Sustaining Student Teachers’ Commitment: the role of first practicum experiences

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Abstract

This research aimed to illuminate students’ perceptions of two first year practicum experiences in a Bachelor of Education (JP/Primary) program and the role these played in their learning and commitment to teaching and their studies. Recent statistics show that there can be up to 30% attrition of students in the first year of university (Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh, 2007). Practicum experiences have been found to be highly valued by student teachers (House of Representatives Standing Committee and Vocational Training, 2007) but not all practicum experiences are positive as evidenced by the concerns highlighted by researchers in the field. These include inappropriate balances of challenge and support in student teacher contexts (Tang, 2006) and communication difficulties and power imbalances in the traditional triad model of supervision (Wilson, 2006; Dobbins, 1994). Clearly it is important in sustaining student teachers’ commitment to continue in their four year program that their first experiences in schools are as positive as possible. To this end students in the course Practical Applications and Reflection 1 participate in what is designed to be a highly supportive and structured introduction to schools and teaching in their first two practicums. In this study, naturally occurring qualitative and quantitative data about students’ perceptions of these practicums were analysed using a grounded theory approach. The research findings revealed that the vast majority of students studied found their practicum experiences to be positive, productive in terms of learning and significant in sustaining their commitment to becoming teachers and their studies in the program. This paper presents findings that illuminates their feelings about initial practicum experiences, their learning from them and the factors they found to be most and least supportive.

Introduction

Research indicates that students are at their most vulnerable in terms of academic failure in the first year of higher education and most likely to experience social, emotional and financial problems (McInnes, 2001) and drop out of university (McInnis & James, 1995). In Australia student attrition in the first year of university is estimated at between 24 and 30 percent (Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh, 2007). First year teacher education students are no exception with high numbers of dropouts reported (Chambers & Roper, 2000). Not only do teacher education students face the same problems experienced by university students in general, but they have also been found to be subjected to ‘strong experiences of social dissuasion from teaching’ (Richardson & Watt, 2006, p. 51).
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It is widely accepted that practicum is ‘a critically important part of teacher education courses and is consistently valued highly by student teachers’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee and Vocational Training, 2007, p. xxy). Practicum experiences provide the opportunity for students to apply and develop their theoretical understandings about effective teaching in classroom settings with the support of experienced practitioners (Haigh & Ward, 2003; Dobbins, 1994). Unfortunately not all practicum experiences are positive as evidenced by the concerns highlighted by researchers in the field. These include inappropriate balances of challenge and support in student teacher contexts (Tang, 2006) and communication difficulties and power imbalances in the traditional triad model of supervision (Wilson, 2006; Dobbins, 1994). At the University of South Australia practicum-based course evaluations suggest that student teachers’ early practicum experiences play a role in helping them to assess whether they should continue in a teacher education program. In Australia and elsewhere there is a growing emphasis on teacher educators working in partnership with schools to construct practicum experiences that maximise student teacher engagement and learning (House of Representatives Standing Committee and Vocational Training, 2007).

Clearly it is important that teacher educators and their school partners constantly strive to develop practicum programs that are of high quality and meet the needs of their students. To do this it is necessary to evaluate students’ perceptions of and learning from these experiences with the aim of continuous improvement. Although such evaluation occurs as a normal part of a teacher educator’s work, it is advantageous to periodically engage in more rigorous research. This study contributes new insights to the field by investigating students’ perceptions of two initial practicum experiences that were designed to be more structured and supportive, and with more congruence between on-campus and school-based teaching and learning, than many depicted in the literature.

Background

There are two practicums in the course Practical Applications and Reflection 1 (PAR 1), undertaken by all Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary/Primary) students in the second half of their first year. The Stage 1 Practicum comprises five consecutive Thursdays in the second to sixth weeks of the study period. It is offered by a small number of schools in close partnership with lecturers in the course and is intended to provide a highly structured and supportive introduction to teaching for 25 – 30 students in each school.

In 2007 five schools worked in the Stage 1 Program and accommodated 140 first year students. The schools included one with a high level of socio-economic disadvantage (65%), one with a moderate level of disadvantage (31%), one with a high level of Non English Speaking Background students (45%) and two with relatively low levels of both (less than 10%). On each of the five days of the Stage 1 Practicum the schools ran special programs around the five themes of:

- Introduction to the school
- Learning is an active process
- Self esteem influences learning
- Language is basic to learning
- Resources, organisation and management
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The programs featured input from staff members to the whole group about the focus for the day, modelled lessons illustrating the focus in action and clustering of student teachers in small groups in home classes for observation and teaching of prepared lessons to small groups of children. University lectures and workshops over those weeks focussed on the same themes and provided the opportunity for students to debrief, share and develop their learning from each school visit. After the fifth and final day of this practicum students submitted to their workshop lecturers via email a 300 word piece of reflective writing in which they responded to questions about their learning, feelings, questions, concerns and goals. The workshop lecturers emailed a brief response and the writing was also shared with other students in the workshop. Students also completed an anonymous evaluation questionnaire about their experiences in the schools.

In the Stage 2 Practicum students were placed in a large number of city and country schools and worked individually or in pairs (in city placements) with one mentor teacher for an introductory day followed by a five day block in the final week of the study period. Students were expected to plan and teach lessons to small groups of students, observe the teacher and observe an individual student and the class group over the week. Liaison with the lecturing staff was by phone and email. On completion of the practicum students once again completed reflective writing, this time about their learning, their understanding of students’ different abilities and needs and the implications for teaching and their goals for the following year. This piece of writing was attached to their Stage 2 Practicum report so that their voices were represented. It was read by the Mentor and Site Practicum Coordinator in the placement schools and by the Course Coordinator (me) when the reports arrived at the University.

Methodology

The overall aim of the research was to investigate student teachers’ perceptions of their experiences in the Stage 1 and Stage 2 Practicums described above. Specifically it aimed to illuminate:

- students’ feelings upon first entering a school and any changes over the course of the two practicums;
- students’ learning from practicum experiences; and
- the factors which supported and hindered their learning in each practicum experience.

The study was mainly qualitative in nature and was based on naturally occurring data within the course Professional Applications and Reflection 1 (PAR 1) for which I am the Course Coordinator and teach three classes. Creswell (1994) defined a qualitative study as one ‘which is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting’ (p. 2). However, the study included a quantitative element in that frequencies were calculated for students’ responses around key themes. Neumann (1997) argued that quantitative data can supplement or complement qualitative data, providing a form of triangulation.
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The participants were the students in the course (approximately 140) but with a particular focus on 61 out of the 73 students I taught who consented to participate in the research. The data comprised:

- an anonymous questionnaire (Q) administered to all students at the conclusion of the Stage 1 Practicum and completed by 117 students. Students were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 4-point ‘Likert-type scale’ (Bernard, 2000, p. 295) of ‘not good enough’, ‘good, ‘very good’ and ‘excellent’ and also provided responses to open ended questions.
- two pieces of reflective writing (RW1 & RW2) which students completed at the conclusion of the Stage 1 and Stage 2 Practicums (from 61 of my students who gave permission to access these). Although these items were a compulsory part of the practicum documentation required of students, they were not formally assessed as the course in non-graded.

A grounded theory approach was used in the analysis of the qualitative data whereby theory was inductively derived from the data using the following process identified by Bernard (2000, p. 443). Specifically, students’ reflective writing and open-ended responses to the questionnaire were read to identify potential analytic categories. Codes were ascribed to each category and print data were re-read and coded. As categories were developed they were reviewed to identify similarities, differences and other patterns that linked them. The numbers of instances of each category were also counted to provide frequencies of students’ responses about each aspect and frequencies for students’ responses to the closed questions in the questionnaire were also calculated. These processes lead to the themes explored in the rest of this paper and to the identification of exemplars in the form of quotes that illuminate each theme.

Students’ Feelings about the Practicums

In the first piece of reflective writing students responded to a specific question about their feelings in the Stage 1 Practicum so it is not surprising that the emotional nature of this first experience was a dominant theme. Around 50% of students wrote about feelings of anxiety and self-doubt prior to entering a school for the first time in the role of student teacher, as can be seen in this example:

Before I entered the school I had many doubts about the practical. I was overwhelmed by the idea of teaching ‘planned lessons’ to students. I was unsure of how to communicate with children and how to discipline them. (RW1: 39)

Some of those who did not express such feelings attributed their calm to prior experiences as parents or working with children in other roles such as swimming instructor of volunteer in community youth groups. An interesting finding was that students reported that such feelings were short lived and that by the end of the first day they had been replaced with feelings of excitement and elation. They attributed this to the support they were given:
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… these nerves soon went away when I realised how warm and welcoming both the staff and students were. (RW1: 12)

The results from the questionnaire completed after the first practicum experience confirmed that students had rapidly overcome feelings of uncertainty. Frequencies for showed close to 90% rated their development of confidence as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ for ‘working in a school setting’, ‘interacting with children’ and ‘relating to teachers’. It was interesting to note that the number of students who rated their confidence in interacting with university staff as ‘excellent’ (16%) was less that half of those for the school-based interactions, indicating more students felt really comfortable in the school than in their on campus workshops and lectures.

It was also interesting to note that more than half (51%) of the students reported that until engaging in the Stage 1 experience they had not really been sure that they wanted to become a teacher. Nearly all of those students reported feeling affirmed in their decision following this initial experience in a school. This response was typical:

After realising on the first day of nursing placement that choosing to study nursing was the worst decision of my life to date, I was apprehensive to say the least about this placement. From day 1 however, a massive weight was lifted off my shoulders when it became glaringly obvious that teaching is what I really want to be doing. This left me free to focus on the task at hand rather than worry if I’m wasting my time and effort on a lost course. (RW1: 30)

Furthermore, it appeared that this school experience helped students to make sense of other learning in the course and motivated them for further study. One student put it this way:

PAR has done nothing but reignite my passion for teaching and maybe even increased it. Now I want to know more and understand more about how to actually teach in terms of the curriculum. (RW1: 6)

Although students were not asked a specific question about their feelings after the Stage 2 practicum, comments such as this one suggested feelings of confidence continued to grow in the second experience:

I feel as though I work really well with younger children and am confident I can support their learning. I believe that I have surprised myself a great deal in this placement with the type of development I am having as a student teacher. (RW 2: 2)

Students’ Learning from the Practicums

It was clear from their writing that students felt they had learnt a great deal from their two practicums. The dominant themes evident in both the Stage 1 and Stage 2 reflective writing are shown in Table 1.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>% for Stage 1</th>
<th>% for Stage 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom/behaviour management</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and organisation</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils’ diverse needs</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective teaching</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed perception of self and teaching role</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Classroom/Behaviour Management**

It is not surprising that students were preoccupied with classroom and behaviour management in the two practicum experiences. Much of the anxiety students felt prior to their Stage 1 experience related to how the children would respond to them. Many expressed relief when they found that they were welcoming and supportive, but some experienced challenging behaviour even in the highly structured and supportive environment provided in Stage 1. It was evident that the increase in comments about this aspect of teaching after Stage 2 reflected the additional challenges students faced when working with one class of children over a sustained period of time.

In Stage 1, the focus in the schools and on campus was a holistic one of seeing behaviour management in relation to children’s physical, emotional, social and academic well being. The emphasis was on acknowledging the positive, building mutually respectful relationships and providing engaging and appropriate learning programs. It was evident in most students’ writing that their perceptions had been influenced by these emphases. They identified many instances of classroom practice in both Stage 1 and Stage 2 which illustrated these themes, as can be seen in this example:

> During PAR 1 we have learnt that focussing on the positives is the most effective form of behaviour management. I was able to see this theory in action and it worked far more effectively that waiting for a student to misbehave and then telling them off. (RW2:35)

**Planning and Organisation**

In the on campus program considerable attention was given to helping students learn to plan learning experiences and they were expected to provide detailed written plans for the small group teaching they did in the two practicums. It was evident in the written reflections that students came to see the value of thorough planning as the means to successful pupil learning rather than simply as a requirement by the University.

> Firstly was the amount of work that went into planning a lesson, and planning it well enough so that students learnt what you wanted them to in a way that was enjoyable for them. (RW1: 22)

That is not to say that they did not find the process extremely challenging, particularly given their limited contact with the students:
A thing that I found very frustrating was planning a lesson each week. It was very difficult to scope what level students are at – what they already know and what they are learning and have learnt already in particular topics. (RW1:3)

The need to be both organised and flexible was also commented on by students such as this one:

I have learnt how important it is to be flexible as many of the lessons I planned needed follow on lessons to complete the task. (RW2:9)

As can be seen in the following example, many also began to get a sense of the challenges of planning for pupil engagement – challenges such as having the prerequisite curriculum knowledge to plan, catering for children’s varying needs and abilities and being able to come up with relevant and engaging approaches:

Incorporating children’s knowledge and the use of the South Australian Curriculum Standards (SACSA) framework into activities and longer term learning plans will be an area for development. (RW2: 17)

This was particularly evident after the second practicum which had a strong focus on pupil diversity.

**Relationships**

A recurring theme in some of the courses studied by the students, including PAR 1, is the importance of classroom relationships in supporting children’s learning. It was evident that in their practicums students had been able to see this for themselves. Comments such as the one below focussed on the positive nature of the relationships between teachers and children:

… the most significant concept that stood out to me was the importance of student/teacher relationships and their role in achieving successful learning outcomes in the classroom. (RW1:7)

Their own role as learners also helped them to see the importance of having positive relationships with their classroom mentors:

The teachers at (School X) were only too happy to help, which made me more eager to learn. (RW1:14)

Most wrote that they had been able to form positive relationships with children in the time they had with them, but not surprisingly some did not:

During the practicum I experienced the feeling that I was not respected as a student teacher. (RW1:4)

It was also clear from comments such as the one below that some students found the area of relating to children challenging in terms of establishing a teacher to pupil relationship rather than a friend to friend one.
I found that I have begun to learn how to create a teacher student relationship but I still need to distance myself more. I am still, at times, trying to become their friend then their teacher. (RW1:15)

**Pupils’ Diverse Needs**

Students’ writing about the Stage 2 practicum demonstrated an increased awareness of pupil diversity, with comments on this made by 96% of students. There is little doubt this was due to a task which required them to closely observe and make detailed notes about one child over the week, while also recording something about each child. As a result of this task it appears that the majority of students developed their understanding of pupils’ widely varying needs and abilities, as can be seen in this example:

The observation of the individual student has helped me to focus on every aspect of the student and understand their learning, behaviours, personality and background. The observation of all the students has shown me the diverse personalities that are contained in just one classroom and the importance of getting to know and understand each child as that then effects how they will be taught. (RW2: 28)

For many this increased awareness translated into reflection about the implications of diversity for their teaching. Some, such as this one, went so far as to be able to demonstrate awareness of particular strategies used by their mentors to address students’ diverse needs and abilities:

She emphasised to her students that it was perfectly acceptable for students to achieve at different levels and at their own pace. I also observed her effectiveness in implementing a variety of tasks which allowed students to have options and a choice of learning tasks. (RW2:7)

**Effective Teaching**

It is usually assumed that student teachers will learn about effective teaching from observing experienced teachers in action and the reflective writing about both practicums indicated that this assumption was valid for many of the students. The Bachelor of Education program is informed by constructivist learning theory, which also informs South Australia’s curriculum framework. The foci for the students in the second and third weeks of the Stage 1 Practicum were ‘learning is an active process’ and ‘language is basic to learning’. It was clear that even three months later in their second practicum students were still identifying practices related to these themes, as can be seen in this example:

I have loved seeing how children construct their own learning and process information… It was also wonderful to see the students so involved in the lessons I planned and how excited they were when they discovered something new. (RW2: 41)
It was interesting to note that there were nearly twice as many (60%) references to effective teaching strategies in the Stage 2 reflective writing as in that for Stage 1 (36%). This is despite the fact that teachers in Stage 1 deliberately modelled strategies related to the five themes. Likely explanations are that students in Stage 2 spent sustained time in the one class and so were able to see more of the one teacher at work, and also that the questions for the Stage 2 reflection required students to make links between pupils’ needs and implications for teaching. A notable absence from the writing was that there were very few comments that critiqued teachers’ practice, with only two students doing this in Stage 1 and one in Stage 2.

**Changed Perceptions**

For most student teachers this was their first experience in schools since having attended as pupils. There were a number of comments in their reflective writing after Stage 1 that indicated that the practicum experience was influential in shifting their perceptions of themselves from students to pre-service teachers. There were references such as ‘a change of mindset’ (RW1:22), ‘being in a classroom from a different side of the fence’ (RW1: 40) and ‘observing the teaching of students through the eyes of a teacher, rather than a student’ (RW 1:45). It appeared that working in the school was a process of self discovery for some:

> Over the past five weeks I have learnt a great deal about myself and my teaching capabilities, the school environment and students from an educator’s point of view.
> (RW1: 43)

As mentioned earlier, it was the interaction with pupils which really brought home to some students that they needed to see themselves as teachers. For some the interactions with teachers also resulted in changes in perception as students realised that they were being regarded as colleagues rather than as pupils.

It was also clear from the writing about Stage 1 and 2 that many students had changed their perception of what it means to be a teacher. Comments such as the following revealed a greater understanding of the complexity and challenge of the teaching role:

> One thing that stood out to me when talking to the teachers was the responsibility that rests on our shoulders as a teacher. We are often the one constant in these students’ lives and many see us as their main role model. There are so many different roles other than educator that encompass being a teacher. We are a teacher, a counsellor, a nurse, a police officer, a role model and these are just some of the things we are to our students. (RW1:53)

Perhaps most important was some students’ recognition that learning to be an effective teacher is a life long process:

> From this practical the most insignificant thing I learn was probably that we are all ‘life long learners’. (RW 1:11)
What supported and hindered their learning in each practicum experience?

The questionnaire completed by students at the end of the Stage 1 practicum revealed that they considered the following factors to have been most supportive of their learning:

- the school in which they were placed;
- the modelling provided by mentors;
- encouragement and feedback from mentors; and
- the structured nature of the practicum.

Although the five schools in which students were placed were quite diverse in terms of socio-economic factors and numbers of students with English as a second language, and the challenges that can lie therein, students were universally positive about the ‘suitability of the school’ for their initial practicum experience. Overall 75% rated this as ‘excellent’ and 23% as ‘very good’. For the school that presented the greatest level of challenge in terms of socio economic disadvantage and cultural complexity the results were 79% and 21% respectively. Comments such as the following explained what students valued in these schools:

Friendly staff who were willing to help and tried really hard to get to know you (Q, School 1:4)

A very passionate principal (Q, School 5:10)

Being able to see how the school functions. (Q, School 2: 6)

The importance the student teachers attached to their mentors’ support was evident, with 85% rating ‘the advice and support from teachers to assist in planning and working in the classroom’ as ‘excellent’ (68%) or ‘very good’ (17%) and 77% considering ‘feedback to assist development’ as ‘excellent’ (63%) or ‘very good’ (19%). Specific behaviours mentioned included providing advice, ideas, examples and resources and answering questions.

The structured nature of the practicum experience was also rated highly by students. The vast majority rated the information sessions (85%), modelled lessons (89%) and observation tasks (85%) as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’. The following comment is typical:

As a student observer I think this gave a fair insight into what teaching will be like for us. The observation sheets that we had to fill out during the modelled lessons focussed on different aspects each week which gave us a range of different ideas and insight into being a teacher. These addressed things like positive reinforcement, behaviour management, asking questions and self esteem issues. I have also realised that there are many different ways to run a classroom and observing different classrooms in action, was a great way to form ideas. (RW1: 32)
Interestingly, considering the amount of time and effort involved out of hours, most students also rated having to ‘plan learning activities and put them into practice’ as ‘excellent’ (40%) or ‘very good’ (51%).

That is not to say that all students perceived all aspects of their practicums to be positive. There were instances where students found their mentors to be less than supportive and students sometimes felt that mentors did not teach in ways that exemplified the practices they had been directed to observe. Some experienced pupils who were disrespectful and uncooperative and some would have liked to see more variety of year levels and learning areas. It was clear that in the Stage 1 Practicum some students felt that the time spent in the more theoretical information sessions was at the expense of what they perceived to be the more valuable time spent in their home classes. This valuing of practice over theory was also evident in comments by a number of students indicating that they felt that they learnt far more in their practicums than in their campus based courses. Examples included:

Finally getting there instead of just boring text book theories. (Q, School 5:9)

Being in a classroom is a lot more useful than just uni theory work. It was a great experience. (Q, School 4:7)

This is an unintended outcome of the time spent in schools and an undesirable one in terms of students’ perceptions of their program as a whole. Ideally practicums should enhance students’ regard for their on campus learning.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that the structured and supportive nature of students’ first year practicums did play an important role in sustaining their interest in and commitment to their chosen profession and their studies in the Bachelor of Education program. The study illuminated several important aspects of the students’ perceptions of their practicum experiences. Of particular interest are:

- students’ need for affirmation and support in initial practicums;
- the role of structured, whole school approaches in providing affirmation and support;
- students’ learning about teaching strategies, classroom management and pupil diversity;
- students’ perceptions of the theory practice nexus;
- the role of practicum in the development of professional identity.

**Students’ need for affirmation and support in initial practicums**

It was surprising to find that so many students reported having doubts prior to the first practicum about whether they wanted to be a teacher or were suited to it. This finding is in contrast to that of Richardson and Watt (2006) who surveyed over 1600 teaching students across three universities and found that ‘people are attracted to teaching mainly because they perceive themselves as having the abilities to teach well’ (p. 52).
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It appears that students’ doubts had not been ameliorated during the first half of the year through their engagement in campus-based courses.

It was not surprising to find that many students felt anxious before undertaking their initial practicum as this is well documented in the literature. For instance, Nicolettiou and Martin (1997) in a study of students at different year levels at university found that in the first year student teachers were more emotionally involved in their work, which in many cases lead to remorse and disappointment and thus lack of confidence. It has also been found that students experience a high level of stress in an initial practicum, but that this decreases significantly in the second (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Interestingly, for most of the students in this study the stress seems to have reduced significantly within a short time of entering their practicum schools with many commenting that they felt very comfortable by the end of the first day. By the end of the first practicum most reported high levels of confidence within the school setting and with students and staff. In fact they were more confident with school staff than with the university staff with whom they engaged on campus. It also appeared that students’ confidence continued to grow through their second practicum. From their responses it appeared that the structured and supportive nature of the first practicum was influential in their rapid development of comfort and confidence in their schools. This, in turn, appeared to affirm their commitment to continue in the teaching profession and program and in many cases re-ignited feelings of excitement and commitment. The fact that only 4 students (roughly 3%) withdrew throughout the duration of this course adds weight to this finding.

The role of structured, whole school approaches in providing affirmation and support

It is clear from the literature that student teachers benefit from a supportive learning environment in the practicum (Walsh and Elmslie, 2005). It is also clear they do not always experience one with factors such as school context, relationships with mentors and other staff and challenging pupil behaviour playing a role in perceptions of negative experiences (Chambers and Roper, 2000; Tang, 2003). There is no doubt that the most common fear for the students in this study was that that they would not be able to manage pupil behaviour effectively, a finding replicated in other studies (Madsen and Kaiser, 1999).

Considering the apparent fragility of many students’ emotions and commitment to teaching before the beginning of the first practicum, this study suggests that it is important that the first practicum experience is structured to be as supportive and focussed as possible. The findings revealed that regardless of the challenges presented by the contexts of the five schools in the program, students felt that all of the schools were appropriate choices for a first practicum. Reasons given included the warm welcome, the amount of information provided in information sessions, the good practice demonstrated in modelled lessons and the specific and encouraging support provided by leaders and teachers. The specific mention of the role of leaders in the schools’ learning programs was in direct contrast to the finding by Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) in a questionnaire of 480 Israeli students that school principals were considered to be supportive by only 24% of respondents. In the Israeli study the most supportive factor in the school was seen to be the mentor and that was also evident in this study where the support of mentors, in the form of explanation, encouragement
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and feedback, was seen to be of particular value. That such support is not always forthcoming is evident in Wasley’s (2002) study which showed mentors often do not know how to share their expertise with student teachers. The structured opportunities for observation and detailed guidelines were also seen as highly supportive, a finding congruent with that of Schmidt (2005) in a study of music teaching students. Although the spectre of unmanageable student behaviour did become a reality for some students, it appears to have been counteracted by the support and advice of mentors and the focus on positive and holistic approaches modelled in the school and on campus teaching.

That is not to say that there were not areas that could be improved. Students’ feedback indicated aspects with which they were dissatisfied and suggestions for improvement. Each year these are considered by university staff and fed back to schools and where feasible, changes are implemented.

Students’ learning about teaching strategies, classroom management and pupil diversity

A great deal has been written about the lack of congruence between what students learn in tertiary courses and what they experience in the ‘real world’ of classrooms. Sinclair et al (2005) summarised studies that revealed that teachers often told students to ‘forget about what is taught to them in the university’ (p. 210). They concluded:

As a result of experiencing the ‘reality’ of classrooms and schools on practicum pre-service teachers often find themselves questioning what they are learning in their university teacher education programs in light of what often seems to be a different philosophy and practice. (p. 211)

There does not appear to have been the same issue of discrepancy between the university and the schools for students in these practicums. Students’ documentation of strategies in areas such as actively engaging children in learning, planning for diversity, developing pupil self-esteem and classroom relationships, effective use of language and managing behaviour and the learning environment provided many examples that were illustrative of the messages conveyed in the on-campus workshops and lectures. It would appear that in the Stage 1 practicum this was most likely due to the collaborative approach to the five days in which the schools specifically designed five whole day learning programs around the five topics which were the focus of the university on campus program. Students’ observations were also focussed by the detailed observation proformas they were given in the Course Information book, and their mentors also received copies of these so that they knew for what the students would be looking. For the Stage 2 practicum students’ observations and reflection were focussed by means of proformas and questions on pupils’ differing needs and abilities and the ways these were met by mentors’ teaching strategies.

An area of possible concern is the extent to which students appeared to uncritically accept the practices observed in their two practicums with only two instances of critical comment in Stage 1 reflections and one in Stage 2. Although it is affirming to see that students observed so many positive practices, there is always the danger that students will become uncritical imitators of others’ practice, a concern elaborated by Sinclair et al (2005) as follows:
By merely imitating practice rather than critically synthesizing both theory and classroom teachers’ practices, pre-service teachers may fail to increase their own understanding of learning processes, develop their own vision of education or develop their own professional practice. (p. 212)

The chances of such imitation occurring are enhanced by the well documented inequality of power relationships between mentors and student teachers (Dobbins, 1994).

The theory/practice nexus
Ideally the practicum serves as ‘bridge between theory and practice in learning to teach’ (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005, p. 289). This appears to have been the case for some students who found that their practicum experience enhanced their understanding of theories with which they had engaged on campus and so expressed renewed enthusiasm for their studies. However, despite the congruence between the practice observed in schools and the messages conveyed in the on campus component of the course, there were indications in some students’ reflections that they valued their learning from their practical experience in the schools far more than the more theoretical orientation of their courses at the University. A dilemma for teacher educators has always been how to help students to see the value of both (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and this is an ongoing challenge for this program which appears to have been exacerbated for some by such positive experiences in schools. Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) recommendation in response to this dilemma is that there should be greater ‘conceptual coherence’ in the design of teacher education and that fieldwork should be purposeful and integrated with others aspects of the program. This is a certainly a challenge that needs to be taken up within my course, but also across all courses as part of program review and revision.

The role of practicum in the development of professional identity
According to Watson (2006), ‘teachers actively construct their identities as professionals in an ongoing, effortful and dynamic process that needs to be sustained’ (p. 512). There were many comments in students’ responses after their first practicum that indicated that the experience in the school had instigated an emergent sense of professional identity – a change in their perceptions of themselves from tertiary students to pre-service teachers. Changes identified included the ways they saw themselves in relation to pupils, staff, the teaching role and their studies. It was clear that this was not an easy transition for some with concerns expressed about their struggle to relate to students as teachers rather than as friends, to mentors as colleagues and to the complexity and challenges of the teacher’s role.

Studies have found that teacher education students often underestimate the complexity of teaching (Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler & Shaver, 2005) and that therein lies one reason that some students drop out of programs (Chambers & Roper, 2000). There is no doubt that many students in this study developed their understandings that teaching is complex, has a heavy workload and requires a life long commitment to learning, but it does not appear to have dampened their enthusiasm for the role.
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Overall, it seems that simply beginning a teacher education program was not enough in itself to awaken some students’ senses of themselves as developing teachers and this only began once they had an experience in a school.

Conclusion

This study illuminated students’ perceptions of two first year practicum experiences and the role these played in their learning and commitment to teaching and their studies. It found that the structured and supportive nature of the practicums, particularly the whole school approach in Stage 1, had a considerable influence in sustaining students’ commitment and resulted in significant learning outcomes. In a context where large numbers of teacher education students are exiting during the first year and in view of the anticipated shortage of teachers, this study suggests that attention should be paid to making initial experiences in schools as welcoming and productive as possible. This is more likely to occur when teacher educators and school partners work together to develop a structured approach to supporting student teachers' learning in schools.

References
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