Pairs on practicum (trial): Early childhood students collaborate with peers in preschool/kindergarten

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Kerryann Walsh, Leona Elmslie & Collette Tayler

School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

Uncertain futures demand that early childhood student teachers emerge from teacher education programs with capabilities to engage in teamwork, to collaborate in curriculum decision-making and to develop practices for critical reflection. This paper reports on a pilot project for pairing early childhood students for their first 20-day practicum in preschools and kindergartens at an Australian University. The paper discusses the benefits and challenges as reported by the participants in interviews and surveys, and analyses findings in relation to the extant literature on best practice in practicum and methods for facilitating learning in preservice teacher education.

Background

Collaboration and partnerships in schools, and between schools and other agencies, are projected as key features of the future. *The Adelaide Declaration (1999) on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (MCEETYA, 1999) proposes a commitment to collaboration for the purpose of "strengthening schools as learning communities where teachers, students and their families work in partnership" (p.2). This supports international calls for such cooperation by Hargreaves (2000), writing for the OECD, who suggests that future teachers in "knowledge economies" (p.3) will require the ability to work and learn effectively in teams. Most notably he recommends that they will need to work together to improve their teaching. Concepts of collaboration and partnership are well established within scholarship in early childhood education in which interpersonal and group skills (Mclean, 1991), and "groupness" (Goodfellow, 1995, p.14) are claimed as essential features of early childhood education and care environments.

Building partnerships is upheld as one of the key components of an effective preschool curriculum (QSCC, 1998). Collegial partnerships, that is, partnerships involving teams of practitioners, parents and other professionals from community service organisations, teacher aides, assistants, administrators, directors, licensees and other workers are considered to be essential for the development of responsive preschool programs which lead to improved outcomes for children. It follows, therefore, that practical experience in developing positive working partnerships is necessary for early childhood students and that the most logical site for this experience is the practicum. Anecdotal evidence suggests that pairing students for practicum is undertaken at many tertiary institutions; but relatively little is known about the

principles that should guide the pairing of students for practicum in general or in early childhood contexts in particular. A notable exception, however is Maloney and Campbell-Evans' (1998) Western Australian study of third year students working collaboratively to plan, implement and evaluate a unit of work during a four-week primary practicum. These researchers found that working in pairs was a less stressful practicum experience for students because they felt supported and shared responsibilities. Furthermore, students reported they acted as motivators for each other. In adopting pairing as an initiative in this practicum we hoped to enhance the opportunity for student teachers to engage in teamwork, collaborate in curriculum decision-making and develop practices for critical reflection.

Our pilot project involved the pairing of one hundred early childhood students for their first teaching practicum in preschools and kindergartens in Brisbane, Queensland, during first semester 2002. The evaluation aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of host teachers and student teachers involved in the paired practicum. We aimed to find out:

- how satisfied each group was with the experience;
- what each group found valuable/not valuable about the experience;
- what factors promoted successful pairing;
- what helped/didn't help to prepare them for the paired practicum; and
- what were strategies or ways that pairs worked together.

This paper focuses on the first three of these points.

The Trial Project

One hundred student teachers from a class of three hundred were paired at forty-eight preschools and kindergartens in Brisbane. Host teachers were recruited via a letter followed by personal telephone contact to enlist their participation in the pilot project. Seventy teachers agreed to participate. Student teachers did not choose their partners. They were paired according to their preference for sites and these were usually in close geographical proximity to their homes.

Student teachers were prepared prior to their paired practicum through the provision of a workshop day. This included background to teamwork and working with peers, and tutorials designed for students to get to know each other, and to begin observing and planning together. Host teachers were prepared for the pairing trial through the provision of seven symposia held at various locations throughout Brisbane. Teachers who were unable to attend a symposium were sent information about strategies to support student teachers working in a pair, and received telephone contact from the Paired Practicum Project Officer to discuss this information.

Evaluation of the Trail Project

The method for the evaluation of this trial was adapted from qualitative action research in education (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) and early childhood settings (MacNaughton, 2001) with the express aims of understanding the issues inherent in pairing early childhood students during their first practicum experience in preschools and kindergarten settings, and evaluating the effectiveness of this innovation with a view to improving practice. Insights and knowledge from the participants, that is, host teachers, student teachers, and university mentors, were considered central to this project because of their responsibility for the

practical development of this initiative. As Carr and Kemmis (1986) say, involving those responsible for practice is essential in qualitative action research as it has the potential to generate collaborative ownership of the process. Action research begins with the explicit desire to transform practices and advance understandings about an innovation or initiative (MacNaughton, 2001).

Hence, the evaluation of the practicum was seen as a way to building knowledge about the pairing in general and to assess its transferability to other professional practice contexts. As Groundwater-Smith (2000) contends:

> Doing something does not necessarily mean learning from something. Experience is not of itself a good teacher. The doing needs to be analysed, queried, interrogated and reflected upon in public and accountable ways (p.5).

A qualitative survey research method was employed for the evaluation of the trial. This approach was thought to be well suited to gathering the perceptions and experiences of participants (Glesne, 1999; Silverman, 2001) and qualitative researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things work from the point of view of participants (Creswell, 1994). Data collection involved three components:

1. semi-structured telephone interviews - with host teachers from all placement sites at the mid-point of the practicum;
2. semi-structured surveys using short answer and rating scales - of participating students, host teachers and university mentors at the end-point of the teaching practice; and
3. case studies - of three student pairs in the final week of their practicum.

Qualitative survey responses were analysed by grouping similar responses together and coding them to capture shared understandings of participants' perceptions. As previously stated, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on host teacher and student teacher's satisfaction with pairing, what they considered to be valuable and not valuable about the experiences, and the practices that promoted successful pairing. Data for this analysis are drawn from the telephone interviews and semi-structured surveys.

Findings

Satisfaction with pairing

Students and host teachers who participated in the paired practicum provided an overall rating of their experience. Students indicated, in the majority, that they had a highly positive experience on their paired practicum. Host teachers also predominantly rated this as a 'good' or 'excellent' experience. Students and host teachers identified experiences that they found valuable and they liked most about pairing and also those that were not valuable and they liked least. Overall, there were many gains identified from the pairing experience and it was suggested that the *positives outweighed the negatives (Teacher).*

What was valuable for host teachers?

Valuable aspects of pairing identified by host teachers are presented in Table 1 and included four areas:

1. practical support in the program;
2. professional development for teachers;
3. challenging teachers to think differently, become more flexible and deal with a new issue; and
4. personal rewards.

Host teachers described the practical support that students provided to them in their own classrooms with the children. Host teachers saw that having extra adults present in the program could provide much needed assistance and greater possibilities for small group work and individual attention for children:

> *The individual attention and small group work the children were able to have because of extra adults being available was a benefit.* **(Teacher)**

But host teachers also identified a number of benefits for themselves - their professional development, the challenge presented by confrontation with new ways of working, and personal rewards. A common thread in host teacher comments related to their own professional development. Teachers seemed to appreciate the stimulus provided by exchanging ideas, talking with students and reflecting with them:

> *I enjoyed having the students brainstorm ideas with each other and me. It represents what actually happens in the field and it models to students that communication is very important in the workplace.* **(Teacher)**

The host teachers' role as the teacher-of-student-teachers focused on making learning meaningful for them while at the same time ensuring their teaching duties with young children were met. This seemed to provide teachers with a challenge, but one many were happy to embrace:

> *It was valuable in that I had to relate very differently to each of my students as each had very different personality styles, beliefs, and communication skills. This forced me to be very aware of individual differences and capabilities. I had to adjust my expectations in certain areas when speaking to each student.* **(Teacher)**

The final benefit perceived by host teachers related to personal rewards perceived to be generated from working with students:

> *Having two enthusiastic young students and watching both gain more confidence in trying new experiences while they were helping each other.* **(Teacher)**

Table 1: What was valuable for host teachers

1. Practical support in the program

- Extra adults present in the program
- Increased individual interactions with children
- Additional small group work with children
- Extra sets of hands and eyes on the whole group
- Sharing practical ideas

2. Professional development for teachers

- Exchanging ideas - giving and receiving
- Dialoguing and reflecting with the students
- Working together as a team
- Sharing their philosophy
- Creating an awareness of different perspectives

3. Challenging teachers to think differently, become more flexible and deal with a new issue

- Challenging teachers to become time efficient in information sharing
- Organising the program differently to maximise teaching and learning opportunities for children and students
- Flexibility in dealing with changes to the program

4. Personal rewards for the teacher through:

- Successfully guiding students in their development as teachers and seeing their confidence grow
- Observing how the students support one another, work collaboratively and learn from their discussions

What was valuable for student teachers?

Valuable aspects of pairing for students are presented in Table 2. These clustered into two broad categories:

1. emotional and practical support for students; and
2. learning gains for students in the three areas of knowledge, skills and attitudes/values.

For students, comments often reflected the affective component of field studies and the benefits they perceived often related to emotional and practical support gained from working together:

> *Having a friend in the same position as me made me not feel so alone.* **(Student)**

> *Being paired made the experience much easier and less nerve wracking. In the end I learned a lot.* **(Student)**

> *I felt that I wasn't alone and we could exchange ideas.* **(Student)**

> *We shared ideas about how to do things or could share information about child observations/profiles. It was good to know that someone was feeling the same way as me.* **(Student)**

Apart from the emotional and practical components of the practicum, there were learning gains for the students in a number of significant areas (knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values). The students noted gains in their knowledge:

> *I was able to compare / share understandings of children, observations and planning and see the different techniques and strategies of my partner.***(Student)**

Students also noted gains in skills such as:

> *It gave me the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other and to share experiences such as group times. We were able to discuss situations or behaviours and come up with a solution together without having to get [the teacher] involved.* **(Student)**

Furthermore students noted gains in attitudes/values:

> *Learning how to work together - need for cohesion and cooperation. Accepting each other's ideas and [being] open to discussion.* **(Student)**

Table 2: What was valuable for student teachers

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1. Emotional and practical support for students through pairing

- Feeling less intimidated or anxious as students have someone on the same level to share this new experience with = students may be quicker to gain confidence
- Being able to talk and confide in another student and ask questions if they have an area of concern
- Reassurance that teaching practice is a process of learning as they could see the other student was also in this position
- Sharing ideas and acting as a sounding board for ideas
- Sharing resources
- Assisting each other as students complete some learning experiences together
- Encouragement
- Challenging each other
- New friendships

2. Learning gains for students in 3 areas

(a)Knowledge:

- Opportunities for talking, sharing, discussing, comparing, and reflecting in relation to their learning, including sharing observations of children
- Observing and discussing each other's teaching practice
- Reflecting on joint learning experiences
- Sharing ideas and brainstorming with one another

(b) Skills:

- Enhancing interpersonal communication and cooperation skills
- Working as a team
- Planning collaboratively
- Promoting reflective practice

(c) Attitudes/Values:

- Learning about and from other people's perspectives, strengths and weaknesses

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What was not valuable for host teachers?

Host teachers' responses to what was not valuable clustered on contingent issues in five areas. These are presented in Table 3:

1. time pressures;
2. evaluating two students;
3. accommodating two extra adults in the program;
4. working with student differences; and

5. facilitating student cooperation.

Table 3 displays categories of negative aspects of pairing identified by host teachers. Teachers described time pressures involved in supervising two students:

> *Lack of time for feedback - particularly time to read through two folders and plans during the day and give adequate feedback.* **(Teacher)**

They also identified difficulties inherent in individual evaluations that sometimes necessitated comparisons between the students and discussing one student's performance in the presence of the other. Teachers were very sensitive to the tension created by the need for pairs to work in partnership, and their need as supervisors to evaluate each one individually.

> *It was difficult when I was taking the students individually to discuss their experiences and techniques, especially when the other knows I'd be making negative comments.* **(Teacher)**

The practical constraints of classroom size and/or adult to child ratios were considered by some teachers to influence the centre's ability to accommodate two students. Teachers sometimes felt that children were negatively affected by more than usual numbers of adults in the program. For example:

> *The high ratio of staff, parents and students, to children in the room at the one time, could be a problem.* **(Teacher)**

> *In our environment when the groups are confined in an enclosed area for stories and group times (quiet room), having two extra adults didn't work well as the children were vying for their attention, wanting to sit on their laps etc.* **(Teacher)**

On the one hand, student differences were nominated by host teachers to add both richness and diversity to the task of supervision. On the other hand, in some circumstances, student differences were also considered remarkable in a negative sense:

> *Their very different personalities and expectations made it difficult to work together.* **(Teacher)**

Host teachers also identified specific situations in which students found it difficult to work together such as when students wanted individual recognition or when they were considered working together to be an imposition.

> *I found that if one student worked very well with something it was hard to give them sufficient credit for that without the other student being put under pressure to compete or come up with a new idea.* **(Teacher)**

Table 3: What was not valuable for host teachers

1. Time pressures because

- More time was required for consultation with two students
- More time was required to read two students' folders
- More time was required to support students individually (e.g., when students have specific learning needs or when one student wants more time for discussion)
- There was a need to repeat information to both students on occasions

2. Evaluating two student teachers because this involved

- Showing favouritism
- Comparing students
- Discussing one student's needs in front of the other student
- Making one student feel less adequate by praising the other student
- A conflict wherein the pairing process encourages teamwork yet students must be evaluated individually

3. Accommodating two extra adults in the program when

- The physical space was not large
- Students stood back and did not become involved in the program

4. Working with student differences when

- One student worked harder than the other student
- Students did not have time to establish a working relationship because one student had been away
- Parents had varying responses to each student
- Pairing allowed some students to rely on their partner too much and promote dependence

5. Facilitating student cooperation when

- Students wanted individual recognition for the ideas they contributed
- Students did not want to impose on each other

What was not valuable for student teachers?

Students identified specific circumstances that made working as a pair more difficult. These circumstances, which are less conducive to pairing, are summarised in Table 4. Their comments point to important conditions that must be explored and addressed in the future. These include when they:

1. worked with another student under certain conditions
2. perceived negatives for the host teacher; and
3. did not have clear expectations from the University.

Students' comments help to pinpoint the fine-grained issues which cause problems for students during pairing. These included working with another student in situations such as:

> *[we needed] more time to get to know [our] pair beforehand, but otherwise I enjoyed it.* **(Student)**

> *[we needed similar] levels of commitment, enthusiasm and passion for teaching... willingness to share ideas and contribute fairly.* **(Student)**

> *The teacher compared me to my paired student like it was a competition rather than a learning experience.* **(Student)**

> *I like the supportive environment but need to be (eventually) on my own to learn to stand on my own feet in the classroom.* **(Student)**

Students frequently noted that competition and comparison between students was challenging. But not all students viewed this as negative. For example:

> *Although I got on well with my pair, it would have been better if I had chosen who I wanted to be paired with. One problem was that she was a lot more confident than me and I didn't seem to be listened to as much. I also felt the teacher may compare us and feel I wasn't as good. However, this did have an advantage of forcing me to have more confidence.* **(Student)**

Students' assessment of the value of the paired practicum was influenced by their observations of their host teacher and the degree to which they noticed their host teacher was supportive of pairing. They were also sensitive to perceptions of how burdensome pairing was for their host teacher. As one student observed:

> *It seemed to put more pressure on the teacher to have two students.* **(Student)**

Working as a pair with a group of children sometimes entailed reduced opportunities for students to experience teaching performance in front of the group as a whole - an experience they considered key to their development as teachers:

> *It appeared to make it a little awkward when planning experiences and group times. There were no opportunities for group times with the whole group as we had to split them into two small groups. Also I feel that having two students may place extra pressure on the supervising teacher as he/she has to take out extra time to meet and discuss our folders and progress - less time for in depth discussions.* **(Student)**

Students also identified some gaps in the University's expectations of them during pairing, and noted that the written practicum requirements were not designed for pairs and they felt they needed examples of written work achieved during pairing to ensure they were meeting acceptable standards:

*Assigned tasks should be provided as a guideline, there was a lot of
confusion over assigned tasks between students [this] needs
clarification.* **(Student)**

Table 4: What was not valuable for student teachers

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1. Worked with another student when

- They did not know their partner prior to the practicum
- There were marked differences between the pair (e.g., in commitment and
  enthusiasm for early childhood teaching)
- Competition and comparison were perceived by either or both students
- They shared ideas and did not receive credit for them, or did not receive ideas in
  return
- They preferred to work independently

2. Perceived negatives for the host teacher when

- The host teacher was not supportive of the concept of pairing
- The host teacher was finding the supervision of two students burdensome or
  challenging

3. The University's expectations were not clear because

- The practicum requirements weren't designed for student pairs
- Participants needed further clarity of practicum expectations and to be shown
  examples of paired work (e.g., a practicum folder)
- There were reduced opportunities for managing whole group learning experiences

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Practices that promoted successful pairing

Student teachers and host teachers identified and described practices that promoted
successful pairing, as shown in Table 5. These practices relate to those generated by
student teachers, by host teachers, and by all participants together.

Table 5: Practices that promoted successful pairing

Practice	*Description*
Briefing and debriefing sessions held daily	• Providing an opportunity for the host teacher and two students to talk, discuss and reflect on the children, learning experiences and future plans • The host teacher arranging some sessions with both students and some sessions with individual students
Student teachers creating a supportive learning environment	• Being helpful, supportive and respectful of each other and the teaching staff • Giving each other positive feedback and compliments
Student teachers demonstrating a positive attitude towards learning	• Showing enthusiasm, initiative, and a desire to get the most out of practicum • Demonstrating a commitment to early childhood teaching
Student teachers talking together regularly	• Sharing observations of children, jointly planning learning experiences, and providing constructive feedback and reflections in relation to experiences
Student teachers starting practicum positively	• Commencing together from the first day • Participating in a positive joint teaching experience early in the practicum
Host teachers creating a non-threatening, supportive, learning environment	• Creating an environment in which ideas and experiences are valued and are shared
Host teachers creating opportunities for a balance of individual and shared learning experiences for student teachers	• Supporting independent and interdependent teaching practice

While these practices may not be surprising, it is important to note that the most commonly cited practice was conducting briefing and debriefing sessions for all participants. The value of this practice had been identified in the literature and was emphasised in teacher symposia and in the student's workshop day. Host teachers and students agreed it was vital:

It was very important to have opportunities at break times to discuss programs, raise questions, extend understanding of teaching responsibilities with each other and then with classroom staff. **(Teacher)**

Conclusion

This pilot project set out to evaluate the pairing of students for their first field experience in preschools and kindergartens. This paper provided a summary of some of the findings of our evaluation of the pilot project. Here we focused on host teacher and student teacher's satisfaction with pairing, what they considered to be valuable and not valuable about the experiences, and the practices that promoted successful pairing.

Our findings demonstrate that through pairing, students were able to: support each other; learn from each other; enhance their skills for critical reflection; and learn the importance of communication and cooperation with teaching colleagues. Host teachers perceived that children in these programs received additional individual and small group learning experiences because of the extra adult support in the program. Host teachers gained personal rewards through guiding student teachers' learning and observing them increase in confidence. Many host teachers commented that they valued students' ideas and enthusiasm. Additionally, host teachers were challenged to be flexible and to organise their program differently to maximise teaching and learning opportunities for the children and student teachers.

The findings draw our attention to the learning opportunities that pairing generates and to important considerations about how to best prepare host teachers and students for this experience. Evidence from our trial shows that some pairs worked together more effectively and productively than others, and this was dependent upon a number of factors. Clearly, there are advantages to different types of pairing and these require further investigative research (Wynn & Kromrey, 1999). Host teachers and students commented that student pairs not knowing each other well prior to the practicum lessened collaboration in some cases. Host teachers noted that giving feedback to two students and reading and responding to two practicum folders, could be time consuming. Supporting two students was identified as more challenging when one student was taking up more time or needed more assistance than the other student. Both students and host teachers noted that where students had marked differences in their personalities, learning needs, or ability to understand other people's perspectives, the paired placement was often less successful. In some cases the dynamic of a paired placement created feelings of competition or comparison for students and host teachers. Host teachers also identified that high ratios of adults to children was less appropriate in some environments.

Overall, there were many gains identified from the pairing experience. Yet, simply expecting pairing to succeed without providing a strong rationale, professional development of host teachers, and teaching strategies relevant to teamwork for students is unfair. The results of this trial demonstrate that a solid base for pairing must be developed by supporting students, host teachers and mentors in their roles. As Perry (1997) notes, "the term, collaboration is sometimes used in a way that suggests that it is a natural phenomenon and that schools or centres are, by their organizational nature, collaborative enterprises... [but]... many skills and abilities are required in order to collaborate" (p.142). Following the trial, we think that pairing of students for practicum can be better supported if the concepts underpinning cooperative learning and working in pairs are embedded in the academic component of practicum coursework (Boud, 2001). In this way, pairing may become more integral to student thinking and practice.

The findings from the paired practicum trial in Semester 1, 2002 have strengthened our conviction that working in pairs on practicum produces worthwhile outcomes for students. This is particularly the case with respect to the personal and emotional support that students felt they gained from the practicum. As the literature points out (Falchikov, 2001; Wynn & Kromrey, 1999), these personal outcomes are of great professional value. A case can be made, based on these findings, for the continuation of pairing taking into account the significant issues identified by both students and host teachers in the evaluation of this trial. As one teacher remarked:

> *Generally the pairing worked really well. I think with a bit more practice this idea could have great benefits.* **(Teacher)**

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