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Matthew Etherington

*The University of Notre Dame, Sydney*

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## Swapping the Boardroom for the Classroom

Matthew Etherington  
The University of Notre Dame, Sydney  
metherington@nd.edu.au

*Abstract: This study inquires into the practicum experiences of 10 second career pre-service teachers who were enrolled in two accelerated graduate teacher education programs at a well established university in Ontario Canada. The objective was to understand the actuality of the teaching experience for teacher candidates with previous careers. The data collection drew on a semi-structured interview format and spanned nearly a six month period. The results suggest that second careerists draw heavily on their experiences from first careers and these experiences continue to shape their interpretations, attitudes and beliefs about teaching during and after the practicum. The conclusions recommend that the traditional performance based model of the practicum be replaced with a more self-directed constructivist practicum model.*

### Statement of the Problem

In Ontario, Canada, there are an increasing number of men and women who have switched first careers to become K-6 school teachers. At the same time many have also returned to first careers following a relatively short period of teaching time in the classroom. While these individuals were initially well motivated to teach, and are career experienced with rich work place histories, their actual experience teaching in the classroom appears to be incongruent to their perceptions of teaching. As such, second career teachers show an inherent resistance to certain types of school bureaucracy—mostly in the form of top down decision making. Moreover, career experienced teachers reveal perceptions of pedagogy that are contrary to the actuality and the practicality of teaching young children in K-6 schools. They seem determined to include as an adjunct to their pedagogy both their workplace successes and also career frustrations. Subsequently career experienced teachers with rich work histories may well be the most challenging and least understood profile of K-6 teacher for education faculty, practicum supervisors and school staff.

This study draws on these challenges and does so by offering a phenomenological inquiry to help uncover the personal and private reflections, perceptions, expectations and experiences of ten second career teachers before they graduate. The aim is to gain a clearer understanding of how second career teachers perceive the initial classroom teaching experience. The career changers were interviewed immediately after their school

experience. Their reflections may assist teacher educators to prepare teacher training programs for mature age individuals who become K-6 teachers after well established first careers.

### **The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual frame of reference employed in this study is drawn from the ideal of self-directed learning. This was made popular by Della-Dora and Blanchard (1979) as a relevant research style of inquiry that investigates past experiences, perceptions and in particular, a view of understanding as it relates to a mature age individual's expectations of further formal schooling and formal education.

Self-directed learning of this nature recognises that much of our knowledge is gained through self-education and it occurs both inside and outside of formal institutions. It is understood that the knowledge and skills of second career teachers can be shared and practiced in schools, which ultimately means that prior experiences gained in diverse workplaces are significant and influential for becoming a teacher.

Self-directed learning occurs when people are not compelled to learn and others are not compelled to teach them—especially not to teach them a particular subject-matter curriculum. While teacher educators can prepare second career teachers for a career teaching in schools, self-directed learning recognises that true education can only occur when a person chooses to learn what he can also decide not to learn. This view reinforces the idea that previous career and life experiences of second career teachers are powerful determinants for any new learning to take place.

### **A Review of the Literature**

The practicum has long been a feature of teacher education in Ontario Canada. In some respects, its longevity is significant, given its resource demands outside traditional university teaching, both of schools and university. Although models of the school experience may vary between teacher education programs, most include school placements supervised by an experienced classroom teacher and university staff (Lawrance and Palmer, 2003). Consequently, the opportunities that teacher candidates have to teach in schools during their initial teacher education program continue to be through the traditional practicum model.

The practicum is usually recognised as central to teacher education because in the classroom, pedagogical skills are developed and theories of teaching and learning are contested. For most, the practicum is a limited period of time, when teacher candidates are meant to apply what they have learned in their studies with the assistance of an experienced supervising teacher. However, for non-traditional teacher candidates who have values and beliefs that have been developed and reinforced over time, have raised families of their own, and have extensive workplace experience or teaching and learning

experiences with their own children, a very different picture of learning to teach begins to emerge.

### **More People are Switching Careers to Become Teachers**

Research indicates that an increasing number of men and women in North America are leaving their established first careers to begin teaching careers (Chambers, 2002; Christensen, 2003; Pellettieri, 2003; Mayotte, 2001; Powers, 2002). Many K-6 teachers today are at least forty years of age with first career experience (Hayes, 2004). Second careerists who opt for teaching are often well educated, own university degrees, and have extended experience working within diverse workplaces. As Roy (2002, p. 1) notes, the “teaching profession is witnessing a new archetypal role model for children—the second career teacher”. These older, mature individuals bring to the classroom different experiences, perceptions and expectations compared to younger, traditional first career teachers.

At the same time the increasing complexities of choosing a second career and the blurring of two careers have sometimes led many second career teachers to reassess their move to teaching, and some have decided to leave the teaching profession within three years of active service (Kosnik, 2003). While this period of teaching time has been described as “the danger zone” (see Huberman (1993), it would appear that teachers with a second degree and a first career are actually at a higher risk of early career burnout (Goddard, 2003).

Early in the 1990s Mrozik (1993) notes that career changing was a ‘phenomenon’ which has brought specific challenges to traditional models of teacher training programs that were originally designed for the younger or first career teacher. In the 1970s Lortie (1975) reminded teacher educators to fill the research gap on the experiences of teachers. In 2008 although the literature concerning the subjective world of teachers is growing, the literature concerning the subjective world of second career teachers and the way they understand themselves as mature age teachers, their occupational lives and in particular their perceptions of schools as professional communities is minimal. Moreover, many of the studies which have investigated the experiences of second career teachers have been focused on people already teaching (Berg; Charner-Lard; Fiarman; Jones; Quazilbash & Johnson, 2005).

The practicum perceptions of preservice teachers in Ontario Canada were recently addressed by Cherubini (2008). The key findings establish that preservice teachers are misunderstood by their associate supervising teacher and even the other academic staff in terms of their expectations of teaching and their perceptions of the practicum experience. Research by Bandura (1997) and Menon and Christou (2002) also confirm that beginning teachers’ experiences are affected by the perceptions garnered throughout their practicum placement and these perceptions translate into expectation as their careers evolve (Cherubini, 2008). In addition, the experiences of teacher candidates during their practicum have a negative effect upon their belief that schools are supposedly professional communities. In particular, Cherubini (2008) found that preservice teachers

aged in the 40 years or over category experience a “protocol that makes it difficult to follow personal beliefs or values, especially if these beliefs are different from those of the school” (p. 8).

Whilst the practicum is widely accepted as a valuable and successful component of professional education, it has a number of shortcomings for second career teachers (Ryan, Toohey & Hughes, 1996). It would appear that the professional development among second career teachers is a solitary and not a collegial experience (Allan, 2003). Autonomy and collegiality have a positive influence on teachers’ professional development; however, as Allan found, the professional development of second career teachers is neither collegial nor autonomous. Research by Ben-Peretz and Rumney (1991) argues that second career teachers are unable to make worthwhile connections between the practicum experience and their learning in teacher education. This is most evident with a practicum that is too narrow to accommodate for those who have first careers and extensive life experiences. As a result, second career teachers are not sufficiently involved in the practicum experience.

Second career teachers are uncertain about their responsibilities in the classroom, though the uncertainty of teaching is much discussed in the literature (Powers, 2002). Surprisingly little has been published about the stance second career teachers exhibit towards uncertainty. This is important because aspects of uncertainty can undermine a teacher’s authority, creating situations in which they must weigh the uncertainty of pedagogical expectations as a mature age teacher against the successes and responsibility they had accrued within a first career.

Building on the practicum experience is the second career teacher’s first encounter in the classroom with the associate teacher. Most of the literature associated with pre-service teacher education presents the associate teacher as highly influential (Hastings, 1996, Koerner, 1992). However, there is a scarcity of research to indicate if this influence is positive and which factors determine the quality of supervision. Furthermore, it is noted that the practicum supervisor and their skill in guiding teacher candidates to be effective educators is “a history of supervision which has not been a glorious one, where the main shortcomings have sprung from a traditional, one-shot, top-down supervision” (Kilbourne; Keating; Murry and Ross, 2005, p.299).

According to Guyton and McIntyre (1990) top-down supervision breeds unsuitable practicum supervisors who enjoy hegemony of power over their teacher candidates. This is problematic for second careerists who have themselves been in leadership roles in first careers and already see themselves as leaders, proven by experience. Dart and Drake (1993) suggest that practicum supervisors are simply poorly prepared to work with second career teachers. Therefore, the hierarchical supervision of second careerists during their school practicum is fraught with potential difficulties.

These are some of the factors that mitigate against second career teachers’ smooth transition into the teaching profession. Second-career teachers may be disadvantaged by traditional teacher education programs, the pressures under which they accept teaching positions, and their sometimes distant perspective of supervising teachers.

## Methods

The methods used to collect the data are interpretive in nature. This is in stroke with the phenomenological work of van Manen (1997) who suggests that the focus should be on the meanings second career teachers ascribe to their experience of their practicum—what is the practicum experience? Therefore, interviews was used for data collection rather than questionnaires. This meant that individual responses could be linked with a particular individual, as the questions demanded a free response and allowed the participants to express their views and experiences. The participants were interviewed during the academic semester immediately following their school placement and while enrolled in the Bachelor of Education and Master of Education degree.

## Site

The *Institute for Education Studies* in Ontario, Canada is one of the largest and most research-intensive faculties of education in North America. The faculty administers entry to teaching for graduate career changers. The Bachelor of Education degree is earned as a second degree and is a 1 year program of study. The Master of Education is a research intensive program, also a 1-year degree. All the participants have chosen a specialist area in which to focus being the p/j program (primary junior) which leads to certification to teach grades 1-6. The number of applicants to submit an application to the primary / junior program (Kindergarten to Grade 8) in September 2003 to the all universities in Ontario was 1,587 out of a total 4,748. Out of a possible 15 program choices, it is apparent that the primary/junior program is the most popular option for candidates, with Intermediate/Senior an established second preference. The practice teaching schedule for intending Primary/Junior teachers includes two sessions of 20 days and 22 days respectively, with a finalising internship of 23 days teaching. This gives a total of 65 days of classroom teaching.

## Participants

The participants were second career teachers all with previous university degrees. They were enrolled in a one-year postgraduate Bachelor and Master of Education teacher-preparation program. All had previous first careers that were mostly unrelated to working with young children (see Table 1.1 and Table 1.2). The ten participants, all training to teach in K-6 schools, volunteered to take part in this study. There were eight female and two male participants and their ages ranged from 36 to 53 years respectively. Table 1.1 shows the careerists' profiles enrolled in the Bachelor of Education degree and Table 1.2 shows the careerists' profiles in the Master of Education degree.

Name	Age	Previous Career
Karl	45	Sales manager
David	53	Small business owner
Linda	42	Small business owner
Antonella	37	Interior designer
Elizabeth	41	Branch manager of IBM
Carolyn	43	Chartered accountant
Gina	36	Archaeologist

**Table 1: Careerists' enrolled in Bachelor of Education degree**

Name	Age	Previous career
Kerri	42	English educator
Louise	49	TV presenter
Fiona	36	Waitress

**Table 2: Careerists' enrolled in Master of Education degree**

### **Data collection**

The data collection took place during the participant's initial year of their education degree and collected by means of an open ended semi-structured questionnaire. Ten interviews were conducted and 135 pages of transcribed material were produced. Five key themes were drawn from ten separate and individual interviews, with the same number of participants. The interviews were recorded on a 90-minute audiocassette, and transcribed verbatim. Each interview was approximately one hour, ranging from 60 to 85 minutes, with a mean of 70 minutes.

## Data analysis

The analysis of the data gained from the interviews is focussed around one main question: How do second career teachers experience and interpret the practicum? A qualitative methodology using individual interviews gave priority to the participant's subjective meanings and direct quotations were taken to enrich the data and discussion.

The most unique aspect of qualitative methodology is in the provision of personal perspectives, limiting the need to generalise findings. By having each participant identify their own perceptions and subjectivities, the perspectival nature of human experience was available (see Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997).

The participant's transcripts were read several times and statements or phrases that seemed particularly essential, recurring or revealing about the practicum experience being described emerged as particular topics. To explore the participants' experiences and interpret the experiences of their practicum three types of open ended questions, as recommended by Merriam (1988) were used:

- (1) The devil's advocate question offers the participant an argument: Some people would say that career changers should imitate their supervisors...?
- (2) The ideal position question involves asking: What is your ideal environment for the practicum...what should happen...?
- (3) The interpretive question asks for an interpretation: Would you say that the practicum should be a time of observation and job shadowing...?

These question types helped capture the phenomenon of the practicum experience understood through the "eyes" of the second careerist.

## The Experience of the Practicum

This section elucidates the ten participant's experience of the practicum.

### David's Experience [53 years old: Small Business Owner and Newspaper Editor]

The data provide evidence that the practicum is limited as an experience open to personal recognition and past experience.

As the chief editor for a local 'right-wing' newspaper David hoped to capitalize on his teaching through his past experiences as an editor. He looks forward to engaging with his students in a critical encounter of historical analysis and indulging them with 'historical facts'— information that he suggests are objective and reliable. Consequently, he hopes the practicum would draw on his skills of critical thinking, historical critique



and historical accuracy. However, post-practicum David experiences an erosion of self-confidence:

I was teaching them [children] about the First World War. I thought it would be important to compare the causes of the First World War. I brought up the war in Iraq to the students but I got nothing but the blankest stares in the world. I then realised that things that interest me are actually no interest to them. It's disappointing that no one told me it would be like this. I had this fantasy that political discussions would be generated in my classes.

David reveals his presuppositions of the teaching experience. Unprepared with a back up plan, David realises that the knowledge he potentially has to offer the students is of little or no educational significance to them. His knowledge and insights could have been a fruitful historical awakening for the students and a unique educational experience; however, no support or preparation for his arrival as a teacher with extensive historical knowledge was evident. The practicum is limited as an experience open to personal recognition and extensive knowledge.

#### **Elizabeth's Experience [41 years old: Branch Manager IBM]**

The experience of Elizabeth provides confirmation that the practicum is limited as a collegial experience of negotiation. The practicum fails to signify the professional development of Elizabeth's identity, that is, as an experienced manager, focussed on the continual development of people-management skills.

Elizabeth's initial perceptions of the practicum experience consisted of building close relationships with the other teaching staff. Such an environment is reflective of the collegial environment she had helped develop as a head branch manager working at IBM. However, post-practicum, Elizabeth now believes that the teaching profession will not offer her the teamwork and dialogue she had hoped:

I have to say that I was very frustrated with the school, especially the way the teachers did not interact with me or even discuss their ideas or challenges as teachers—there was no focussed group. The staff issue really frustrated me, it was far too individualistic. I offered some ideas but these weren't considered. However after a staff meeting one day I convinced some people to volunteer to do stuff [*sic*] together; similar to the task force I used at IBM, working together as a team and that's what should happen at the school.

Elizabeth believes that any productive and well managed workplace reflects a team approach which entails problem solving and goal setting; school teaching should be no different. As a teacher she expects to invest in the infrastructure of a truly accepting environment of colleagues sharing their ideas with each other. Elizabeth believes that by showcasing her skills of good management, the teaching staff will eventually support her quest to build a more inclusive collegial environment of group decision making.

**Karl's Experience [45 years old: Sales Manager]**

Karl's experience confirms that the practicum is perceived as a learning environment open to previous skills, knowledge and experiences outside of teaching.

Karl does not see himself as a mere teacher candidate—that is, a novice with little teaching knowledge, minimal confidence or insignificant leadership skills. Instead, Karl is confident as a person in charge, with leadership skills established over many years in sales—strengths he anticipates using during the practicum. As a confident individual with a history of successful leadership, Karl has the opportunity to share his accumulated knowledge, and in particular, with his associate teacher. By building a profile on past successes, Karl advances from mere student to someone with knowledge, talent and an important career history:

In some areas I know more than others do—it's expected. I've worked with so many professionals over the years. I've done many things and experienced a lot of success in my life. In the practicum the teacher taught the math and I taught the weather. Sure I learnt from her, from watching her teach, but some things she didn't know and I helped her to understand. She appreciated that and so it went both ways.

Karl and Elizabeth believed that the experience of the practicum would draw on their extensive knowledge and skills. Both individuals were initially confident and highly motivated to demonstrate their expertise, and to share their knowledge and interests with the students, and of course, their teaching colleagues, proving themselves worthy as a different but valuable classroom teacher.

**Kerri's Experience [42 years old: English Educator]**

Kerri's experience demonstrates that the role of the associate teacher is to provide opportunities in the classroom that would unlock and encourage the second career teacher to exercise their autonomy to a greater degree.

Kerri commenced her first and final practicum with a high degree of confidence—a confidence that would draw on ten years of history, knowledge and skills gained as an international translator in Lithuania. Yet Kerri encounters a second practicum largely restricted by the expectations and regulations of the associate teacher. Forced to emulate a teaching personality foreign to her beliefs, personal values and expectations, the practicum resembles an exercise in mimicking the associate teacher. At the same time, by following the practicum objectives, Kerrie must *job shadow* the associate teacher and by doing so the associate teacher is fulfilling her role of supervisor adequately:

The first practicum I was supposed to be like my teacher, things should have been different this time [second practicum] but no, once again I'm expected to be like my teacher. There is no room to spread my wings, to be myself, to pass on my experiences, not to mention my skills as a translator— because if we do, they will say 'no you can't be like that, you don't know.' There is no room to be myself. I

still have no way to know what type of teacher I am, or want to become— I have to be like them.

Kerri believes her potential as a teacher is determined by the expectations of the associate teacher. This experience is indicative of what Ross (2002) describes as the “unofficial apprenticeship period” (Ross, as cited in Brown & Havlat Lancaster, 2004, p.3). As the apprentice Kerri is forced to imitate a teaching self that is not her own and imitate the personality of the associate teacher. Furthermore, under this model she experiences minimal encouragement to engage or experiment with new ideas or utilize a personal teaching self. As a result, Kerri lacks confidence in the objectives of the practicum and sees herself just ‘getting through.’ As she reveals:

I’m just struggling to get through my practicum and trying to apply everything I have learnt here at university. I would first pick a different instructor; one who talks with me and lets me be myself. It’s okay though, I’m going to get through this practicum, and I’m going to be a teacher and forget it was ever there in my life.

#### **Antonella’s Experience [37 years old: Interior Designer]**

The experience of Antonella provides evidence that the level of autonomy that the associate teacher permits a second career teacher to enjoy determine their expectation and overall assessment of the school experience.

Antonella experienced a second practicum that drew upon a performance based model of assessment. Similar to Kerri, she encounters minimal opportunity to explore a personal teaching philosophy or indeed be given the option to trial her own pedagogy. Antonella speaks of a prescribed practicum instigated by what she sees as an autocratic associate teacher:

In my first practicum I was able to experiment with my teaching just be myself, but this last practicum, I don’t know if it was the personality of my associate teacher, but there was something that I didn’t quite feel was right. I mean to put it quite formally, she was a control freak. If I didn’t do things a certain way, her way, I obviously wasn’t doing it correctly so I felt I couldn’t deviate from that, it had to be the way she expected it, and she was assessing me on this. That’s the way she was but I survived it.

Antonella’s experience is reflective of the ongoing struggle and competition for autonomy that associate teachers and in particular career changers to teaching often encounter in the classroom as teacher candidates.

**Gina's Experience [36 years old: Archaeologist]**

The experience of Gina provides evidence that as a second career teacher Gina is empowered when she is given responsibility for various decisions associated with her pedagogy.

Gina's experience of the practicum is different to Antonella. Although both had similar initial expectations, Gina believes the practicum should be open to a personal teaching philosophy. This expectation materialises when she is given the opportunity to exercise her autonomy:

The first practicum was great. The teacher didn't expect me to follow her lead at all or even adopt her disciplinary style, and it was basically do what I wanted to. She was there for support when things fell through, she would be hovering but not directing me. If there were issues she would address them, but I got to be myself and even got to play with some things I brought from home and of course the things that had been taught in the program. I used all these in the classroom with the children, it was great.

Gina experienced a practicum open to democratic ideals. The associate teacher sustained her autonomy and was available for support and guidance. As a result, Gina did not feel "assessed"—there was no "supervisor's eyes" observing and recording her every move, and so the awkwardness that sometimes transpires when one is assessed or evaluated was absent:

Things went well for me. I could really go my own direction with some ideas that I had. The teacher didn't interfere at all. She was quite supportive actually. I could be myself—I felt very comfortable being in that classroom.

In democratic classrooms, writes Edwards and Watts (2004, p. 107), "teachers provide guidance. Students are allowed to make decisions, they are allowed freedom in a cooperative learning experience, with freedom to explore, discover and choose their own way". Allowing students' breathing space to make decisions in the classroom is the best way to learn without usurping their right to autonomy. Most importantly, second career teachers under the tutelage of democratic teachers develop a sense of belonging to and have a stake in the classes.

**Fiona's Experience [36 years old: Waitress]**

The experience of Fiona provides evidence that as a student teacher in the classroom independence plays an undeniable role for the development of a meaningful and authentic classroom experience.

Fiona considers herself more like a student rather than a mature adult with life and career experience. Her concerns begin with the unfamiliarity of being 'sent to someone else's classroom.' Forced to operate in a foreign 'place' and unable to exercise her autonomy she feels less capable as an individual with a previous career history, and feels more like an inexperienced student:

I have really felt more like a student and not a teacher. I am in someone else's classroom and they have their things in place and their ideas and you are stepping around them. And if you don't do things their way you don't make the grade.

Fiona thinks of herself as an intruder in another's classroom. The boundaries have been set and she must adhere to the classroom rules and structure as determined by the associate teacher—yet her confidence increases only when her autonomy is acknowledged as an important decision maker in the classroom:

It's important for the children to see me as a teacher and not as a student teacher. It was hard for the students to know that I have had another career, although it would have been so easy to show them. As a student I was worried if they would even listen to me. There was little support from the classroom teacher. There was hardly any time to decide on the activities for the children although when I did I felt more like a teacher. I just know that if they don't see me as another teacher, they [school students] will eat me alive.

Being recognised as a student teacher as opposed to an individual with rich career and life experiences outside of education is unique as it is problematic. Taylor (2001) notes that the identity transition from university student to student teacher is not only an arduous one but made even more unsatisfactory when one has already been actively employed in the work force. Although expectations are high these rarely correspond to the complexities of teaching young children.

#### **Louise's Experience [49 years old: Television Presenter]**

The experience of Louise provides evidence that the practicum is perceived in terms of shared power and authority vested among two equal colleagues, and the result is mutual decision making.

The practicum expectations of Louise include an opportunity to experiment freely with ideas and be independent of the supervisor's criticisms of her teaching ability. Louise is already a confident teacher; the result of maturity and life experience, which essentially places her in a mentorship role to the younger associate teacher. Louise has experiences outside of teacher education and is confident that these experiences will be complementary to a teaching career. Louise describes a practicum that includes an empathic supervisor:

The two people [supervisors] I had were both younger than I— quite a bit and they were very open to having somebody like me in their classroom who could test out their ideas. They were appreciative that I had so much life and career experience. I think both of them were really excited and grateful about this especially when I shared my experiences with them.

The confidence that Louise exhibits as a teacher candidate is contingent with recognition and appreciation for the knowledge and experiences she has gained outside of the teaching profession. When her advice, ideas, knowledge and experiences are taken

seriously by the associate teacher, she perceives herself as a ‘real’ teacher, supported, appreciated and included:

I was very lucky. I was able to experiment and they [associate teacher] did not interfere and they were very supportive and in both cases they had so much to teach me but I had something to teach them and I could sense that they understood this. It was a really nice cross-pollination. Both teachers saw me as a colleague; they were there to support me. It wasn’t like they had to keep looking back at their teacher, they gave me the reins. They understood where I had come from and accepted me for that.

Being accepted as a knowledgeable and capable person with career and life experiences outside of teaching confirms Louise as a teacher of children and an individual who has much to offer the teaching staff. Her existing knowledge and skills as a working professional guides her to acquire additional skills and knowledge needed to enter the classroom and impact student learning.

#### **Carolyn’s Experience [43 years old: Chartered Accountant]**

Carolyn’s experience provides evidence that the associate teacher has the potential to provide leadership by displaying confidence in the potential of Carolyn to manage a classroom effectively.

A successful practicum for Carolyn is also reliant on being placed alongside an understanding and empathetic associate teacher. Fortunately, for Carolyn, the practicum supervisor was herself a second career teacher:

The practicum was awesome; it was an extremely positive time. Maybe I was lucky because the teacher I was hooked up with had a business career before teaching. So we had an awful lot in common, we really hit it off. I don’t know if they knew this before they linked us up but it’s the only way someone in my position could be understood and appreciated, so we had an awful lot in common—we instantly bonded.

Carolyn relished in the camaraderie of a sympathetic associate teacher and as a result her motivation and confidence increased. This had the ripple effect of increasing her commitment to invest herself fully in the classroom, yet she was still not sufficiently secure to disclose her whole self to the classroom teacher:

We were just team teaching, having fun, we were joking with the kids. We worked so well together. We established such a good rapport. The children could see that. I felt so good being there. I had so much energy and I became so motivated to just give all of myself in my teaching. Initially you would think it was a bit awkward because I have actually run my own classrooms before, teaching French but I actually didn’t tell my teacher any of that.

Unlike the other nine second careerists, Carolyn hoped the associate teacher would perceive her in minimalist terms, that is, with little teaching knowledge or pedagogical competence:

I wanted her to see me as a student teacher and not to assume I knew things that I didn't know so it was a little uncomfortable knowing that I was being assessed on every word I said. But after establishing that rapport, it took probably half a day in that classroom and we would play off each other. Sometimes someone would come in and talk with her and I would just step up and continue the lesson, and then she would go (*sic*) "thanks Carolyn". She would come back and continue.

Carolyn enjoyed the confidence her associate teacher had placed in her. One might assume Carolyn's aim is to impress the associate teacher with 'hidden' pedagogical skills—revealing herself as a quick learner and receive the accolades, rather than disclose her pedagogical experiences and experience possible disappointment. Carolyn's aim is to underachieve, so she can overachieve later.

Although the careerist's perceive themselves as both teachers and independent individuals, their self-esteem and personal expectations of teaching are closely related.

#### **Linda's Experience [42 years old: Small Business Owner]**

Linda's experience provides evidence that her independence is fully realised and consolidated through a public recognition of her individual identity.

Linda is concerned about being introduced to the students as a "teacher candidate" as this presupposes her limited knowledge of classroom teaching. As a mature age second career teacher she expects to be perceived differently and this means a correct introduction to the school children by means of a formal title. Linda's confidence to teach increases when the associate teacher does not disclose to the children her student status:

On practicum I was introduced as Ms Rogers and 'she is going to spend some time here.' They didn't know quite how to take me; maybe I was supervising their teacher. They automatically thought I was already a teacher and I think I was just in to help or to see how this school did it. They automatically assumed I was a teacher. I felt important. It was so great.

#### **Karl's Experience [45 years old: Sales Manager]**

Karl is empowered as a teacher when he is given responsibility for various decisions in the classroom—and without assessment. Karl's practicum concerns are aimed at the establishment of a trusting relationship forming with the associate teacher. This consists of an opportunity to share his knowledge freely with the students, and done so without any guidelines or supervision from the classroom teacher. His frustration gains momentum when he reflects upon his successes as a scout leader:

I encouraged my practicum teacher to leave the classroom but according to the guidelines, she couldn't. She said I could take this class as long as I wanted but under the guidelines. Well that's okay but I've had a lot of experience with cubs and scouts. I've been in charge of you know 45 boys running around in a

gymnasium with a ball. You know, I had to structure this, and I had to keep control of that. I should be given the chance to teach alone.

Karl sees himself as a capable teacher who can successfully manage a classroom without supervision, and with no assessment needed. He is already confident with managing children. Left alone as a teacher, Karl is able to teach academic content and manage classroom behaviour without assistance. He feels trusted when left to make his own decisions in the classroom and ultimately this verifies his prospective 'teacherhood'.

## Results

The experiences raised by the ten second career preservice teachers provides important information for teachers, principals and academic faculty who are involved in the teaching or supervision of second career teachers into K-6 schools.

Mature age second career teachers may ultimately prove to be one of the most important groups of future educators and this is said in light of what Montgomery (1998) notes about a profession that "has a habit of eating its young" (p. 33). Therefore, the results of this study maintain that a deeper awareness and understanding of the perceptions of second careerists to teaching is critical so as to create the most synergistic balance through education, information and teamwork for those who have and will continue to swap the boardroom for the classroom.

Since the purpose of this study was to reveal the perceptions and experiences of 10 second career teachers after their compulsory school practicum, the following results are deemed significant for second career teachers during the school practicum.

The results suggest that the practicum would be more ideally suited to the careerists' expectations and career histories if it were grounded in a constructivist methodology, in recognition of prior knowledge and first career experience.

The results propose that the practicum could emphasise self-directed learning which recognises that much of the careerists' knowledge and expectations is gained through self-education and self-reflection and has occurred during and after a first career.

Prior to the commencement of the practicum the careerists would benefit from induction programs, requiring each one to make a metacognitive evaluation of their knowledge, skills and their expectations of teaching young children.

The results suggest that the practicum should include a mid-point formative assessment. That is, a customised assessment form designed specifically for second career teachers. An additional category of assessment includes a particular focus on the transferability of past experiences, knowledge and skills to curriculum content and pedagogy.



And finally, the findings recommend that the structure of the traditional school practicum should be modernized to remove job shadowing and replaced with a more constructivist framed school experience.

## **Discussion**

There is no doubt that second career teachers bring rich career and life experiences to the classroom. They have interpersonal skills, organisational skills and program planning established and developed from experiences in other work sectors besides schools. Such prior knowledge, skills and attitudes is pedagogically valuable within the K-6 classroom. Therefore, the results of this study support the practicum experience as an opportunity rich for second career teachers to showcase their talents and reveal their potential and uniqueness as non-traditional teachers. This opportunity reflects previous studies by Ben-Peretz and Rumney (1991), Menon & Christou (2002) and Cherubini (2008) who note the importance of providing a practical experience for second career teachers; one that is embedded in a constructivist approach which draws on and makes transparent the careerists' beliefs, presuppositions and their expectations of teaching children.

The careerists assume their associate teachers will perceive them as knowledgeable mature age individuals with significant work place histories and on most occasions have their past experiences incorporated into their pedagogy. This supports previous findings by Kilbourne (2005) who maintains that as they progress towards 'teacherhood' second career teachers draw regularly upon their skills, insights and understanding gained from a diversity of work place experiences and this would entail the recognition, understanding and support of an associate teacher or colleague.

The findings point towards job shadowing as a particularly limiting default position that the traditional practicum assumes for all its pre-service teachers. Mature age second careerists experience job shadowing as the practice of someone else's pedagogy. This is particularly limiting to those who have themselves been in leadership roles in the workplace. This supports research by Guyton and McIntyre (1990) who note that top-down supervision requiring second career teachers to replicate another's pedagogy creates an environment of minimal self direction, and communicates a powerful message to second career teachers—knowledge and skills gained from a first career are insignificant as a K-6 teacher. Moreover, while integration of teaching style is implied during the practicum, there is little autonomy to exercise and live out their visions and beliefs, minimal sense of belonging, and reduced curriculum alignment between the school and occupational area.

The findings highlight the particular challenges associated with integrating mature age second career teachers into K-6 schools. The results points out the need for further research to focus on gaining a deeper and personal understanding of how second career teachers perceive their first school experience. It is hoped that this study may be the catalyst for future research and also prove to be fruitful in the present for teacher educators and school leaders to effectively prepare for the differing needs and expectations of these career rich, mature age school teachers.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to uncover the perceptions, expectations and experiences of the practicum described through the 'eyes' of 10 second career teachers. In determining the usefulness of the results a brief summary is derived from the key findings and deemed as potentially useful in helping in-service teachers and teacher education programs to more effectively meet the diverse needs of mature age second career education students.

The degree of autonomous decision making that associate teachers grant second career teachers in the classroom determine their expectation and overall assessment of the school experience. The second careerists stress the importance of personal autonomy and a psychological sense of community. This can be examined in terms of the relative importance placed by the individual on the values of personal autonomy and a psychological sense of community in the classroom and amongst ones peers. This linking of personal values and autonomy to a teaching career is similar to the model presented by Rokeach (1973), who assessed the relative but high ranking of the values of freedom and equality in an individual's value system, with reference to a sense of community and the work environment. Such a state of affairs seems to be obvious and essential among the participants in this study.

The second career teachers in this study are empowered as they acquire increasingly more responsibility for various decisions in the classroom. The practicum is perceived by them in terms of shared power and authority vested among two equal colleagues resulting in mutual decision making. The associate teacher has the potential to provide leadership by simply displaying confidence in the second career teacher's ability to manage a classroom effectively.

## Conclusions

Many of the perceptions and experiences reported here by mature age pre-service teachers will resonate with principals, education faculty, supervisors and especially second career teachers. Although this study was small scale and therefore lacks a universal scope, at the same time the results are significant for the key players involved in the general preparation of second career teachers. The findings provide a personal understanding of the practicum experiences of ten second career teachers, and in that sense, their experiences could be reflective of the experience of others.

The importance of maximising the prime asset of any organisation is its people and so the key findings of this study posit a particular focus on the heightened awareness and recognition of the impact that previous workplace encounters can have on the practicum experience and teaching perceptions of ten second careerists.

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