Turning a critical lens on the practicum in secondary pre-service teacher education programs

Doreen Rorison
Charles Darwin University
Northern Territory, Australia

Abstract

The class was quiet...where were their thoughts?
‘Guess what I’m thinking’, they silently said.
‘Guess what I’m thinking’, the teacher shattered their calm.
Lucky we have an excursion on Thursday!

This paper reports preservice teacher and school student perspectives of the practicum. These voices are usually silenced and the research highlights the ‘messiness’ and complexities of classroom research. A story of the practicum co-authored by the participants (classroom teachers as mentors, preservice teachers, school students and teacher educator) uncovers views not previously heard.

Evidence of school student and preservice teacher strategies to reclaim a sense of themselves and resist imposed views is presented. Engaging school students is seen as a problem of how students are constructed as learners, not a problem of pedagogy. Preservice teachers describe the practicum as a time to endure and acquiesce and complain of limited feedback from either the university or their school-based mentors.

Both students and preservice teachers support seamless sharing between classroom teacher and novice teacher. They also suggest that the gap in the life worlds of teachers and the life worlds of learners is indeed a chasm.

Jumping Through Spinning Hoops

Very early in my teacher education career I became aware of the tensions surrounding the practicum. It was apparent that we did not prepare preservice teachers well for the practicum experience in schools. That isn’t to say that we did not prepare them quite well for teaching, what we did not prepare them for was the politics of the school and the efficacy to withstand the sense of novice and ‘not belonging’ in the classroom.
There was a huge gap between the expectations of the preservice teacher and the varied experiences and receptions they received in the schools.

I believe that our preservice teachers have a sound idea about productive pedagogies, classroom culture, curriculum development and a reasonable content knowledge in their subject areas. They are well versed in assessment and evaluation techniques, how to ask the fertile question and how to develop and maintain positive classroom relationships and interactions. The educational theories that underpin a democratic and constructivist view of the teaching/learning dialectic have been interrogated and used to construct outcomes focussed unit and lesson plans. But teaching someone else’s class, someone else’s knowledge in someone else’s way is disempowering for preservice teachers and this often leads to an initial acquiescence to prescribed lesson content and classroom management techniques that acknowledges the ‘superior knowledge’ of the mentor teacher. This is when preservice teachers report that they feel they have been misled by the university and suggest they have a sense of ‘jumping through spinning hoops’.

My research visits the preservice classroom and asks the questions: Does the practicum offer what it promises? Is it only an assessable culminating activity of the learning of the preservice teachers or can it give them the space to continue to learn and ‘become’ as a teacher? I could see that much of the conflict was related to the different constructions and perceptions of the participants in the practicum classroom. The participants here include the preservice teacher, the mentor teachers, the teacher educator (myself), and of course the school students. At times there are other players too – the other liaison lecturers, the ‘senior’ teachers, the coordinator of preservice teaching within the school and occasionally the assistant principal or principal. Parents seldom influence the process directly but there is an understanding that they are quick to react where they believe the teaching of a ‘novice’ teacher might disadvantage their student.

After establishing that there was very little in the education literature to help the preservice teachers in their ‘jump into the spinning practicum hoops’, I designed my research to allow for the voice of all participant groups to be heard. I planned that we would co-construct a story about the practicum that could be later rubbed against the
research literature to make some sense of the practicum experience. In doing so I hoped to provide new evidence and information to facilitate a more seamless transition for the preservice teacher.

**Reading the practicum as text**

**How are the different participants positioned as the practicum unfolds?**

Without a clearly defined ‘theory of the practicum’ teacher education has relied for too long on a structure and framework that supports a past view of schooling, a time of ‘supervisors’, ‘student-teachers’, ‘teacher training’ and ‘practice teaching’, a time not cognisant of current understandings of the social, political and cultural lifeworlds of schools. The recent intensification of teachers’ work and the sense of deskilling that have resulted from a progressively politicized and ‘managed’ profession have made issues around teachers’ work and teacher knowledge even more difficult. The tensions related to ‘ownership’ and ‘positioning’ in the practicum lie amidst these complex interactions between the practitioners in the schools and the forces within the learning community that demand an array of (sometimes) contradictory outcomes.

This paper reports on a pilot study in four practicum classrooms though it is informed by both past and present voices from a wide range of schooling and classroom experiences. Post-structural critical perspectives suggest that ‘voice’ is heard and not heard through both deliberate and unintended actions. These actions are related to the social, cultural and political positionings of the research participants. In this study the researcher has been student, ‘student teacher’ (this term has lost favour in the literature and I will use the currently accepted term of preservice teacher without the hyphen), teacher, parent, supervising teacher (this is now the more expanded role of ‘mentor’), teacher educator and preservice teacher practicum coordinator. This places me in an interesting position in relation to the other participants in the study and highlights the importance of the partnership with the ‘mentor’ in their new role of support and guidance rather than surveillance or evaluation.

The research questions the role of the practicum as it is currently conceived and reaches into the practicum classroom to build meaning and new understandings of how the participants are positioned or constructed by current views. This new
perspective tries to make sense of the complex ways preservice teachers acquiesce, acquire or/and contest the moral, ethical and social practice of schooling. It also interrogates how young people at school construct their own role and tries to make sense of how they can be constructed differently as learners in the classrooms.

By using the tools of qualitative critical and participant research the study seeks to unsettle the veil that has been thrown over the practicum classroom to preserve a view of the practicum that is agreed, consistent and successful. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is not the case; the practicum experience is more likely to be inconsistent, counter to the outcomes as presented in the university preparation and disempowering for the preservice teacher. Working within these tensions and contradictions preservice teachers’ focus on successful completion and endure the attempts at ‘occupational socialization’. Frequently they also encounter a culture of diffidence to the progressive theories of inclusive and transformative learning that are part of their university preparation. This results in confusion and often resentment that the university ‘theory’ has misled them and not prepared them for the realities of teaching. This is often supported by the schools where ideas of ‘forget what you learned at uni’ are frequently proffered (although this is not always the case, I recently heard a preservice teacher in a middle schooling setting comment ‘this is what they were talking about at uni’). Unfortunately, however, it is frequently more like trying to place a square peg in a round hole. Schools are not that receptive to our preservice teachers, their learning needs and developing ‘sense of becoming’ a teacher. In my weaker moments I wonder why we don’t just give them a toolbox of class management tricks and send them out there! But of course we know that they would soon burn out and have nothing to fall back on. It is more important that they are reflective practitioners with a full understanding of school culture, learning, pedagogy, curriculum development and how to maintain positive classroom relationships.

This paper seeks to promote a new synergy of the practicum revealed in the stories co-written by preservice teachers, mentors, students in the classroom and the teacher educator. By using an interpretive framework that is loyal to and embedded in the setting, these stories takes a fresh look at the practicum experience. This exposes some unsettling trends and practices that challenge some taken for granted
understandings about the learning of both the preservice teachers and the school student in the classroom. By listening reflexively to what the students and preservice teachers are telling us this study reads their perspectives against those of the teacher educator and mentors and asks how we can provide for a practicum experience that more accurately reflects the contemporary and transformative conversations on which university teacher education is based. Student learning outcomes need to be the focus of the teaching by our preservice teachers and the sooner they learn to make student learning central, the sooner they will understand the teaching/learning dialectic. This is more likely to be the outcome if we truly understand what is happening in our practicum classrooms. Thus the need for a study such as this one.

As a pilot for a much larger research project this study involved four preservice classrooms in three different schools with between fifteen and twenty-eight students in the classes. I sat in the classroom in much the same manner as I would if I was observing a preservice teacher, making it clear to them that I was wearing a different hat, and I never commented directly on their lessons. The preservice teachers admitted that I made them nervous at first but they soon forgot that I was there. The selection of the sites was completely random, after collecting the timetables of all eighteen volunteer preservice teachers I worked out a combination that would allow me the greatest possible number of sites with the greatest number of visits to each. I then distributed letters to the principal, mentor teacher and students (for parental permission). The university ethics committee and the Department of Employment, Education and Training Research Authority and the Boards of the Independent Schools had already granted approval.

I attended almost every lesson in a particular subject for three to four weeks and wrote about the learning that was occurring in the classroom, from my perspective, every day. From the second visit onwards I presented a ‘story’ of the learning to the focus group after each lesson for their comments, annotations and changes. The focus group consisted of four or five classroom students, the mentor teacher and the preservice teacher. My story was written in the left hand column of the page with space for them to write their story, variations, perspectives or comments in the right hand column. Over night I would weave the student, preservice teacher and mentor perceptions, variations and comments into the text and add my perspective of the most
recent lesson. This would be presented again to the focus group the next day for comments, changes and annotation. These stories were co-constructed over ten to fifteen visits to the classrooms and all participants were given the opportunity to comment on the final story by mail one week after the final visit.

The difference between the early childhood, primary or elementary, lower secondary and senior secondary practica is seldom considered in the literature. Much of the previous practicum research has been undertaken in the primary school. While in the early childhood and primary school practica the preservice teacher spends every day with the same group of children, the secondary practicum experience involves teaching in two or three different classes, working with each group of students for only one lesson (about fifty minutes) a day, and being only one of six or seven different teachers the students relate to in a day. This has a range of tensions around the lack of time spent with each group, the number of ‘mentor’ teachers the preservice teacher relates to and the range of students they need to engage. The students can also be from twelve to twenty years old and depending on the structure of the school can be arranged from higher-level learners to low literacy or numeracy groups, or can be vertical groups of similar levels and vastly different age, or mixed ability groups based on choice of electives. Learning or subject areas can also be vastly different from one lesson to the next, from practical or vocational to higher-level thinking and problem solving. Classrooms include traditional layouts with thirty paired desks in rows, outdoor education in remote settings, middle schooling designs, practical lessons in kitchens, gymnasiums and workshops and both well resourced and poorly resourced computer labs. Add to this variety an absentee level of up to five students every day and we have a range of adjustments and challenges for the secondary preservice teacher that are not adequately considered in the extant literature. Further research is necessary to highlight the variety of experiences the secondary preservice teachers encounter in their practicum and the varied receptions they receive from the schools. The balance between observation time and teaching time also needs to be interrogated.

The research design endeavoured to provide the space for the participants to write into being their perceptions of the classroom learning experiences, expectations and realities as well as their reaction to the perceptions of the other participants. Shultz
and Cook-Sather (2001) suggest a method of presenting the views of school students by helping them to read across their own writings and offer their own connections. Smyth and Hattam (2001) call for different ways of interrogating issues ‘that are more informative, more insightful, more compelling, and more epistemologically tuned-in’ (402). It was hoped that by being ‘evocative… [and] grasping the complexity’ (Richardson; 2000), new understandings of the practicum, or new aspects of old and previously unchallenged issues, might be revealed.

The narratives that emerged from the research were honest and respectful stories of a shared view of the practicum classroom, representing the tacit and embedded knowledge of the participants, but when read apart from this embedded involvement the stories were somewhat bland and did not reflect the richness and complexity of the classroom experience as it was ‘known’ by the participants. The researcher’s voice became too dominant and the voices of the other participants were reduced to whispers. By remaining ethical and not disclosing individual perceptions or experiences that might be hurtful or belie trust, there was too much about the classroom that could not be written. Though the participants in the focus group were able to add to the story in an unrestricted way when they wrote their perceptions, the resultant story became a compromise between what was perceived and what could be exposed. It can only be considered one of many stories of the practicum, a story created by the teacher educator in her role as researcher, heedful of the perceptions of others yet unable to name a wide range of interactions and worrisome features for fear of exposing issues that rightfully should not be exposed in a setting where individuals could be identified. So additions, comments and changes suggested by participants were often not able to be woven into the story, limited by the texts inability to be controversial, indiscreet, specific or identifying. As Bloomfield (1997) suggests it is quite a challenge even in collaborative work, to include the personal. Whatever the desire, we function within particular ethical and cultural practices that may not give us the freedom to unveil all that we perceive, and our perceptions themselves are also limited by our own positionings.

For example, if the mentor teacher wrote that the preservice teacher had not prepared the lesson adequately, this could not be included in the next part of the story for fear of affecting the relationship the preservice teacher had with the class. If a teacher or
student gave information about a student who had not taken his medication for a bipolear condition, it could not responsibly be written into the story as other students would be reading it, and although the student would not be identified it would be obvious who they were. The ethics or wisdom of disclosing information to participants restricted the sharing that was possible.

While transparency and voice are important in research, so is an understanding of the morality, ethics and dynamics of classroom relationships. This led to a revision in the design of the research that resulted in future stories being fictionalised as ‘composite biographies’ (Connell, 1985) and checked by students, preservice teachers and mentors in a totally different setting. Though still created from continuous and sustained classroom observation, a ‘sense of’ the practicum classroom was written into existence, rather than the specifics of any one setting. Indeed it became obvious that it was not the source of the stories or the specific detail that was important but the sense of the perceptions that were uncovered to inform future practicum ‘knowing’ for preservice and mentor teachers. I will report on this study in a subsequent paper.

Despite this necessary variation in future research design the stories co-authored and the perceptions co-constructed in this pilot study provide complex, rich and multi-layered information to connect to the wider debates. The stories may have been ‘bland’ in the reading but were rich in conception, providing trustworthy evidence for the sorts of things teachers, preservice teachers, teacher educators and students have been saying for some time. Keeping in mind that the stories had been given approval by the participants as accurate and collaborative interpretations of classroom interactions, culture and pedagogy, they provide powerful and authentic evidence of the practicum classroom. The themes that are tapped by the conversations emerging from the stories provide a robust and vibrant new understanding of the practicum classroom.

**Reading Across the Co-Constructed Story**

**What are the classroom students telling us?**

The revelations that are most illuminating are those related to student perspectives. It became clear that many of the interactions in the classroom were not about young
people and their learning but about imposing teacher views, from their sense of the
world, onto young people. Teachers claim the authority over what students should do,
where they should be, what they should wear, where they should sit, when they
should stand, and according to them ‘what they should say’. What became obvious
from this opportunity to dispassionately observe classrooms for a sustained period
was the realization that young people are continually contesting the mores imposed
upon them.

For students the classroom activities are ‘a moment in time’ not necessarily
connected with the rest of their lives.

When discussing the difficulties of engaging with young people as researchers, Cook-
Sather (2001) comments that ‘their lives move on and they lose interest’. One student
in our stories comments, ‘I had developed a better understanding but didn’t feel the
need to report it to the rest of the class as I was impatient to move on’. There were
many instances reported that demonstrated enjoyment of the moment but little
connection with the learning that had been planned. Students appear to be
continuously looking for distractions to move the moment on; in fact they appear to
have an infinite appetite for distractions. Serious engagement was frequently hindered
by interruptions and this seemed to be expected by the young people. In the upper
year levels there were less interruptions but no less searching for distractions to move
the moment on.

Crisis of engagement, mis-communication at a cultural level and lack of freedom.

A second theme is a sense of different understandings. Engaging and productive
activities, relevant content, student centred lessons, meeting the varied learning needs
of students and making meaningful connections are generally accepted as indicators
of progressive and constructivist pedagogy (and that is certainly what we teach and
hopefully model at the university). What becomes clear through this study is that no
matter how well a lesson adheres to all of these principles it will not resonate with the
students if the teacher speaks in ‘foreign tongues’ and fails to communicate. Students
frequently wrote that they did not understand what teachers were saying, that teachers
‘saw things differently’ and that ‘teacher meaning’ was often different from ‘student
meaning’. Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst (2000) and Smyth and Hattam (2004) introduce the concept of mis-communication at a cultural level in their study of students who had ‘dropped out, drifted off or been excluded’ from formal schooling:

…schools are important sites of youth socio-cultural identity, and what we are seeing…is an instance of ‘interactive trouble’ – young people are being prevented from fully participating in the school curriculum because of a failure to understand the cues of the teacher, whilst teachers are seemingly unable to make sense of student talk. It is a classic case of mis-communication at the cultural level of the relationship between the life worlds of the students and teachers (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson, & Wurst, 2000:277).

It is not that students and teachers are not interacting, but their perception of the communication outcomes is quite different because they have constructed their positioning quite differently. A teacher may perceive their remarks as relevant and supportive, providing the type of guidance they believe a student needs at a particular time, while a student can hear their comment as negative, disempowering or belittling. There were many instances during my observations of students failing to understand the language, intent or ‘cues’ of the teacher. There are also many examples where the teacher fails to relate to the messages from the students. As Bakhtin (1981) says:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—over populated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin, 1981:293-4)

Student engagement is the topic of much discussion in the policy literature and media at present and the political view is that teachers are the biggest effect on student success (and by extrapolation must have the biggest affect on student failure) (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs Higher Education Division, 2000; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001; Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 1994; Ramsey, 2000; Rowe & Rowe, 2002). What comes through very strongly in this study is that student
engagement is less a result of the particular teacher or pedagogy and more about *how students are constructed as learners in the classroom*. Young people have thought the problem *differently* from their teachers; they have developed their own ways of surviving in a student unfriendly environment and in a system of schooling that no longer meets the needs of the society it serves. The choices students made in the classroom and the comments they made and failed to make in the story, suggest that the gap in the life worlds of teachers and students is indeed a chasm. The continuous interventions into their lives and decisions being made for them about what is meaningful or worthwhile, is denying students the freedom to make connections in their own way and within cultural constructs that they understand. It is a moral, educational and a political disgrace that is deliberately hidden from public view by a neo-conservative and managerial push bent on discrediting schools and teachers and blaming them for the inadequacies (that are somewhat contrived) of their students. It becomes very clear from sustained observation that it is the systemic and structural restrictions in schools that work against productive and constructivist pedagogies. We need to stop blaming the teacher and teacher education.

Issues previously discussed in the literature as peer pressure or image issues, on deeper and longer observation, appear to be more related to cultural resistance and classroom ecology. Patterns of who mucks up, who answers questions, who appears disengaged and who demands the teacher’s attention seem to be set up in every classroom. Though the pattern can be quite fluid and can change from day to day, the students appear to be protecting each other from the stresses of teacher and schooling demands. When there is no alternative there appears to be an agreement to play the school’s game, the coercive demands of some teachers (or schools) providing for a culture of mute compliance. Generally, however, the patterns change very little from class to class, or lesson to lesson. The young people in the classrooms orchestrate the lesson to their own tune, especially in the preservice teacher classroom.

The preservice classroom (and equally the ‘relief’ teacher classroom) offers students an opportunity to ‘muck up’ as the students put it. With no history of coercion and little fear of retribution, many students see these lessons as times to test the boundaries. They seem to conceive of this opportunity as a relief from the boring patterns of the classroom and enjoy the opportunity to test the water and upset the
truce or precarious dynamic of the classroom. The novice teacher who was the subject of research by Smagorinsky, Lakly and Star Johnson (2002) reported a similar observation. She believed it was all part of the game. It is how the game is played by all participants that seems to be of most interest to the students. This is not generally understood by mentor teachers, preservice teachers and teacher educators, resulting in a tension created from the change in classroom dynamics when the preservice teacher takes on the role of classroom teacher. A new teacher will always result in a changed classroom synergy, but we have not yet developed a full understanding of how best to manage this to ensure the development of the preservice teacher during the practicum. Teaching ‘someone else’s class’ is imbibed with issues of power and when we add this to the angst of the classroom teacher who can have a myriad of issues related to their sense of ownership of the learning culture, we have a Pandora’s box of problems not previously addressed. These issues impinge dramatically on the quality of the practicum experience and need to be interrogated more fully.

**Identity of the classroom student in our schools**

Smyth and Hattam (2001) propose that there is a ‘crisis of identity’, suggesting that the connections that help develop identity are not achievable for a large number of students, especially those who don’t want to play the game anymore. Although Smyth’s study looks at young people who had dropped out of school or were on the brink of dropping out, the same symptoms of a cultural divide between students, teachers and others who claim the authority to speak on behalf of young people are replicated in the classrooms of this research. This study reveals that the crisis of identity is not ‘lack of’ identity or ‘poor’ identity, merely a different *sense* of identity. This sense of self is not constructed from a socialised and compromised ‘adult’ view but one that still has a sense of the possibility of ‘who am I?’ I believe this is generally misunderstood. If young people are continually told they cannot be who they want to be, or who they think they are, but need to comply with adult and teacher views of who they should be, then it is no wonder we have the conflicts and malaise in our classrooms.

Generally the students present in the classrooms reported that they were comfortable with the role or ‘identity’ they had etched out for themselves. It made some sense to
them in terms of their own understanding of their place in that classroom. This is not to say that it might not change in the next class. One student in the Shultz and Cook-Sather study admitted, ‘High school, for me, was all about multiple personalities. I knew how to play the social games of high school’ (Strucker, Moise, Magee, Kreider, 2001:153). Students are perspicacious and very much aware of what is going on in the classroom, even when they appear to be disengaged. Their attitude, actions and levels of engagement make sense to them and are dependent on how they are positioned or constructing themselves at that point in time. They too have full and complex lives that influence their day-to-day reactions.

The point I am trying to make is that we have misrepresented our students and their malaise. They are actually quite savvy and pay attention to a great deal more than we give them credit for. Reisinger and Cook-Sather in ‘Final Thoughts’ for the chapter co-authored by Dunderdale, Tourscher, Yoo, Reisinger & Cook-Sather (2001) came to a similar conclusion:

They remind us that everything we say and do as teachers – tone of voice, gestures, side comments, references, kinds of questions and responses to student work, unintentional comparisons—sends an array of messages to students that they absorb perhaps even in greater quantities and with greater consequences than the content to which they are exposed.’ Dunderdale, Tourscher, Yoo, Reisinger & Cook-Sather (2001:72)

**Young people do not want to be categorized or stereotyped.**

When commenting on or amending the text of the stories, students were reluctant to name or blame other students using the dominant views or discourse of schooling. Occasionally there would be a perspective added by teachers about students being ‘lazy’, ‘less able’ or ‘not engaged’ and there was always a response by student authors during the next focus group contesting the construction. This also came out strongly in a study by Cook-Sather (2001) that used text co-constructed by a preservice teacher and school student through email communication. Students ‘do not want to be categorized, compared to and judged against one another, treated differently or discriminated against’ (Shultz and Cook-Sather, 2001:4). Research that privileges the
views of young people seems to paint a picture of young people who are aware of the differences within the group but are more accepting of these as artefacts of background and differences in engagement with the norms of schooling. They are unlikely to name or blame, they prefer to construct it ‘as just the way it is’ and they do not want to be either rewarded or penalised for ‘difference’. Examples in the stories we co-authored include students being unwilling to censure the behaviour of others or give reasons for their actions. They are more likely to present excuses or just not respond to comments or questions about student behaviour. They respect each other as individuals who are differently constructed, ‘that’s just Tom, he’s a fantastic artist you know’. Adults appear to be too quick to pre-judge young people, constructing them from their own perspectives and experience, not cognisant of the experiences of being young in the early twenty-first century.

**Students prefer to do their learning away from the classroom, frequently at home.**

As already mentioned there was evidence in every classroom I visited that student sense of self as a learner frequently did not align with their contrary or unfocused visage in the classroom. This was not the first time I had come across students who were continually disruptive or bumptious in class who then completed all work and met learning outcomes over night, presenting them at school the next day or at least before deadlines, and then proceeded to do their own thing during class once again. Many students wrote in these stories that they did not see that the classroom was a good place to concentrate or produce their ‘best’ work. Young people, despite being silenced or seldom consulted about preferred educational contexts, are shouting out both in action and metaphor for environments that might support their learning.

Coulter and Wien’s (2002:20) reading of Hannah Arendt’s views of freedom, action and responsibility supports this. She believes learners need space to think as well as peace and a chance to communicate with themselves. People of all ages need space and peace to work at the cognitive level that deep learning demands. This is when creativity and imagination flourish, referred to as ‘flow’ by Csikszentmihalyi (1990).
The classroom students frequently contested my construction of the classroom as a place where learning was central. The students were continually telling me that despite our attempts to make learning meaningful, purposeful, enjoyable and just (Rorrisson 2004), we seemed to be missing the point by structuring learning in unfriendly environments using traditional tools. The progressive concepts of schools that are more flexible both in physical structure and timetable, particularly those adhering to middle schooling pedagogies are presented by Dimmock (2000) in his book ‘Designing the Learning Centred School’, and projects like ‘Anytime, Anyplace’ (Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2004). Dimmock refers to the classroom as the ‘impenetrable part of school’ (277) and suggests challenging our Western theories and practices of education, while Harpaz (2003) and Harpaz & Lefstein (2000) may be closer to the mark with their alternative view of schools and classrooms as ‘communities of thinking’. Here ‘fertile questions, research and concluding performances’ (Harpaz, 2003:2) take young people in Israel out of the classroom and into the community, providing them with resources and technologies more able to support their learning. These experiences seem to be more in line with the views of students in this study who are looking for a learning environment that gives them peace and space to work, as well as the relevant tools and motivations. Often the resources in our schools are outmoded and unreliable and the environment is not conducive to concentration.

Student report that schools are ‘unfriendly’ environments but there are also students with no home to go to and students with homes they do not wish to go to. As a society we need to question how we can accommodate the learning needs of students if we cannot provide them with environments that are conducive to learning. Dale Spender (2005) and Epstein in Dimmock (2000:282) are beginning to highlight these issues but there is little evidence that the educational community or the policy makers are listening to this spin. The social reform necessary for the huge changes recommended so that our schools might catch up with the society it serves is a huge undertaking. Turning a critical lens onto schooling is however a start. By doing this we can begin to provide trustworthy evidence based on the perceptions of all participants, to support the call for much needed educational change.
Students voice fear of being wrong

Finally there are still many contradictions voiced by the students in the classrooms. Despite their astuteness and different sense of identity, there were many examples in the stories of students refusing to engage in interactions with their teachers from fear of being wrong. The concepts of right and wrong have been learned well and it became apparent that students often did not feel safe enough in the secondary classrooms to express themselves without fear. Students also voiced the opinion that teachers usually had an answer in mind and unless they could read the teacher’s mind they were unlikely to provide the right answer, inferring that their view would not be listened to. This is why I wrote:

The class was quiet…where were their thoughts?
‘Guess what I’m thinking’, they silently said.
‘Guess what I’m thinking’, the teacher shattered their calm.
‘Lucky we have an excursion on Thursday!’

If young people are going to be productive learners then how teachers construct the learning environment and young people as learners in the classroom, is seminal.

Reading Across the Co-Constructed Story

What are the preservice teachers telling us?

What is generally missing from the literature is a call to ‘reconceptualise’ the practicum to better meet the needs of the preservice teachers. What experiences and interactions need to occur to progress preservice teachers’ learning in the practicum? What would a productive practicum synergy look like? Can the practicum offer what it promises in its current form? How can we make spaces for the voices of the preservice teachers?

I searched carefully for the ‘voice’ of preservice teachers in the stories. Their voice was mainly represented by their silence; by the way they tolerated, acquiesced and accommodated the views of teacher educator, mentors and students with little more than a murmur. My presence may have influenced the preparedness of the preservice
teachers to add to or amend the stories much more than I appreciated. There were however a number of themes that emerged from reading these stories against the wider debates of how preservice teachers are positioned and position themselves in the practicum.

There was little observed engagement by the preservice teachers with either their own learning or the concept of ‘making learning central’ for their students in the classroom.

Ingram (1998) suggests that the practicum can have both ‘no effect and huge effect’. Campbell and Kane (2000:95) claim preservice teachers have only ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, a concept originally coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) suggesting that novice members of a community of practice are marginalised and need to be socialised into the culture by knowledgeable members. Results of this study seem to suggest that this ‘institutional socialisation’ of the preservice teacher may be contrary to the needs of their developing sense of ‘being’ as a teacher. It also asks a number of questions about how the practicum can facilitate preservice teachers’ construction of a sense of themselves as teachers. Others (Grenfell, 2005; Education and Training Committee, 2005; Ramsay, 2000) recommend an extension of the time preservice teachers spend in the schools on their practicum to progress their ‘teacher-readiness’. The recently presented consultancy report ‘Developing Guidelines for Quality in the Practicum’ (Eyres, 2005) affirms the presence of ‘a faint but discernible theme in the general comments/constraints sections of the questionnaire’ alluding to the ‘need for increased involvement of schools as TEI [teacher education institution]-related teaching sites… (6)’.

The opposite view is suggested by the evidence presented in these stories embedded in the secondary practicum, unless there is a new conception of the practicum resulting in schools becoming more prepared to accept the role of helping preservice teachers practise and learn, not just copy and replicate. The current practicum seldom delivers what it promises and does not give preservice teachers the space to develop as teachers, nor does it continue the conversations begun at university.
Preservice teachers made few changes to the story, even when comments in the text were clearly directed to them. They were more inclined to employ criticism rather than critical reflection when discussing their teaching. Although productive and critical pedagogy were employed at times in their teaching and they were offering a range of learning opportunities in the classroom, the preservice teachers often did not recognize this themselves. They were frequently unable to relate to the way students themselves constructed their classroom learning and despite their practicum preparation, readings and discussions at university, held some utopian view of receptive students sitting in rows attentive and enthusiastic. They struggled to accept that the learning outcomes in the classroom were not immediate and obvious but more long term and subtle. They tended to judge their success by test scores and student output with little opportunity to reflect on the ecology of the classroom. The bell would ring and they would be swept up in the frantic rush to face another (often entirely different) group of students in another part of the school, or face a discussion with their mentor that seldom touched on the issues that could settle the lingering doubts that hung over them.

Even when I deliberately provoked the preservice teachers in the text of the story of the practicum they remained reluctant to comment. One story reads, ‘there were, however, several teachable moments –moments of deeper, richer, higher levels of understanding. These however were difficult to sustain which may have been related to the resistance of some students’. No comment from the preservice teacher was forthcoming, though the students actually took a more gentle view and wrote that my perception was incorrect, they had engaged with the lesson content and learning opportunities and had worked hard but ‘didn’t make a show of such things’. At a later date I introduced this point again, asking why the students were so resistant –again no comment from the preservice teacher but several excuses from students related to how difficult it can be to adapt to a new teacher. No support or comment was forthcoming from the mentor teacher in either of these situations though he read the narrative and knew that the preservice teacher and the students had also read it. Was it total disinterest or his own resistance that resulted in his silence? Why did the preservice teacher not respond? This is a complex situation, one of many that needs to be unpacked if we are to see the practicum as a valuable contribution to preservice education. While teachers or schools remain resistant to the purpose of the practicum
and the ‘practising’ by preservice teachers in their classrooms, the anecdotes of tension, frustration and dissatisfaction will continue to be the reality that undermines preservice teacher education.

**Limited feedback from mentor teacher during the practicum, despite a range of mechanisms that had been put in place.**

There is much evidence in the literature that the practicum experience should be carefully guided and supported by the mentor teachers who become the profession’s agent for ensuring that future teachers are inducted into teaching in a manner that will aid their sense of ‘becoming’ as a teacher (Bloomfield, 1997; Bloomfield, 2000; Campbell, 2000; Campbell & Kane, 1998; Eyers, 2005; Martinez, 1998; Martinez, 2002; Roth, 2002). It is generally believed that teacher identity is built from the interactions and dialogues with other teachers and students as well as a personal philosophy of teaching and learning developed through engagement with the current education literature and the policies and guidelines of the various educational authorities and schools (Eyers, 2005). Successful teachers really understand what they do and why they do it, and successful mentors of preservice teachers need to understand what they do as teachers as well as be able to communicate this to the preservice teacher. They also need to understand better how they construct the learning of the preservice teacher. Whatever the structure of the school and the culture of the classroom generative feedback is essential for learning or change.

There is little evidence from our stories of mentors engaging in sustained discussions with the preservice teachers. There is some evidence of explanations of content ‘the what to teach’, but the overwhelming message is one of ‘let them find out for themselves’ concerning the appropriate pedagogy and the things they need to know about the school and the students. They are reluctant to name the ‘how’ of teaching. If we couple this with Elbaz-Luwisch and Pritzker’s (2002:287-288) suggestion that there is an Anglo-Saxon abhorrence of confrontation or uncomfortable interactions that prevents mentors from engaging in more than superficial critique, then the purpose of the practicum as a learning experience for preservice teachers is at risk. A recent project entitled ‘Professional Learning for Mentors’ (Rorrison & Sutton, 2005) exposes this lack of understanding by mentor teachers of their role in the preparation
of preservice teachers especially in terms of critical reflection and critical pedagogy. Campbell and Kane (1998) in their report of fictional tales from primary schools found that despite considerable resources being spent in preparing mentor teachers, the old problems of ‘stuck’ ideology beneath surface changes resurfaced every time they sent preservice teachers to the partnership schools.

The teachers who volunteer to work with preservice teachers have a range of reasons for making that choice and a system strapped to find positions for their preservice teachers inevitably finds some troublesome placements. This complexity is replicated throughout the western world (Campbell & Kane, 1998; Eyers, 2005; Zeichner and Schulte, 2001) but this does not justify the injustices and disappointments observed and reported during the practicum. There is little evidence currently that apprenticeships, internships, practica or mentoring can result in better-prepared preservice teachers without a better understanding of the process. It appears to be taken for granted that a system that has been in place for many years must be successful. A recent US comparison of the quality of university educated neophyte teachers and those receiving alternative teacher certification (Zeichner and Schulte, 2001) came to the conclusion, ‘it depends’. They did recommend however that we:

…continue to support multiple pathways into teaching careers and focus on making sure that the components of high quality teacher education are present in all of these rather than attempting to assert the superiority of any particular model (Zeichner & Schulte, 2001:280).

Feedback to students by the preservice teachers was also limited.

Preservice teacher feedback to students was also lacking in the learning environments I observed. I commented in one story that it was a long time since students had feedback from the preservice teacher, and the mentor agreed. The students stayed mute- and why wouldn’t they? They had not needed to provide evidence of their learning or not learning! The preservice teacher did not react or change her pedagogy. Feedback is intrinsic to learning as the tool through which the learner can check his/her developing understanding and continue to build on it. It is also essential for the teacher so that student learning can be supported, extended or negotiated. Preservice
teachers appeared to be unable to get to know their students well enough to decipher what was appropriate and timely feedback. Preservice teachers in this study needed a great deal more support from the mentor teacher. Without feeding back either individually, in groups, or to the whole class with written responses or well-managed dialogue, teachers are unable to support student learning or gauge student development to guide further understanding. Instead of remaining in touch with the class and the preservice teacher the mentor teacher sat up the back in almost every classroom I visited, with limited involvement in the lesson or with the students. I will discuss this further under the heading ‘battle of ownership’.

**Evidence of accommodation and acquiescence to the traditional and teacher centred ‘filling the pot’ rather than ‘lighting the fire’** (Wu; 2002). The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled (Plutarch circa 100AD). Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire (William Yeats).

In all four sites it was obvious that the preservice teacher was aiming to maintain the status quo, follow the directions or suggestions of their mentors and ‘endure’ the restrictions and contradictions of teaching someone else’s class, someone else’s knowledges, in someone else’s way. I found, as did Segall (2002), Smagorinsky, Cook & Star Johnson (2003), Cook, Smagorinsky, Fry, Konopak & Moore (2002) and Kincheloe (2004), that the preservice teachers did not have enough confidence and experience with the non-traditional critical pedagogies introduced at university to be able to challenge the existing classroom structure or roles. These preservice teachers had related to the course learning outcomes and underpinning philosophies in tutorials and in assignments but recoiled from jeopardising classroom dynamics by trialling progressive pedagogies in the classroom. Generally their lessons were teacher centred and their (unquestioned) knowledge was transmitted in traditional ways. Formal and summative assessments were invariably used as motivation to complete work ‘better concentrate, we have a test of Friday’, and many of the lessons were ‘boring’ with little learning happening. Concepts of the reflective practitioner, authentic assessment, making connections with the young people in their classes and helping them make the connections with their learning, student voice, culminating activities, productive pedagogies and transformative learning (Rorrison, 2004) were frequently forgotten in these practicum classrooms.
In her narrative study ‘The making of a teacher’, Ingram (1998) reports that preservice teachers were much more focused on their own assessment outcome than they were on student learning. She also comments that those who were thus focused tended to achieve a higher grade for the practicum; another case of ‘show us what we want and tell us what we want to hear!’ Bloomfield (1997:14) on the other hand identifies the tensions around assessment of the preservice teacher as a major concern for the classroom teachers. Despite a collaborative process where teachers and university educators worked together to develop explicit assessment criteria (where were the preservice teachers and the students?), when it came to assessing the preservice teacher the criteria were variously interpreted according to the mentor teachers personal views and practice. While referring to Wajnryb’s (1995, 1996) work in linguistic analysis Bloomfield discusses the supervision/assessor relationship as fragile, a ‘clash of goals’ and tempered by ‘politeness’. She concludes that the result is ‘supervisory interactions which are inadequate in terms of clarity, authority and productivity’ and recommends an assessment process that focuses strongly on a developmental perspective (Bloomfield, 1997:16).

Although our assessment is both developmental and based on agreed outcomes that reflect the preservice teacher knowledge, skills and understandings at particular stages in their course, and although it is ultimately the responsibility of the preservice teacher to provide evidence of both their critical reflection and development, the concept of assessment by others is never far from their minds. Our intent that they are intimately involved in their ‘summative practicum review’ (as we have chosen to name it) through negotiation and the provision of their own criteria and evidence, is difficult to establish, the unequal power relationships of assessor and student are so firmly etched into their understanding.

The neophyte teacher in Labaree’s (2002) study highlights initial frustration and anger at needing to capitulate to the traditional academic curriculum and teacher centred pedagogy. She later calls it dancing the ‘acquiescence, accommodation, resistance waltz’ (Labaree, 2002:211). Poirier (1992) also tells a poignant story from her practicum where she struggled to maintain her composure when faced with the injustices in one particular classroom. Other studies highlight the ‘moan’ session at
the end of the practicum, where preservice teachers debrief and share their stories (Campbell, 2000). Smyth (1986, 1991) almost twenty years ago called for a need to adequately understand the social and political relationships that embody the work of teachers and questioned the appraisal and supervision of teachers based on incomplete understanding. The more recent work of Martinez, Hamlin and Rigano (2001:7) spearheads the move to making ‘student learning the cornerstone of supervisory conversations and observations’.

There are more instances in the stories of the effect of the traditional and reductive culture pervading the practicum than of any other issue affecting the preservice teacher. The majority of observations relate to teacher centred practice, worksheets, busy work and traditional assessment tasks with little opportunity for individual creativity or negotiation. There is a culture of control and settings that reflect a misuse of power, all making it difficult for the preservice teacher with progressive ideas.

**The battle of ownership – is the class a shared responsibility between the mentor and preservice teacher?**

There were several instances observed where the mentor either ‘takes over’ or ‘reacts to student behaviour or questions’, frequently intuitively. Not once was this viewed negatively by the students, they seemed more cognizant of a seamless interplay or synergy between the two teachers than the teachers did themselves. In one classroom where I observed frequent interjection by the mentor the preservice teacher herself voiced a ‘team teaching’ relationship as a more workable alternative for the preservice practicum. This is an unexpected result; previous studies had suggested that a successful practicum depended on the ability of the mentor to relinquish control and allow the preservice teacher to experience the reality of the classroom. I presented these findings to a group of mentors while piloting a program of professional learning for mentor teachers. As a result each one of the eight participants decided to use this concept of sharing the classroom as the focus of their action research project that was designed to develop deeper understanding of the mentoring process. I will be able to report on their findings at a later date (Rorrison & Sutton, 2005) but what is clear already is that many mentors greet the idea of sharing the class, team teaching, tag teaching and small group work as a relief from the concerns they feel about
relinquishing their class. Working together with the classes both teachers would
remain in touch with the classroom dynamics and the wise mentor would recognise
the strengths of the preservice teacher and facilitate development, support and
reflection in other areas. The preservice teacher would benefit from being included as
part of the dynamic of the learning environment and not ‘shut out’, while the
classroom teacher would have an opportunity to spend more time with particular
students and avoid the state of panic that goes with the handing over their classes. In
this way teachers may become more preservice teacher receptive, rather than the
current culture of schools seeing involvement in the mentoring process as yet another
demand on the time of the teachers.

**Little evidence of finding or making the time to ‘get to know’ the students.**
**Preservice teachers seemed to be daunted by the stresses of continuous
interpersonal relationships and lack of time.**

Again there is significant evidence in the stories that the fundamental steps to
preparing lessons and units of work that are student centred are often abandoned and
replaced with the safer alternative of board work, textbook research or questions and
worksheets. Only one preservice teacher in this study continued to provide variety,
alternatives and student centred activities beyond the first few lessons. As previously
mentioned, if students are going to learn how to learn, then meaning needs to be
translated into ‘their world and their words’. Somehow space needs to be created for
preservice teachers to get to know their students better and begin to address how they
might engage with them in meaningful ways. Rather than being overwhelmed by the
sheer immensity of the task of suddenly becoming the teacher, preservice teachers
need time to develop relationships and knowledge about their students. While both a
new view of schooling and a sharing of the practicum classroom would benefit the
synergy within the classroom, in the absence of both the question arises- what is the
point of the practicum as it is currently conceived?

**Poor preparation and limited critical reflection.**

Equally concerning to me was the lack of consistent planning in three of the four
settings I studied. In preparation for the practicum, university-based subject
specialisation lecturers introduce preservice teachers to a range of strategies and models to help them prepare their curriculum in ways that are meaningful to them as well as consistent with the constructivist underpinning of the curriculum frameworks. Although loath to prescribe a particular method of presenting lesson plans or unit plans lecturers do spend considerable time both in core units and methodology units introducing preservice teachers to a wide range of planning techniques based on asking the open and fertile questions related to; Who is the learner? What knowledges and understandings will they relate to at this time of their lives? How can we best facilitate this learning? Where and when should this happen and how will we know that it has happened? With the help of the curriculum support team from the Education Department we present support materials, anecdotes, role-plays, discussions about critical pedagogy and engage preservice teachers in several tasks and much practise in preparing alternatives. We offer considerable feedback to encourage and assist in their preparation for classroom teaching, yet once in the schools many of the preservice teachers seem to forget what they learned at the university and try to plan day by day, without a unit plan or clear outcome statement. Many of them fail to connect the curriculum framework documents with their planning, disregarding the various band levels, indicators, essential learnings or guiding principles and plan ‘intuitive’ lessons that have little connection with curriculum outcomes and make it difficult to participate in critical reflection or provide evidence of development or progression. This begs the question; where are the conversations with their mentors? Bloomfield (1997:18) recommends we look upon the ‘supervision role’ not as ‘model’ or ‘coach’ but as ‘critical friend’ and ‘co-enquirer’ which encourages the focus to move from ‘self’ as the teacher to ‘learning as central’ in a particular social and cultural environment. Despite this focus in our course, preservice teachers appear to fear to let go of firmly held beliefs that position teachers as central in the classroom.

**Conclusion**

While the stories co-constructed by the preservice teachers, students, mentors and teacher educator were weakened by ‘perspectives that could not be shared’, what was written and what was *not* written provided rich data on how the participants were variously positioned. How each of the participants is constructed both by themselves
and by other participants is written into existence in evocative ways. Both the words and the silences point towards the need to reconceptualise the practicum in a way that continues the conversations begun at university and supports the development of the preservice teacher.

If the practicum is to be a learning experience as it promises and not merely a time to endure and acquiesce then a more seamless sharing of the classroom responsibilities in necessary. Purposeful learning of the preservice teacher and the students needs to be based on critical reflection and ‘co-enquiry’. This study provides evidence that participants in the classroom each think the problem differently uncovering a new view of the practicum as a time for synergy and support. Schools need to be more receptive to preservice teachers’ learning needs and more aware of the vast differences in how young people view their classroom experiences. Unless classroom teachers really understand what they do it is unlikely that either the students or the preservice teachers in their classes will benefit from their experience.

References


Campbell, A. (2000). Fictionalising research data as a way of increasing teachers' access to school focused research. Research in Education, 63(May), 81-89.


Queensland Board of Teacher Registration. (1994). Learning to Teach, Report of the working party on the practicum in preservice teacher education. Toowong, Q.


to me I'm leaving. Early school leaving in South Australian secondary schools. Adelaide: Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching, Department of Education, Training and Employment & Secondary School Assessment Board of South Australia.


Wajnryb, R. The Pragmatics of Feedback: Supervision as a clash of goals between message and face. PEPE Research Monograph: 1, 135-154

