out, the less tangible elements of a teaching and learning environment are difficult to assess. 'Staff and student conceptions, perceptions and expectations form part of the less tangible aspects of a teaching and learning environment, compared for example with actual behaviour, materials or practices. Being less tangible, these factors are also more difficult to acknowledge and identify. Nevertheless...their resulting potential impact on attitudes, behaviour and teaching and learning outcomes is substantial' (p. 277). Although less tangible, these affective responses not only act as a mirror of the emotions that students are experiencing during the practicum, and therefore a way of analysing their experiences, but also indicate the impact that emotions have on students on a personal level, as well as on their learning overall.

Learning issues - Our study

It is clear from the literature, and anecdotal evidence, that students enjoy the experiential nature of the learning in the practicum. However, there appears to be a gap in the literature in terms of identifying the factors that lead to quality learning. It is this area that this study seeks to explore by refocusing on the nature and quality of the practicum experience, the physical and emotional environment surrounding it, and the relationships within it, that influence learning during the practicum.

The body of literature on the teaching practicum is extensive but, as Martinez et al. (2001) and Wood (2000) point out, there is a lack of discussion in the literature on the quality of learning occurring, being eclipsed by a focus on assessment outcomes. This paper attempts to explore some of the issues involved in this apparently neglected area.

As Gore (2001) states, 'Instead of asking questions about whether or not to have something or how much of it we have in a program, the focus would shift to what it is that we do within the pieces that we have; that is, the focus would shift to fundamental questions of pedagogy, curriculum, and learning. What matters would then centre on how we can enhance these dimensions of classroom practice in our programs both in terms of how we teach and in terms of how we prepare *our students* to teach' (p. 134).

Methodology

Mid-way through Semester One, 2001, all first year Bachelor of Education students at our university were invited to attend a public session to discuss their progress and provide feedback on the course introduced that year. Just over half of the students (N~76) attended the meeting. Following a brief introduction on the expectations associated with the session,

and prior to any discussion, all students were invited to write a personal reflection revolving around a number of key questions/issues: their personal reflections on initiation and progress within the course; identification of what they perceived to be the strengths of the course; and any suggestions for further improvements. This took the form of an 'open letter'. The session was conducted by the Course Coordinator and one other academic staff member attended the session. Students were then encouraged to discuss the issues. The 'letters' were then collected by the Course Coordinator, collated and analysed. An analysis of the data provided the stimulus for an exploration of the issues associated with the experience of practicum.

Student responses from the 'open letters' were grouped thematically, using a phenomenographic approach to analyse the ways that students conceptualised their experiences of the practicum to date. Categories of description emerged from the data, using students' own language to assist in determining these categories. This grounded approach allowed the questions and categories to emerge from the data itself, rather than using pre-determined categories chosen by the researchers. Students' own words are presented.

The phenomenographic approach uses 'ways of experiencing' as the primary unit of analysis (Säljö, 1997, p. 177), 'based on an analysis of accounts of experiences as they are formed in description' (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997, p. 192), in this case, ways of experiencing the practicum. Phenomenography is useful in this study as it has 'focused on describing qualitatively different ways in which particular sorts of students understand a phenomenon, or experience some aspect of the world, which is central to their education, and setting the results into the educational context of interest' (Booth, 1997, p. 135).

Findings

Of the 76 students who provided written responses, 12 made no statement about the practicum component of the course. Of the 54 students who did comment on the practicum, about 90 percent made positive statements overall, although some of these included comments that were critical of particular aspects of the practicum program such as organisational issues, or made suggestions for improvement. As the students' statements were part of an overall evaluation of the course, which did not specifically elicit information about the practicum, many of the statements were broad comments about how students were enjoying the practicum. The following themes and issues were identified and drawn from statements students made about specific aspects of the practicum.

These are listed in order of the number of times they were mentioned by students. Responses have been grouped into comments that were broadly interpreted as positive or negative. Examples of the actual statements made by students are provided in the following section, as well as a discussion of the issues raised by the statements.

Positive responses:

Issue
Helped to confirm career choice

Helps to understand/make connections with learning
Practicum in First year/early in course
Most enjoyable part of the course
Acts as incentive to remain in course

Negative responses:

Issue
Unclear expectations/poor organisation/communication with schools
Prefer later in year/course/block mode
Excessive workload because of practicum
Too many students for small rural schools

Discussion

Positive responses:

Helped to confirm career choice – ‘I know teaching is the thing for me’

This response was given most often by students (15 responses), who clearly see the timing of the practicum as a significant issue. It indicated that students felt that it provided them with an opportunity to test or confirm their individual aptitude to teaching.

At the start I was feeling very unsure about my course choice (Primary Teaching) but field experience changed everything. I now know that this is exactly what I want to do with my life and I'm going to love every moment of it!...

Field experience was really good. Enjoyed the atmosphere, the environment and everything about the school. I think it is a really good idea that you do this in the first year as you see the inside of it all, and realize if it is what you want or not. Instead of waiting til 3rd year and wasting 2 years on uni and thinking that it's not really you...

I love this course, and the field experience makes it even better...When I first went out to my school, by recess I realized that there was no doubt. Teaching is definitely what I want to do for the rest of my life...

...I know this is for me. I went on my 1st field experience and I loved it and I can't wait to go back this Friday. I knew the field experience would make up [my] mind as to whether or not I should really be here...

The course is AWESOME ! Going to a school every Friday and participating in school activities, learning, observing and watching strategies teachers use when teaching is a fantastic idea!...Field experience has opened my mind and eyes, and I am even now more dedicated and aware that this is the career I wish to pursue!...

Helps to understand/make connections with learning – ‘It’s good to be able to see the connection’

Students frequently stated (14 responses) that one of the major benefits of early practicum was that it meant that their learning during their university-based units was more meaningful for them, facilitating their understanding of their ‘theoretical’ learning, often stating that it gave them an incentive to keep going.

I am looking forward to it and to use my knowledge learnt during the past 5 weeks.

The subjects are really interesting and having school experience at the same time, it is good to be able to see the connection...

It's so much easier when you can actually see what you have been learning in the classroom, it sticks better in my mind and gives me an incentive to keep on wanting to learn new things...

The other positives [sic] is the practicum, we are able to relate the work of topics into a real environment or classroom setting...

...perhaps better if it was in 2nd semester so we are able to observe and put into place what we have learnt...

Practicum in First year/early in course – ‘A joyful insight into what teaching is all about’

This response is linked to the issue of confirming career choice (12 responses). Although a small number of students preferred to have the practicum later in the course, many expressly stated their positive response to the introduction of the practicum very early in the course. Providing students with the opportunity to participate in professional experience from the third week of the course was generally perceived as being ‘a good idea’, ‘the most excellent component’ and one of the positives associated with the course structure.

I believe the introduction of field experience into 1st year is a great idea. It gives you a chance to have a break from uni while gaining experience and insight into teaching...

To go back into an environment which I had spent the majority of my life at was both an [sic] exciting and challenging at the same time...Field experience in our first year is the most excellent component of the new course. You are thrown into your course, and can decide if this is what you want...

I like the idea of field experience in the first year, as it allows us as students to get a taste of the teaching world...

I fell privledged [sic] that I am able to have this contact with the schools in my first year. They have allowed me to have a joyful insight into what teaching is all about...

Most enjoyable part of the course – ‘It’s everything I dreamed of and more’

Students often (8 responses) reported that the practicum was the best part of the course. The language used by students was often striking in its intensity, indicating perhaps the strength of students’ affective responses to their practicum experiences. Words such as ‘fantastic’, ‘fabulous’, ‘awesome’, ‘joyful’, ‘adore’ and ‘overwhelming’ were used. It also indicated their positive reactions to the practicum, often describing it as ‘the best thing’, ‘the best part’ or ‘something to look forward to’.

The field work is great! It is the best thing about the course...

So far the best bit of the course has been the field experience. I don’t think I would be enjoying this as much if we didn’t have it...

Field experience – I LOVE IT. It’s everything I dreamed of and more...

I enjoy how we get to do field experience straight away as it gives me something to look forward to in the week...

Acts as incentive to remain in course – ‘This made me realize that I just have to stick it out’

Students (5 responses) clearly stated that the practicum acted as an incentive to continue studying, even when they stated that they were unsure about or struggling with other aspects of the course.

I really enjoyed work experience the other day and I am really positive that this is what I want to do so I will persist with things that I’m struggling with...

I know that by the end of the four years things that I am doing now will help

The field work has definitely been an eye opener. I love it and it has just reassured me in the first year of the course that I now no [sic] exactly where I want to be in four years time...

I do however know that I want to become a teacher and my field experience reinforced this for me. I enjoyed my time within the primary school environment and this made me realize that I just have to stick it out at uni in order to achieve my goals...

Going into the schools was fantastic. I loved it so much and I can see myself loving it in four years time...

These comments show that for many students the practicum experience has not only confirmed their expectations, but has also gone beyond them, provoking much stronger responses from them than they had clearly anticipated, 'It's everything I dreamed of and more'. The strength of the affective, emotional responses by students, almost expressing their own surprise at the intensity of their reactions, was indicated not only by the words used, but how they framed their comments. Their responses were sprinkled with exclamation marks, capitals, bolding and underlining of words and phrases, which was in stark contrast to the grammar and words used to describe other parts of the course.

Students also made strong connections with issues about learning: making connections between their learning at schools with their learning at university; the practicum acting as an incentive to keep learning; building on their own learning; and observing learning within classrooms

Negative responses:

Unclear expectations/poor organisation/communication with schools – 'What exactly is our purpose?'

Complaints about the lack of clarity of what was expected of students during the practicum were frequently made (11 responses). Either students were themselves unclear about requirements, or they reported that their schools were unaware of what they were meant to be doing. These statements seemed to relate generally to students' confusion about the role that they were expected to assume, unsure whether they were 'helpers', 'novices', 'apprentices' or active participants. They often stated that they were unsure what they were 'allowed to do'. Comments made by supervising teachers in schools, reported by the students within their responses, also perhaps indicate the need to re-examine the perceptions that supervising teachers hold about the practicum.

I was placed in a school that not only wanted me on a different day, but when I got there the teacher made it clear that she thought 1st years on placement was a waste of time...

It's hard to involve yourself in the classroom when your [sic] not really allowed to do anything...

The school wasn't really sure what we're supposed to do...

The school doesn't want us to do that...I don't think, but I'm not sure...

The field experience is fabulous to go out on in first year, but it would've been better several weeks later, so we know exactly what we are supposed to be doing, observing, helping, taking notes, what exactly is our purpose?...

Prefer later in year/course/block mode – 'Give us a chance to find our feet'

As stated previously, a small number of students (6 responses) expressed a preference for the practicum to be undertaken later in the year or semester, sometimes reflecting their broader lack of confidence or uncertainty, and sometimes related to the pressure of increased workloads.

My main concern is the school placements. I feel that they may be a little too early into a first year student's life...

May have been better to do this next semester when we had more info...

Perhaps better if it was in 2nd semester so we are more able to observe or put into place what we have learnt...

Lessen the placement work during the first year to give us a chance to find our feet and settle in to a work routine and new way of life...

Excessive workload- 'Everything seems to all come at once'

Some students (4 responses) who expressed very positive reactions to the early practicum nevertheless commented that a negative aspect of this was the increased workload involved, reflecting perhaps their reaction to coping with a number of new requirements at once.

Everything seems to all come at once and with field experience on Fridays I have little time to work on things through the week...

But because of field experience (which I simply adore) that day out is lost and I really feel that I need at least one weekday to be free of classes...

Too many students for small rural schools – ‘It seems very squashy and uncomfortable’

The fact that the students are at a regional university with a limited number of potential schools to be placed within, seemed to have worked against some students’ interests, with some (4 responses) reporting that they outnumbered the teachers at the school to which they were allocated (they were sent in teams of two or three).

Us being there is very overwhelming for such a small school...

...extremely disappointed because of the fact that their [sic] is three of us in a school with [a small number of] students. Teacher seemed to be unprepared for our arrival...

With our school I feel that the school is too small for us...it seems very squashy and uncomfortable...

As can be seen from these comments, although ostensibly they appear to be expressing negative reactions, on closer reading it can be seen that they offer positive suggestions about improving the course. The students have in fact highlighted the need for better preparation for the practicum to ensure more worthwhile and deeper learning experiences, ‘so that we are more able to observe or put into place what we have learnt’. They frequently refer to the connections between what they are learning in different contexts.

Discussion

How do these findings connect to the broader literature?

The themes and issues identified by students, and outlined above, have been compared with the issues identified from the literature, to examine areas of overlap, and to gain students’ perceptions on these issues. The literature identified issues such as:

- Retention issues, or aptitude for the profession (confirmation of career choice or incentive to stay in the course);
- Connections with learning;
- Expectations;
- Perceived roles of parties involved; and
- Appropriate assessment of the practicum.

Students’ statements on these issues are discussed below, highlighting the major themes of their comments, although not all of the issues identified in the literature were raised by students. Appropriate assessment of the practicum was not raised by students, for example, as they were early in their placements and assessment was not yet an issue for them.

Notable features of the students' comments were the strength of their responses and their recognition of the importance of their experiences for their broader learning. We were challenged by the varied responses linked to learning and the students' assumptions and beliefs underpinning what is considered to be effective, meaningful and empowering learning.

Retention issues/aptitude for the profession

Many of the responses indicated that the practicum experience reinforced previously held assumptions - that teaching was the correct career path. As one student stated, the experience is one which has 'opened my mind and eyes and I am even now more dedicated and aware that this is the career I wish to pursue'. Some responses take this confirmation and state their feelings even more passionately and refer to the course as being 'AWESOME' and 'I am going to love every moment of it'.

The comments from students about the earliness of the practicum appears to have the potential to influence retention patterns within the course. Much of the literature on retention of university students, and first year students in particular, shows that the first six to seven weeks of the course are critical for establishing a commitment to a course of study (see McInnis & James, 1995).

According to Yorke et al. (1997) and McInnis et al. (1999) in their work on factors that influence tertiary students' retention rates, commitment to the course and choice of the right course are the two most important factors that influence students' decisions to remain in the courses they have chosen. The strong responses on this issue from the students surveyed in this study has demonstrated their views of the importance of these issues. Indeed, the previous course, where the practicum was not undertaken until third year, showed an uncharacteristic 'spike' or increase in students leaving the course during third year, similar to the usual 'spike' found in most courses during first year. Students also stated that the early placement tested or confirmed their aptitude for the course and their career choice.

Connections with learning

The frequent references to the possibility of 'using', 'increasing' and 'sharing' knowledge may provide an insight into students' perceptions of teaching as being a process whereby knowledge is 'transmitted'. Åkerlind and Jenkins (1998) cite Martin and Balla (1991) who identified three hierarchical levels of learning, the first of these being teaching as a process of 'presenting information'. Students' comments indicate that their perceptions of learning at this early stage at least are consistent with this level of learning being the presentation of information, rather than a more active construction of their own knowledge.

The issue of making connections with learning in different contexts was prominent for a number of students, where relevance and 'making meaning' of university coursework in relation to practicum experience was seen as beneficial. They reported that it is the professional experience which provided their inspiration and 'incentive to keep wanting to learn new things'.

Expectations

In preparation for their practicum placement, a formal orientation/briefing session was conducted with the first year cohort, where expectations relating to the professional placement were clarified. Students nominated a school of preference and a partner. Written documentation was provided to both students and schools. However, responses suggest that this may have been both insufficient and ineffective in many instances as there existed confusion and uncertainty relating to expectations. The proposed experience differed somewhat from the previous, more traditional approach, and school personnel, in particular, seemed to be relying on previously established understandings relating to practicum placements.

Some students indicated a preference for practicum placements to begin later in the course, and preferably in second semester. It was suggested that students required more extensive course orientation time and perhaps semester one should be primarily a 'grounding for all aspects of study'. This may indicate students' inability to assimilate successfully into a multiplicity of learning environments, all of which have expected modes of operation. These responses may represent a preference for the 'ease in gently' approach to individual learning environments, and the belief that students should be allowed to 'find their feet' and be provided with time to 'settle into a work routine and a new way of life'.

The question may then be asked, how much 'lead in time' is appropriate? What may be the most equitable lead time for the majority of the cohort? Is it only a question of timing, or do other factors significantly influence readiness?

Perceived roles and relationships

An analysis of the terminology used to express student perceptions highlights some interesting issues. Students referred to 'being allowed' to participate in professional experience and of being 'put into' field experience. These responses may indicate something of the power relations within the university and the inequalities - real or perceived - associated with university relationships/partnerships.

Many of the students' comments demonstrated a confusion about the role they were expected to assume, often apparently falling into patterns with which they were familiar from their own previous experiences of schooling. Students used words such as 'helper', or 'work experience' student, or displayed a perception of being in inferior roles, unsure whether they were 'allowed' to do certain things. This reflects the tension outlined by Hughes (1998) where there are inherent underlying uneven power relations involved. Martinez et al. (2001) argued the need for student teachers to be active participants in schools, yet few students indicated that they saw themselves able to take on active roles within their schools.

These comments underlie an apparent assumption by the students that they are in inferior positions to those with whom they are working. They do not reflect a sense of the collegial relationships that Martinez et al. (2001) wish to promote. Enhanced roles and relationships within the practicum will play a major part in determining the quality of the learning within the practicum, where participants are jointly pursuing knowledge and understandings and where there is a focus on the learning of all parties, including all of those within classrooms, and these will be reflected in the quality of those relationships.

As with this study, Burton (1998) focuses on the importance of the quality of the student experience and the roles of all of the parties involved. She argues that relationships within

the practicum need to be partnerships between students and those within the teaching profession:

A commitment to a reflective teaching profession, whose members can work within the dynamics of their own philosophy and can identify and pursue their own professional needs, requires partnership quality assurance measures to be less concerned with the technicalities of assessment and unanimity of student experience. Instead the focus must be on gauging the extent to which subject mentors and university tutors are employing their respective skills and knowledge bases to preparing those sorts of teachers. (p. 145)

Conclusion

The data relating to student perceptions of the practicum experience demonstrate that issues raised in the literature do reflect the perceptions voiced by students. Emergent themes relate to: commitment to the course, the experience serving as an early test of aptitude and therefore potentially influencing retention patterns within the course; establishing connections with learning, specifically in relation to the theory/practice connection; expectations associated with practice; and working towards clearer understanding of roles and relationships.

However, identifying the students' perceptions has challenged us to refine our own focus, and to reconceptualise the framework underlying the practicum. Our focus is now on student learning within the practicum, and our aim is to develop a teacher education programme which will better prepare 'teachers who can assist their own students to achieve high quality learning outcomes' (Gore, 2000, p. 127). We have progressed beyond organisational issues - from "Too little, too late" and "This is the best part" - to working towards a more thorough examination of issues underpinning student learning in the practicum.

As Gore (2000) suggests, we must keep our eye on the ball - 'the ball is student learning' (p. 127) - and to do this, teacher education programmes need to ensure that 'our students develop deep understanding of the complexities surrounding learning as well as strong skills for producing learning.' (Gore, 2000, p. 127) How then can our teacher education programmes provide the vehicle for such learning?

This pilot study has pointed to the need for further study in this area and has raised broader questions about effective learning in both tertiary institutions and school learning environments. It reinforces the pivotal role that the practicum plays and how it encapsulates what it means to become a teacher.

We recognise that we have taken only the first few tentative steps in re-focusing our own thinking about the central issues within the practicum. The students' responses have stimulated us to ask different questions about improving the practicum experience for our students. For our own programmes at least, we now want to re-consider some of these fundamental issues. We know that at this stage we simply have questions, and that the 'how' and 'what' are yet to come. We know that we are working within a conservative context where change to programmes and products is sometimes prompted by factors other than purely educational ones, and that tensions exist for the many stakeholders involved. Students' own beliefs and previous experiences are part of this context. 'McIntyre reminds us that learning to teach is quite complex, that it is influenced powerfully by student teachers' previously acquired beliefs about teaching and images of teaching and that these images and beliefs are resistant to attempts to change' (Young, 1995, p. 104). Indeed, as Gore

(2001) states, (quoting Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris, & Watson, 1998), 'Teacher education is a conservative enterprise and reform has been slow' (p. 133).

The focus for us is the learning. How then can teacher education programmes, and in particular, the practicum experience, create a learning environment that acknowledges experiences, helps to maintain enthusiasm, encourages innovation, creativity and risk-taking and, therefore, empowers learners to learn? This process cannot be left to chance. It requires a rethinking of assessment tasks and processes to alleviate an overemphasis on an outcomes-based approach and encourage engagement with the learning. It requires support from and for all stakeholders. It requires us to consider more fully the power of the 'affective energy' as the fuel for this learning journey.

The questions we ask are:

How do we shift the focus, for all stakeholders, to the learning that occurs within the practicum, rather than merely assessing its outcomes?

How can we assist stakeholders within these complex environments to change their focus?

How do we support this change for stakeholders?

Most importantly for us, how do we use students' affective responses to their practicum experiences as a learning tool, so that it is the fuel that provides the energy to drive their learning?

How do we tap into and actively use this energy and enthusiasm to engage students more fully in the learning process?

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