Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

SUMMARY

The quality of teacher education has become a matter of high public interest and accountability at State, National and International levels. Recent reviews and reports of teacher education have been overwhelmingly critical and highlighted the need for improved knowledge about what matters in teacher education (see, Education and Training Committee 2005, Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2007, Levine 2006). In Victoria the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Suitability of Preservice Teacher Training Courses (Education and Training Committee, 2005) concluded that teaching experience is the ‘key area of contention…’. However, research about how teacher education placements lead to the professional growth of student teachers is limited. In a review of research on placement experiences and methods courses, Clift and Brady (2005) conclude that although there is evidence of a positive effect on student teacher learning ‘…it is difficult to predict what impact a specific course of experience may have... (p. 331)’. The current study reports on student-teacher professional learning within the context of the placement experience in one- and two-year secondary teacher education courses in Victoria, Australia. It forms part of a larger study which examines how the professional-learning experiences of teacher education courses are structured, how they are implemented by supervising teachers and how they are experienced by student teachers. In this report student teachers are asked about placement experiences and how this impacts on their preparation for teaching. They are asked about areas of difficulty they experienced during placements. When contrasted with the Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers these difficulties are found to reflect all elements of the standards. The findings suggest that more attention should be given to understanding how the professional standards might inform the initial period of student teacher professional learning during placements and the pedagogy needed to support this phase of professional learning.

Introduction

Teacher educators are under increasing pressure to produce high quality teacher graduates and to account more fully for the placement experience component of teacher education courses. In Victoria, Australia, course accreditation with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) requires teacher education institutions to produce graduates who have demonstrated the qualities listed in the VIT Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers. This framework, developed from the Professional Standards for The Teaching Profession (2005), defines teaching using three professional domains: professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement which altogether encompass eight elements of teaching. Although these standards have been adapted for graduate teachers and are used to specify the desired learning outcomes of pre-service training courses there is no indication of how these capabilities are to be developed. Beyond a specified minimum 45 days of teaching, there is little pedagogical understanding about student teacher needs at different stages of placements for the three domains of professional learning. For instance, no guidelines exist about the order in which the elements can be expected to be achieved or how learning across the
Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

different elements might be related. Overall, there is a very limited appreciation of how school placement experiences contribute to the development of the professional attributes for teaching.

Student teachers regard placement experiences as the most valuable component of their teacher preparation courses (Ben-Peretz, 1995 cited in Townsend & Bates 2007, p692). Student teacher learning is more effective when the goals of placements align with the philosophy and practices of the placement school and when what is to be learned is “framed” by the learner (Furlong, 1997). This creates greater coherence in the program and improves opportunities for student teachers to apply what they are learning. Guidance and targeted feedback further improve learning by assisting student teachers to focus on, and professionally frame, their teaching experience (Tang, 2002). When these features exist it appears student teachers are more able to accurately remember the details of their classroom teaching experience (Allen and Casbergue, 1997 cited in Penso, 2002 p32).

Although placement experiences may be assumed to provide a coherent teaching experience for student teachers as they learn to teach, confusion may arise when schools and universities emphasise different aspects of the practicum (Conley and Goldman, 1998, Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hargraves, 1997 cited in Townsend and Bates, 2007 p. 693). Lack of agreement about what is valued in the placement experience and the order in which it is to be learned may differ and create conflicting sources of information for student teachers. More information is needed, therefore, to demonstrate links between placement experiences and student teacher professional development. Research is needed to establish how student teacher professional learning is supported by the on campus and school based components of teacher education courses and what conditions are needed to ensure these two components provide complementary support for initial stages of professional learning. Researchers Cove, McAdam and McGonigal, (2007) and Meyer and Land, (2005) also suggest that research focusing on the processes of learning to teach should consider those professional development areas that create difficulties for student teachers to help identify a pedagogical solution for these problems.

This paper presents evidence from group interviews with student teachers after the completion of their first placement. The study has been designed to examine student teacher’s initial professional learning including areas they find to be difficult to learn. The study is designed to help improve knowledge about the pedagogical needs of student teachers during their initial placement experience.

The Study

The larger Practicum Partnerships Project, from which this study is drawn, is a continuing mixed methods study of different models and outcomes related to professional learning and teaching performance of teacher graduates. The study is funded by the Carrick Institute of Higher Education and is designed to report on the role of the practicum in the professional preparation of graduate teachers. This report presents data from group interviews that have been conducted with student teachers from one-and two-year postgraduate secondary teacher education programs. All interviews were conducted within two-weeks of completion of their first placement. A group of 5-8 student teachers were interviewed for each course. The interviews lasted for approximately 45-60 minutes and the questions focused on their experiences in the placement and their views about their professional learning. All interviewees also completed a
Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

A survey which asked them to rate their learning in the placement against the Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers, using a 4-point Likert scale. In all, student teachers from 10 different courses from the eight universities in Victoria (approx 80 student teachers) were interviewed. This study reports student teacher responses to the question about what they found difficult in this placement. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis and their comments were grouped according to themes. The identified themes were then compared to the eight elements of the Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers. Group-interview data have been reported and, although the analysis has not attempted to relate comments to different courses, the findings have indicated that regardless of the particular course they were enrolled in, most student teachers experienced a similar set of difficulties during their first placement.

Results

Each group interview session commenced with a warm up which asked student teachers to think of a few words to describe their placement. The one word responses were highly positive and affirming of the placement and included; enlightening, enjoyable, encouraging, exciting fantastic, positive, fun, rewarding. The words described the physical and emotional demands of the placement with; ‘hard work, busy, rushed exhausting, challenging, reflective, and motivating’. Interestingly, less than 5% of the words were negative, e.g. ‘useless and frustrating’.

After this introduction the student teachers were asked to discuss aspects of the placement they found to be difficult. The themes that arose from this discussion were later analysed, summarised and contrasted with the Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers (Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2005). The results summarised in Table 1 suggest that the first placement presents areas of difficulty that encompass the full breadth of the professional standards for teaching.

Table 1: Key themes arising from student teacher responses to the question about what aspects of their placement they found to be difficult. Comments are shown in contrast with the Professional Standards for Graduating Teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Themes in response to “Areas of difficulty”</th>
<th>Key concerns and issues</th>
<th>Professional Standard</th>
<th>Ways to teach</th>
<th>Lack of knowledge of ways to teach.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge of ways to group students.</td>
<td>Inability to adapt teaching methods quickly to respond to situations.</td>
<td>Professional Practice 4</td>
<td>Content knowledge</td>
<td>Being required to teach new content not studied before, or;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Knowledge 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not being proficient in content they were required to teach.</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge of resources appropriate to content they were required to teach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Knowledge 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of students they are to teach</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge of students prior to teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information appeared to be Professional Knowledge 3</td>
<td>biased and unhelpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty in using classroom dynamics and grouping strategies to support teaching.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

General unpreparedness.
Classroom management issues considered to be “the most difficult thing”. Should be better equipped with strategies before leaving university and commencing the placement.
Need broader range of strategies e.g. how to motivate students.
Deep feelings of uncertainty and a sense that they were “thrown in at the deep end”.
Managing levels of ability concern.
Professional Knowledge 3 & Professional Practice 5
Coping with Diversity NESB students.
Students with disabilities.
Literacy issues.
Coping with Diversity.
Professional Practice 4 & 6 Learning Environment Framework for teaching already developed.
Classroom processes organised.
Lack of professional space in the classroom.
Relationships in classes are already established.
Limited authority vested in the student teacher.
Not able to use their own teaching style.
Expectation they had to emulate supervising teacher.
Unable to use the strategies learnt at university.
Limited professional freedom e.g. difficult to express disagreement with supervising teacher and lack of clarity about what was permitted.
Professional Practice 5
Awareness of school policies Knowledge of school.
Knowledge about students.
Duty of care.
Discipline policy of the school.
Professional Engagement 7
Professional relationships within the placement Limited professional respect for student teacher.
Level of respect within the classroom environment dependent on the level of respect already established in the classroom.
Professional Engagement 8

Student teachers strongly believe that their preparation for the placement should be focused directly on their professional learning needs. They felt they were required to respond to the demands of the placement without adequate preparation. In some instances students drew on their own prior knowledge of schools and children through their personal and work experiences in the community. In other cases preparation for the placement was built into the program more directly through community and school-based programs. In these instances student teachers felt better prepared to cope within the complex workings of the classroom environment.

The VIT standards for graduating teachers require teacher education courses to prepare student teachers with professional knowledge that includes the elements; knowing how students learn and how to teach them effectively; knowing the content they teach and knowing their students. The student teachers interviewed in this study felt ill-informed about teaching pedagogy and about ways to group students for effective learning. They lacked confidence in being able to make adaptations to their teaching methods to respond to situations that arose during their teaching sessions. They were particularly concerned about the lack of knowledge they had about students prior to teaching and in some cases considered
Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

The information they were given to be “unhelpful”. Inadequate knowledge about how students learn impacted directly on their capacity to know how to plan to teach effectively and make use of classroom dynamics to support their teaching. Overall the student teachers did not feel able to take control of all aspects of their teaching role. Student teachers who had been given support and focused feedback from their supervising teacher indicated they felt more able to deal with the different elements of their teaching.

An important learning outcome for student teachers from supervised school placements are the three elements of professional practice that evidence the ability to: plan and assess for effective learning; create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments and to use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning.

Responses from student teachers suggested they experienced a high level of anxiety and nervousness about taking classes and they felt unable to address the needs of students across the whole class. The issue of classroom management was the most challenging and perhaps overwhelming aspect of their teaching assignment. They did not feel prepared for the type of experiences they were exposed to and expected to master. For example they were concerned that they did not have strategies that they needed to motivate students or the capacity to respond to events appropriately or spontaneously enough. There was a general acceptance amongst student teachers that more could have been done to prepare them on campus prior to the placement to help them deal with these issues. Some student teachers reported they felt they “went in blind” or “were thrown into the deep end” in this placement.

Student teachers felt they were unprepared and unable to cope with diversity in classrooms. They did not have the capacity to manage different levels of ability in classes. They found working with NESB students, assisting students with disabilities and adapting work to cater for the different literacy needs of students to be particularly challenging. In some cases the information shared by supervising teachers with student teachers about these issues was insufficient to assist them with their teaching role. One student teacher commented that he hadn’t been told by the supervising teacher that there were NESB children in the class and that he “… thought they just didn't want to talk”.

Lesson planning and structure was identified as another area of difficulty and student teachers indicated that they wanted more time to learn to plan and to analyse their own teaching strategies. They wanted opportunities to engage in cycles of planning and teaching that were more focused on events that had happened and strategies they might have used to address them. On-campus method teaching subjects were identified as providing the most practical preparation for teaching although many student teachers felt a need for more support in this area prior to their first placement.

Student teachers felt their capacity to make an impact on the learning environment they were working in was very limited. They noted the classrooms in which they were expected to teach constituted a pre-organised learning environment which provided them with a professionally limited learning space. They felt compromised in being able to learn to create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments. Aspects of class behaviour, attitudes of students to the established class teacher and the short-term nature of the placement reduced their belief in their power to teach effectively and often deterred them from trying out new ideas. The assessment of their professional practice by the supervising teacher added to their reluctance to test any
Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

Boundaries. Typical comments included: “...students know that you’re not a teacher yet...and... “you’re not going to be there to mark their assignments later in the year”.
Comments such as: “You’re not able to use your own teaching style”... “we had to teach the way our supervisors did”... “my mentor was reluctant to let me use the strategies that I learnt at uni”... and ..“ultimately they are the ones who are assessing us” were heard frequently.

Professional engagement and relationships in the teaching situation were also perplexing for student teachers. They felt the placement experience did not optimise opportunities for them to reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice or to feel they could act as active members of the teaching profession. For example, they felt the relationships between themselves and the supervising teacher and the students they were teaching were very limited in nature. Consequently they did not feel they were treated as a professional colleague in training. As noted previously, they felt they wanted more information about the students and the teaching situation they were placed in prior to the placement.
They also believed they could have been given more information about important professional requirements prior to the commencement of the placement, including knowledge related their duty of care toward students.

The comments from the student teachers indicated the professional learning model that pervaded the placement lacked a consistent or identifiable pedagogical framework. Many felt they were under pressure to emulate their supervising teacher and that targeted advice related to their particular professional development needs was not provided. They felt they were often forced to rely on their own background experiences and personal insights to make sense of what they were observing and experiencing in the classroom rather than refer to an articulated professional framework to assist them with making judgements or developing plans for further action. In cases where the entire placement had become difficult, student teachers felt they were unable to identify a suitable source of professional assistance.

Discussion

The findings of this study supports the need for a more formal introduction to the placement experience focusing on schools and students, planning, teaching strategies and how to cope with initial difficulties in teaching. This study echoes findings of much earlier research in teacher education and placement experiences and suggests that teacher educators need to develop a deeper understanding of the initial stage of teacher professional learning and aspects of teacher professional practice that should be taught procedurally to introduce teaching practice. Darling Hammond et al (2005, p402) stresses that “Learning in practice does not just happen on its own, of course. Though the importance of teaching experience has been reinforced by much research it is important to recognise that practice alone does not make perfect, or even good, performance. Opportunities to connect practice to expert knowledge must be built into learning experiences for teachers”.

Although the student teachers in this study have an overwhelmingly positive view of the value of the school experience placement they found the experience difficult and problematic.
These difficulties appear to stem from the lack of specificity in the placement experience in relation to their learning needs. Moreover the difficulties embrace all elements of the professional standards for teaching.
Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

Student teachers want to be better prepared, feel more professionally informed about the teaching situation prior to teaching and be provided with feedback that is more targeted to their learning needs. They want to have strategies to draw upon when the need arises. Their learning situation presents them with a paradox in which they are required to perform as a teacher but do not have either the professional capacity, or authority, or status to be a teacher. The findings suggest that many student teachers feel overwhelmed and stressed in this situation. At a pedagogical level student teachers are often being expected to perform at a level that is beyond their level of readiness. This suggests the initial preparation for, and experience in, school placements should be more carefully graded and matched to account for the learning needs of developing student teachers. More opportunities and support need to be created to enable neophyte teachers to develop professional knowledge and professional practice skills before being required to teach a class. Development in teacher education needs to be supported by a research agenda that is designed to examine the details of student-teacher professional learning. A pedagogical framework for practical components in teacher education courses needs to be more clearly defined.

The results of this study suggest that student teacher learning could be more targeted if a coherent framework for professional learning in placements was established. Placement requirements need to reflect and match the particular needs of the stage of learning of student teachers in each particular placement. This would require development of university – school collaborations to ensure the expectations, and support for each placement were aligned across the university and school – based component of each program. It would also require a deeper understanding about student teacher learning. Learning expectations could then be designed to reflect incremental stages of early professional growth more accurately and avoid unnecessary stress and confusion in the learning situation.
Professional Learning in Pre-service Teacher Education: Placement experiences in graduate teacher education programs.

References


Education and Training Committee (2005) Step Up, Step In, Step Out: Report of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Suitability of Teacher Education Courses,


Victorian Institute of Teaching, Standards for Professional Practice for Full Registration,