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A SCHOOL-BASED INITIATIVE: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE PRACTICUM

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INTRODUCTION

Each year since 1987 a group of 16-20 Dip Ed students at Monash University has been placed in three or four schools for an extended ten week experience. As a member of the staff at Monash, I have spent half-time in the schools during this practicum supervising student teachers, arranging school experience activities and conducting seminars for student teachers and school staff. In 1993 I had a half-time teaching allotment in one of the schools so that my classroom also became a source of common experiences for follow-up discussion. This paper outlines the restructuring of the traditional preservice program that led to the school-based initiative and discusses a range of themes that have emerged over seven years of evaluation.

A BASIS FOR CHANGE

The first set of principles we used to argue for a restructuring of the preservice program is set out in Table 1. This table represents a particular view of the way a person might learn to teach. As the assumptions highlight the importance of prior experiences of schooling and the way new experiences are personally interpreted, the view can be described as a constructivist perspective on learning to teach. The changes to the course that followed were a reaction to our overestimation of what we can teach neophyte teachers in a "show and tell" format and an underestimation of our ability to provide the conditions and experiences for people to be learners about teaching.

Table 1: Assumptions underlying a restructure of one teacher education program

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The prospective teacher has changing needs and priorities which must be considered in planning and delivering the program. 2. The transition from learner to teacher is difficult to achieve and is greatly facilitated by having prospective teachers work in a collegial environment. 3. The student teacher is a learner who is actively constructing a view of learning and teaching based on personal experiences and strongly shaped by perceptions held before beginning the program. 4. The program should model the teaching/learning approaches being advocated. 5. Student teachers should see the preservice program as a worthwhile experience but only the first stage of a career-long professional development. |
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A restructure of the campus program followed. The program began with activities designed to address personal concerns; a flexible timetable allowed for changing emphases throughout the year (Assumption 1, Table 1). The students were organised into small groups (15-18) with two staff taking responsibility for delivering the major part of the program (Assumption 2).

ESTABLISHING CHANGE IN THE PRACTICUM

In reviewing and reforming preservice teacher education, the school experience components proved difficult to change. This, despite clear recognition that any significant improvement in the overall program would certainly incorporate changes in the way the practicum contributes to learning about teaching.

Prior to 1987, the teaching experience had extended over ten weeks and was organised into three blocks of experience in different schools for the majority of students. The criticisms associated with this format would be clearly recognised in most teacher education institutions (see Table 2). In response to these criticisms, the institution had tried many different structures (eg. 2 days per week, 2 blocks of time) at different times with no clear preferences emerging among staff and cooperating schools.

Table 2: Criticisms associated with the practicum

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient time to get to know staff and students • Inability to apply important ideas from the course • Many aspects of teaching not experienced • Gap between school practice and theories of the course • Variations in quality of supervision and incompatibility between ideas about teaching at the university and the school • Student teacher treated as a student not a colleague • School experience not subsequently linked to the course • Little opportunity to foster interaction between colleagues |
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The inability to respond in any fundamental way to the pressures for change in the practicum can be attributed to two major sets of factors. Firstly, the requirements of staff in the campus program set limits on what might be possible in the practicum. Faculty staff needed reassurance that their campus contribution could fit in with an extended practicum experience. Secondly, the practicum arrangements involve careful negotiations with schools and the daily demands of schooling had to take precedence over providing school experience for student teachers. This second set of factors constituted a critical barrier to initiating major change. It was appropriate and necessary that the initiative for significant change in the practicum came from a

school concerned about a perceived lack of readiness for teaching among new teachers. The school principal of that school pointed out that,

They are nice people who know their subject, but they do not realise how a school works and the range of things teachers have to do outside their classrooms.

He was expressing legitimate concerns and when it was suggested that the school would have to provide the wider range of experiences for new teachers, the negotiation process had begun. In 1987 his secondary school accepted a group of 13 student teachers and myself for a 10 week period (April to June). These students volunteered to become part of the school community while the remaining 180 students continued the campus program (7 weeks) and completed their second teaching practice block (3 weeks).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT TEACHERS DURING THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE.

There is widespread agreement that the practicum is the most significant area for learning about teaching, yet generalisable findings, that might guide improvement and better links to the campus program are rare. Our school based approach provided an opportunity to "live" with a group of student teachers and monitor their development during the school experience. One entry in my daily journal identified a shift in the informal lesson plan discussions among the student teachers:

There is a difference in the way student teachers are talking about their lesson plans. There is more excitement and wider involvement in each person's problems. Lynda and Joanna believe they are now talking about classes and students where before they were concerned about the content to be taught ... they point out that it takes 3 weeks to know the students and after that they (the class members) become the most important factor in thinking about their lessons. (Journal entry in the fourth week of the school-based experience.)

It is sobering to reflect on the value of the traditional block of 3-4 weeks practicum and the expectation that, in this short period, student teachers would gain some understanding of the pupils they meet. The extended school experience enabled this group of student teachers to interact with pupils in a range of school level activities

and in ways that the traditional practicum would not allow. It also allowed me, for the first time, to closely monitor student teacher development in the important school setting.

THE ROLE OF THE TERTIARY INSTITUTION IN THE PRACTICUM

The school-based experience has proved successful for the student teachers and the school concerned. The full time commitment required from student teachers has meant that it has remained an alternative program in the larger mainstream structure. Some staff have reservations about student teachers missing crucial campus inputs, although some of the more theoretical aspects of the program are continued via the seminars at the school level.

The continuing faculty debate is based on differing views held about how one learns to teach. Assumption 3 (Table 1) emphasises the importance of a full range of teaching role experiences as a critical factor in learning to be a teacher. Associated with this is the most appropriate way to introduce important areas of teacher activity (e.g. integration of disabled students, assessment and reporting, curriculum decision making). The school-based approach is based on a view that experience in a school may substitute for or complement lecture and seminar presentations.

In the second year Saville Kushner (1988) completed an evaluation study based on careful observation of the student teachers in their school settings towards the end of the ten week experience.

THE PERCEIVED IRRELEVANCE OF THE TERTIARY INSTITUTION IN TEACHER PREPARATION

Kushner (1988, p.37) found that for some participants the success of the extended experience confirmed their view that the tertiary institution contribution to teacher preparation has limited value. In an interview with the Principal of the school, one student comments:

I went back to Monash for some lectures - but it was useless ... They were talking about things to do with classrooms and I was thinking "It's just not like that". But I just sat there in silence - I wouldn't say anything.

A conversation between Kushner (1988, p.34) and two student-teachers illustrates further aspects of this issue.

John: Rather than developing a theory about learning or education, what we have been doing here is developing technique.

Jerry thinks about that: I come into teaching with a different angle to most student teachers. I have my own political outlooks and, I suppose, my own philosophical outlooks - they'll obviously determine the teacher I am and how I approach teaching ... I would say, if there was a philosophy or a theory about teaching and learning it's probably there to begin with - and it grows with you, but you can't express that until you have the technique - until you feel confident with a class, with managing a class ... first of all you have to learn how to survive in classrooms.

Saville: What's left for universities? You come to teaching with the theory - in school you learn the realities - you learn about success and failure in schools - universities are left with teaching you how to use the overhead projector?

They pause and laugh for a moment.

John: It's not one of these things that you learn at Uni which develops your theory or philosophy about education - you've already got it before you start Dip.Ed.

Jerry takes that further, unwilling to strip the university of its role in teaching theory and philosophy, but wanting students to have a grounding in educational practice before they confront that. He would have a Dip.Ed. starting with a brief introduction to the students before they went straight into schools to learn teaching. After that period they would return to university to theorise about it - relying heavily on group discussions, since it is this kind of forum which, in his experience of this course, encourages and enthuses students to talk and think about their teaching.

IS THE TEN WEEKS OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE TOO LONG?

The purpose of the school-based initiative was to provide a more valid experience of teaching as part of a teacher education program. It was an attempt to address some of issues set out in Table 2, not support an apprenticeship model of teacher preparation. Kushner (1988) identified a concern

that, instead of providing an opportunity for student teachers to develop as continuous learners, the ten weeks may function simply to socialise them into a particular setting. For example:

John: What would the difference be if we said, instead of doing any lectures or things at the university - especially the theoretical ones - we just spent the whole year in a school as a student teacher - would that be adequate training to be a teacher the year after? I don't know.

Jerry: You go into a school, you've got teachers who've been there ten, twelve, fifteen years - there's a certain pattern of teaching, a pattern of thought - it's very easy - if you came in, you'd fall into that as well. In university you're being introduced to new ideas - new concepts that you can take back to a school.

(Kushner, 1988, pp.40,41)

PROVIDING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT FOR STUDENT TEACHERS

There is evidence that the supervisory support initially provided for student teachers in the extended school experience did not match their levels of development over the ten week period. Consider the following extract from a discussion with Lesley (a student teacher) nearing the end of her ten week experience.

(Lesley): A great deal of teachers' time is spent on discipline. Teachers want children's full attention so that they can pour knowledge into kids' empty heads. To obtain this attention they need kids to conform to a number of rules ... On my secondary school visit one teacher spent 90% of the lesson time trying to get kids to sit still and be quiet and attentive. The scene in the classroom seemed to be more of a power struggle than of a lesson.

(Saville): In retrospect, Lesley's views of school were not inaccurate - perhaps, for her, they were prophetic and maybe that was what was in the mind of the tutor who encouraged her to think of how she would respond to the pathology she was writing about. That's what she is doing now and it dismays her to see herself as part of the problem she felt so distant from in the early days of the Dip.Ed. "But how else can you do it?" She wants to find other ways of approaching teaching - she hates discipline - but all the advice she received to help her improve her teaching is advice about classroom management and control, and encourages her back into the problem.

(Kushner, 1988, p.23)

In this case I was one of the people responsible for supervising the experience and concentrating on discipline and management when Lesley was trying to understand what was possible, and looking for encouragement to explore possibilities. The extended school experience has highlighted the limited script we follow when we supervise student teachers and highlights a need to develop greater opportunities for student teachers to explore teaching possibilities, take risks and accept responsibility for peer development and support.

WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE HAPPENING IN THE PRACTICUM?

For the tertiary staff involved in the school based program it was the first time this question was thoroughly examined. School experience is accepted as necessary and very significant in teacher preparation, but what happens? What is supposed to happen? And how can we arrange the learning opportunities? Kushner (1988, p.41) provides a starting point with a simple model of learning:

Practice -> Reflection -> Learning -> New Practice

It was the second step that is worthy of attention and it seems possible to view the process of reflection in a number of ways (see Table 3).

Table 3: Reflecting on the teaching experience

Learning about teaching in a particular context	Understanding the teaching process
Teaching more effectively	Striving to understand
Fitting the school context	Shaping the situation
Assessing performance	Understanding and addressing issues

The left hand side of Table 3 represents a view that teaching is an activity which can be mastered, with agreed principles and competencies which underly good teaching. The right hand side of Table 3 is based on an assumption that teaching is not something that can be mastered, so that teaching always involves an element of research - a continual search for understanding.

This contrast in ways of thinking about the development of a teacher is clearly linked to views about the nature of knowledge and in this case the nature of knowledge about teaching. The issue is whether teaching is made up of elements which can be taught and mastered or whether teaching should be presented as something that cannot be defined and mastered in a generic way, but remains an area that will require continuous personal research and learning.

Kitchener and King (1992, p.62) address the way adults engage in the process of understanding and knowing. Their seven stage model "describes the shifts that occur in assumptions about knowledge and the way a person justifies beliefs or decisions". Table 4 sets out the way teachers respond to the question, "What is the best way to teach (a relevant topic)?"

Some preliminary work with teachers shows that the stages have some face validity when their responses to the question are analysed. More importantly, the range of responses illustrates that both the views of teaching as mastery of a defined area (Stages 1 to 3) and a problematic area of activity requiring continual learning and research (Stages 6 and 7) are evident in the way teachers explain their decisions and actions.

Table 4: The ways teachers justify their views of teaching (after Kitchener and King, 1992)

What is the best way to teach ...?	
Stage	Response and Justification
1.	There is one way (e.g. "show and tell" or "discovery learning").
2.	There are other ways but they are not as effective as my way.
3.	One way is best, other ways are less certain.
4.	Depends on the context and teacher preference (idiosyncratic situation).
5.	Depends on the way the situation is constructed and interpreted.
6.	Different approaches can be argued (No best way, generalisations not possible).
7.	The question is a research problem - a continual learning challenge for teachers.

It is now clear that the view of teaching embodied in stages 6 and 7 (Table 4) was implied in the assumptions underlying the development of the school-based program (Table 1) and much of the long term inservice work conducted with practicing teachers (Baird and Northfield, 1992). The extended school-based program highlighted the need for interventions that would make the overall experience compatible with the view of teaching being espoused. Among the interventions most likely to present teaching as a career-long search for understanding are:

- **a requirement to accept responsibility for the development of a student teacher colleague.** At least four student teachers are placed in each school and expected to work together in ways that range from visiting each others classes, and engaging in follow-up discussions, to preparing and presenting team teaching lessons. In this way it is hoped that teaching is not seen as an isolated effort to gain mastery but a complex task which requires continual growth in understanding about self, subject matter knowledge, school and classroom contexts, and the young people they teach.
- **a requirement that student teachers will follow individual classes** and appreciate the varied experiences provided by the many different teachers. The student teachers can make up their minds whether there are principles to be mastered or whether teaching is a matter of sensitivity to contexts and a continual search for understanding and improvement.
- **regular contact with a tertiary staff.** The school based program has continual tertiary contact in the school and this has been one reason why the school experience has received increased research attention. In 1993 the author also had a teaching allotment in the school and student teachers had access to their lecturer's classroom and therefore common experiences to consider. The concepts of teaching involving new ideas, successes and failures and a continual search for explanations could be modelled with students. Joint team efforts to develop responses became possible and proved to be powerful ways of shaping new teachers' perceptions of teaching.
- **more appropriate feedback and support.** The example of Lesley set out earlier showed that supervisors (tertiary and school level) can inadvertently set limits on a student teacher's development. The conventional supervisor

report which comments on management, overall impressions and areas for improvement is the outcome of brief interactions between two persons about a limited classroom experience. The extended experience placed the tertiary lecturer and school supervisor in much more of a collegial relationship with the student teacher. It has taken several years to go beyond the lesson comments and move to discussion topics and opportunities more appropriate for continued development over the ten week period. Several supervising teachers referred to the good student teacher who became comfortable "after 3 or 4 weeks and needed to be challenged". In this way the supervision role also extended experienced teachers as the student teacher - supervising teacher roles had to be reconsidered.

- **a continuing relationship with and reference to the school.** In the second half of the year the school experience is used in the campus program. Frequent follow-up in the school is common as the student teachers are seen to have earned their right to be part of the school life. Continued involvement with excursions, sport, drama productions as well as return to classes, allow student teachers to feel part of the school and contemporary education issues are experienced as well as being topics in lectures and seminars.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In its seven years of existence, student and school evaluations of the extended experience have been very positive. Three schools have remained in the program since it began and acknowledge its value to the school in many ways. One could expect this result when student teachers volunteer for this alternative and schools and teachers elect to work in this way. The alternative has remained available for only one group of students (about 16) because of reservations among tertiary staff responsible for the campus input. It is an alternative that can be tolerated, but extending the school-based experience would meet with opposition from those who see the importance of their continuing input in the campus setting. School level interest in the program is high and many schools seek to become involved in this extended way.

The school-based alternative has shown that schools are willing to accept a partnership role in teacher preparation. The school community

(school councils, school committees, all staff) have accepted responsibility for providing an experience which reflects the wider demands of teaching beyond the classroom experience. Teachers have welcomed the more collegial relationship that can be established with student teachers and teaching has been presented as a collegial profession (see Assumption 2 in Table 1) rather than the isolating occupation that it becomes for many teachers.

Finally the school-based initiative has forced us to study the practicum much more closely. For the first time, the teacher educators live in the school setting with the student teachers and observe their development, and the way the school setting shapes their views about teaching. We better understand the way student teachers learn about teaching, their pupils and their classroom contexts. If nothing else had happened, this opportunity for the teacher educator to be a researcher of the practicum experience has made the initiative worthwhile.

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