Abstract

This paper draws upon the evaluation of a university-school partnership in the provision of secondary pre-service teacher education through a mentor program and the development of a community of practice by embedding the course within a secondary college. Effective professional preparation requires a partnership between the university, employing bodies, schools, and the pre-service teachers. Such a partnership was initiated in 2005 with the Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) between the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Canberra, the Catholic Education Office (Canberra/Goulburn), and Catholic schools. Secondary pre-service teachers were inducted into units of curriculum specialisation by university academics and leading teachers (mentors) from the schools in Canberra. In 2011 the program at ACU was further enhanced by embedding the course in St Mary MacKillop College. In the traditional model of pre-service education, few opportunities existed to experience the realistic on-site experience while attending university lectures.

The paper will examine the significance of mutualism in this university and school partnership. The paper will present current research evaluating the success of the program in addressing the nexus between theory and practice and the practical outcomes for pre-service students in the application of pedagogical content knowledge in real life classroom practice. Consideration will be given to the initiative from the school perspective and highlight the need for university-school connections, as well as the practical implications of embedding a university course within a workplace setting. The partnership provides a mutualistic relationship, which as it evolves, provides significant benefit to all participants.

Introduction

Most researchers agree that teacher education is involved, complex and multifaceted. In the preparation of pre-service teachers for the profession, one of the challenges is to provide an educational process capable of transforming practice and to initiate new teachers into an array of professional skills, attributes and competencies (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Another dimension of pre-service teacher education is to address the nexus between theory and practice, and to apply pedagogical content knowledge in real life classroom practice. Meijer et al. (2011) identify three issues that need to be addressed by pre-service teachers. Firstly, they need to deal with their own pre-conceptions of teaching constructed from their own educational experience. Secondly they need to enact what they know, which is dependent upon a deep understanding of theory and practice and, thirdly, they need to own and control their own learning in order to grasp the complexity of teaching. For the pre-service teachers, their growth is not merely professional but also personal. ‘For student teachers, this means they need to actively examine their own developing practice in relation to societal demands and abstract notions’ (Meijer et al. 2005, p.116). What is needed in the early
stages of their professional development is a forum for ‘the voices of teachers themselves, the questions [they] ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives’ (Cochran-Smith & Lyle, 1996, p. 93).

Traditional approaches to teacher education have generally offered university courses in isolation from schools and the school environment and have been constructed around systemic observation, teaching practice and reflection. The ‘application of theory’ model of pre-service teacher education, whereby pre-service teachers learn the theories at university and are then required to apply these when they move into the practicum in school, has been accepted as the norm (Zeichner, 2010). This leads to a perceived disconnect between the university courses and the professional experience of pre-service teachers. Often the associate teachers charged with supervision and mentoring of pre-service teachers have little knowledge of the courses undertaken at university. This disconnection between university courses and professional experience has been referred to as ‘the Achilles heel of teacher education’ (Zeichner, citing Darling Hammond, 2010, p.91) and there is a clear need to strengthen the nexus between the theoretical component of university courses and professional practice within the school setting to enhance learning. To obviate the separation, Zeichner (2010) proposes the concept of a hybrid space whereby the school and university educators are brought together in a space which has the potential to bridge the traditional gulf. This model acknowledges the expertise of the teacher in the field as well as the academic expertise of the teacher educator. As highlighted by Zeichner (2010, p.92) ‘creating third spaces in teacher education involves an equal and more dialectical relationship between academic and practitioner in the support of student teacher learning.’ Such spaces rely on the collaboration and formation of partnerships between those involved in pre-service teacher education: the university, the employer and the school. Within these spaces, the teacher educator and the practitioner are brought together and the resulting partnership has the capacity for transformative learning.

Kruger et al.(2009) determined through their study that successful partnerships were achieved through and characterised by trust, mutuality and reciprocity among pre-service teachers, teachers and other school colleagues and teacher educators. Such partnerships also require a clear focus, manageable agenda, fiscal support, long term commitment and have a dynamic nature (Robinson & Darling-Hammond, 1994).
The Immersion Model in Practice

The practicum is often the first classroom experience for many pre-service teachers since leaving school and this is especially so for graduate entrants to university. Increasingly, there has been a movement toward alternative programs consisting of early entry into schools, such as the Teach for Australia model, based on the supposition that pre-service teachers will learn in the midst of practice (Grossman & Loeb, 2008). The model provides an intensive experience of teacher education followed by two years of a supported mentor relationship. There is an increasing acknowledgement by researchers such as Ball and Cohen (1999) and Hammerness, Darling–Hammond and Bransford (2005) that much of what pre-service teachers learn must be learned from practice, rather than in preparing for practice (Zeichner, 2010).

The immersion of graduates, some of whom have had careers outside teaching, in the pulse and rhythm of school life is designed to enhance their practical understanding of educational theories, philosophies, professional performance and effective learning strategies. It enables them, as pre-service teachers, to engage within their future professional environment in such a way that they are more likely to emerge from the experience with greater confidence, wisdom and judgment and a deeper appreciation of the context and practice of the teaching profession. Authentic interactions and dialogue with staff and students provide opportunities that pre-service teachers might otherwise have acquired only in their early years of teaching.

Context and Program Description

Mentor program 2005-2010

In 2005, a mentor program was introduced into the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) at the Canberra campus of Australian Catholic University. The program relied on collaboration between the university educators and a cohort of experienced secondary school teachers, who assumed the role of ‘academic mentor teachers’. Secondary pre-service teachers were inducted into units in Curriculum and Teaching Studies 1 & 2 by university academics working cooperatively with the ‘academic mentor teachers’ or leading teachers, who were specialists in specific curriculum areas, from Catholic schools in Canberra. The involvement of the ‘academic mentor teachers’ added credibility and relevancy and proved successful in strengthening the course. The university lecturers provided the theoretical and academic input while the
‘academic mentor teachers’, usually coordinators with at least five years experience, extended learning by forming links between the theoretical considerations and practical components of the course in the curriculum specialisations of: Commerce/Business, English, History, Science, Mathematics, Religious Education, Studies of Societies and Environment, Languages, Music, Drama, Technology, and the Visual Arts. In the past six years more than twenty teachers have been involved in the ‘academic mentor teacher’ program. The success of the program has resulted in an increase in teachers offering themselves as ‘academic mentor teachers’ for the program.

The role of the university appointed ‘academic mentor’ is distinct from that of the practicum mentor whose function is determined by the nature and duration of the practicum. The ‘academic mentor teacher’ fulfills a more academic role in the provision of small group tutorials that address educational theories in practice, philosophies and professional performance, as well as effective teaching strategies. The ‘academic mentor teacher’ has an ongoing role throughout the year and provides another level for reflective practice for the pre-service teacher beyond the practicum. Simpson et al. (2007) found that the success of the learning can be constrained when the relationships are not sustained beyond the limited duration of the practicum. In contrast to the practicum, the professional relationship embarked upon by the pre-service teacher and the ‘academic mentor teacher’, provides a significant initiation into the profession and insight into the professional practice of a competent educator, as the relationship is maintained over the length of the course. As observed by Jaipal (2009) the mentor, particularly in the school setting, demonstrates multiple roles of ‘friend, encourager, counselor, nurturer, evaluator, including being experts who model specific teaching practices in subject curriculum areas’ (p.258).

The Development of the Down-South Initiative 2010-2012

In 2010, a strong university-school-community partnership was formed between the Australian Catholic University, Canberra Campus and St Mary MacKillop College, a Senior Catholic Secondary College situated in the Tuggeranong Valley of Canberra. The ‘Down South’ initiative was implemented in 2011 and aimed to develop a new model of secondary teacher education that provided pre-service teachers, enrolling at ACU in a Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) course, with opportunities to engage in ‘real-life’
authentic learning experiences. The partnership aimed also to create a dynamic learning environment comprising multi-dimensional layers of interaction between all participants, including ACU academics, College staff, pre-service teachers and secondary school students, for collaborative professional learning and research opportunities. The following diagram shows the gradual transition from the traditional model of teacher education to the now most recent ‘Down South Initiative’.

Unlike most university school partnerships, where the university initiates the partnership (Efron, et al. 2010), this initiative was proposed by the school and this encouraged at the outset a sense of equality for all participants. For partnerships to be effective, they should be characterised by a concern for the learning of all participants, the pursuit of improvement together, and focus on the achievement of mutually reciprocal outcomes based on sound research.

The formation of this partnership was timely and responsive to the need for change within the higher education sector, as highlighted in the Bradley Review (2008), and aligned with the Australian Government’s agenda to lift aspirations and heighten the expectations of school students, especially those from lower SES backgrounds, to consider university as a future pathway. It was expected the presence and interaction of pre-service teachers with senior College students would facilitate a deeper understanding of the life of a university student.
The Process and Organisation

A Steering Committee, comprising representatives from the Australian Catholic University, St Mary MacKillop and the Catholic Education Office (Canberra/Goulburn), formed in 2010 and began preparations for the design of the partnership 12 months before implementation. At these meetings, the scope and objectives of the partnership were determined, the courses which would be offered by the University at the school were outlined, and the mentoring networks between ACU students and St Mary MacKillop staff were established. A framework was developed for the facilitation of ACU student access to Professional Learning opportunities at the College, and for the incorporation of ACU students into the professional life of the College. Mechanisms were also established for professional dialogue between the ACU, St Mary MacKillop College and other schools.

On-site coordination

A number of productive meetings were held in Semester One. These focused on planning and ways in which the program might be effectively evaluated, including formative and summative processes. Consideration was also given to opportunities for collaboration and sharing of ideas regarding future partnership activities, including research. The ongoing dialogue ensured the smooth implementation and operation of the program. The presence at the College of the St Mary MacKillop Campus Head, the school-based Coordinator, and the ACU Secondary Coordinator, was pivotal to course cohesion and the overall success of the program’s implementation.

The pre-service teachers engaged in what would normally be offered by the College as an Early-Career Teacher Orientation Program. Throughout the semester pre-service teachers engaged in regular briefings with the Campus Head for the purpose of clarifying Campus and College events, protocols and procedures. They received copies of College newsletters, bulletins and notices, and attended College assemblies, masses, liturgies and briefings. Pre-service teachers also participated in a series of lecturers presented by ‘experts’ in several fields from the University, the Catholic Education Office, Systemic schools and the Board of Senior Secondary Studies on topics such as: College Ethos, Integrated Curriculum, Tactical Teaching, Student
Management, Legal responsibilities and Duty of Care. All students were linked to pastoral teams and met each week with the Pastoral Coordinator for a 20 minute briefing.

A central element of the program was the pre-service teachers’ membership of the faculty teams. Each had been allocated to a team according to their specialisation and attended the faculty meetings. This involvement enabled them to experience the complexities and expectations on the teacher beyond the curriculum delivery.

**Teaching and Learning Program**

The teaching program was timetabled each week for two days at the senior secondary campus (Year 10 to 12) with some further study time allocated throughout the week for the ‘academic mentor teacher’ sessions across the various curriculum specialisations. Some ‘academic mentor teacher’ sessions were conducted at St Mary MacKillop Campus while others took place at ACU or other College sites. The program provided opportunities for structured observations in the pre-service teachers’ curriculum specialisations, as well as in a specialisation other than their own.

In Semester One, 2011, two units: EDFD548 Effective Teaching and Professional Practice and EDFD546 Learning and Learning Development, were offered to pre-service teachers at the St Mary MacKillop Campus. In Semester Two, 2011, another two units EDFD547 Diversity in the Classroom and EDFD543 Social and Cultural Contexts of Education were offered. A mixed-mode pedagogical approach was adopted to enhance the learning opportunities for the pre-service teachers. Assignments were designed to maximize the authentic setting of the school and all assessment tasks were integrated with the observations of classes and students at the College.

Mixed-mode methodologies were used to capture formative and summative evaluative processes, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and surveys. The focus of evaluation was on the improvement of the program design and implementation. The research questions addressed: the benefits of being within a school setting and what professional enhancement, if any, was gained for the pre-service teacher within a school setting; the impact of the program on assisting the professional induction of pre-service secondary
teachers in relation to preparation for the practicum; the gains from being part of the pastoral care teams and faculty teams; and where further improvements might be made.

To date, the evaluative process has provided the following insights:

*Pre-service teachers and academic mentor teachers*

Focus group interviews of pre-service teachers and mentor teachers revealed there were reciprocal benefits for both groups. The students articulated that they were getting a genuine experience of school. This enabled them to keep the focus real and their goals before them. The link between theory and practice was evident in the relationship between lectures and observations of classes. The correlation between secondary pre-service teacher education and school, strengthens the learning experience and pre-service teachers believe they will be better prepared. This was evidenced in the confident manner in which pre-service teachers approached the practicum.

The process of enculturation into the professional setting gave the pre-service teachers a familiarity with the staff and the staff room so that it became ‘a relaxed and safe place’ and they felt part of a school community. The interactions in the staffroom and involvement in faculty meetings gave the pre-service teachers an awareness of the contextual factors that influence teachers’ work (Malmberg & Hagger, 2009). Interactions with the students were facilitated through membership of the pastoral care teams. One pre-service teacher went from being fearful of adolescents to finding ‘the students fantastic’ (PT1, 2011).

For novice professionals, such as pre-service teachers, the provision of a mentoring relationship can offer support and feedback, and prepare them for a successful entry into the real world of the classroom. Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable because they lack experience in managing and teaching a large group of learners, while coping with assessment demands, curriculum changes, lesson planning and being responsible to parents, students, the community and school administration.

The ‘academic mentor teachers’ commented on the significant impact of the practical application of theory within their particular curriculum specialisations. As these secondary pre-service teachers were older, the program was regarded as of immeasurable assistance in easing them into the profession, though recognising that the professional relationship needed time to develop. Through the process the pre-service teachers were
enabled to reflect on what it means to be an effective teacher. In the induction to the profession one ‘academic mentor teacher’ acknowledged the opportunity to inspire, develop ethics and share in the passion for teaching. Pre-service teachers highlighted the importance of preparedness, conduct, low stress levels and workload, as significant aspects of initiation into the profession. The practical aspect of the process was articulated in the provision of skills such as developing and planning units of work and assessment. Both groups commented on the realistic approach that came from the opportunity for a facilitated introductory relationship between the pre-service teacher and the school. The ‘academic mentor teachers’ believed that the program allowed a more realistic attitude, particularly as many pre-service teachers were negotiating a change of career and have an idealised memory of a more perfect schooling system. As one ‘academic mentor teacher’ commented, the mentor sessions were distinct from the university classes and the learning was often more credible for the pre-service teacher.

Pre-service teachers appreciated the opportunity to link theory with practice through the mentoring relationship and immersion in the classroom. The focus on the difficulties in the classroom, and the professional guidance offered, were regarded as strengths; the pre-service teachers felt more confident when transitioning into the profession.

*The attributes of the mentor*

The mentors regarded the academic knowledge of their discipline as a pre-requisite attribute. There was a need for the mentor to have at least five years experience coupled with the realisation that they should not be ‘too long in the job’. This was based on the observation that it may be difficult for older teachers to consider what they do from an objective perspective, especially aspects that they had originally found demanding. For some, age was not a significant factor, but rather the person selected should be recognised as a key teacher with energy and spark; a person with good practice. ‘Academic mentor teachers’ identified the need for contemporary knowledge of the discipline and awareness of new developments.

*Professional benefits for the mentor*

Mentoring should not be regarded as a one-way process but rather, it should have the dimension of mutuality and be an enriching experience (Smith & Zeegers, 2002). The process of mentoring for the teachers in the
program was positive in providing a new perspective on teaching and the development of new ideas and skills. There was a sense of excitement and revitalization from sharing in the enthusiasm, inventiveness and creativity of the pre-service teachers (MT1, 2011). Simpson et al. (2007) found that typically, teachers engaged in pre-service education, do not recognise the potential of professional development and this was also the case with the ‘academic mentor teachers’ who ultimately found their practice improved.

**Conclusion**

The mutualistic nature of the university-school partnership has resulted in sound and sustained relationships with all the participants in the program. The onsite nature of the program has provided credibility to the theoretical component of the course as pre-service teachers and educators see current practice enacted around them. The pre-service teachers were aware of their teacher educators’ desire and efforts to stay informed of current practices (Chorzempa et al. 2010). For the teacher educator the experiential nature of course delivery surrounded by the process of education within a classroom block brings an authentic context to course delivery. The elements of risk involved, such as the lack of technological support outside the university, forces the academic to be flexible outside the familiar campus setting and to model good practice.

Both the teacher educators and the pre-service teachers thought the advantages of connecting theory and practice within a school setting far outweighed the disadvantages.

The importance of research, as well as involvement in quality professional experience, is essential to the ongoing development and sustainable growth of the ‘Down South’ initiative. A Research Development Cell is in the early stages of formation at the College and a working party has been convened to monitor and expand this important work aimed to build organisational capacity across both the College and the University.

The success of the ‘Down South’ initiative has resulted from a paradigm shift, from a model where teacher educators are the source of knowledge and control, to one that acknowledges the expertise of professional practitioners; now both coexist as partners within a dynamic community of practice. This mutualistic relationship has created a transformative or ‘hybrid’ space where pre-service teachers are able to learn more effectively how to manage the complexities of the teaching profession.
References


