Planting the Seed of Teacher Identity: Nurturing Early Growth through a Collaborative Learning Community

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Introduction

Growing interest in the notion of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes being a collaborative partnership between ITE providers and local schools (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) guided the reframing of The University of Waikato's Bachelor of Teaching (BTchg, Primary) ITE programme in 2012. Situated in Hamilton, New Zealand, The University of Waikato has had a longstanding relationship with local Normal schools, who have traditionally been models of exemplary teaching practice. This reframed Collaborative University School Partnership (CUSP) repositioned the education of pre-service primary school teachers as a collaborative partnership between the University of Waikato's Faculty of Education and these local Normal schools. This reframed model was implemented through a co-constructed and co-delivered Professional Practice and Inquiry 1 (Prof Prac 1) course, which was taught by both university lecturers, and an appointed in-school (honorary) associate lecturer at each of the local Normal school sites. It was expected that this collaborative development work would result in shared responsibility for the preparation of teachers, and build a more robust relationship between faculty staff and schools.

This paper reports on part of a larger research project, which studied the redevelopment of The University of Waikato's Bachelor of Teaching (BTchg) programme as it reconceptualised the delivery of the programme as a collaborative university-school partnership. This paper details the part of this study, which examined the impact of this redeveloped programme on pre-service teachers in their first year of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The purpose of this study was to consider, from the perspective of the pre-service teacher, how this integrated university-school partnership influenced their development as teachers in their first semester of their first year. The participants own perceptions of their development as teachers were, therefore, examined and triangulated with data gathered from Associate Teachers (ATs), school-based Associate Lecturers (AL) and university lecturers. The findings of this research indicate that this collaborative classroom-university experience facilitated the early development of teacher identity and, therefore, prepared pre-service teachers with a more realistic and authentic understanding of what it means to be a teacher. This paper uses Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning to theorise the early development of teacher identity within the context of collaborative learning communities and advocates that a collaborative model of ITE holds promise for preparing early career teachers with a strong sense of teacher identity and the realities of classroom teaching. The findings of this paper will be of particular interest to ITE providers, teacher educators and academics, particularly those who are looking to reframe their own ITE programmes within a collaborative and integrated school-ITE partnership.

The Development of Teacher Identity

Understanding the importance of teacher identity provides a key to understanding why the development of teacher identity should hold a central place in ITE. Teacher identity can be described as a self-attributed notion that is constructed through teaching experiences that affirm what it means to be a teacher (Korthagen, 2004; Lasky, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Research indicates that professional teacher identity impacts on motivation, self-efficacy, commitment, job satisfaction, effectiveness and teacher retention (Chong, Low & Goh, 2011; Day & Kington, 2008; Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). Despite the obvious benefits of developing a strong sense of teacher identity, the development of teacher identity is a complex, difficult and contextually based process that can occur over time, within multiple contexts (Chong, Ling & Chuan, 2011; Korthagen, 2004). Construction of teacher identity occurs through developing understandings of the professional practices of teaching, alongside the necessary values, skills, and knowledge implemented within the teaching profession (Chong, Ling, & Chuan, 2011; Chong, Low & Goh, 2011; Olsen, 2008). Active participation and reflection on the roles and responsibilities of teaching alongside an understanding of the implicit 'codes of practice' (Wenger, 1998) embedded in teaching supports the understanding of what it means to be a teacher. This, in turn, seems to enable the strengthening of a professional identity as a teacher (Korthagen, 2004). Olsen (2008) and Wenger (1998) maintain that it is through interactions with others in the school context that teacher identity is formed, influenced and reshaped through continuous interactions within a community of practice.

Chong, Low and Goh (2011) note that pre-service teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers throughout their ITE is critical in preparing them for their initiation into the teaching profession. In a study that explored pre-service teachers' emerging professional identities at the exit point of their four-year ITE programme, Chong et al. (2011) found a mismatch between pre-service teachers' perceptions of, and the realities of, what it means to be a teacher. This lack of alignment can lead to an unrealistic and underdeveloped understanding of the professional roles and responsibilities of teaching which ultimately impact on teacher identity in the early years of teaching (Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2012). The more 'traditional' ITE programmes that provide only practicum-based teaching experiences do little to prepare pre-service teachers for this 'praxis shock' upon entry into the teaching profession (Friedman, 2004). It is clear from the literature that there is disjuncture between the theory and practice of teacher education and the development of teacher identity in the practicum experience, which, fails to adequately prepare pre-service teachers for the realities of teaching and fails to provide a realistic understanding of what it means to be a teacher (Korthagen, 2010;Mutton, Burn & Hagger, 2010; Sim, 2011).

Situating Learning within Communities of Practice

Recent OECD reports draw attention to the need for ITE to be more flexible and responsive to the realities of teaching by providing an authentic and integrated teacher education programme based on collaborative partnerships with local schools (Musset, 2010; OECD, 2011). Identified as a 'missed opportunity', Musset (2010) challenges ITE providers and schools to take shared responsibility for teacher education in order to ensure a smoother transition into the teaching profession. While

teacher educators, teachers and pre-service teachers are often viewed as belonging to different learning communities, the development of shared meaning making through co-generative dialoguing (Tobin & Roth, 2005) can provide an opportunity to integrate theory and practice and allow differences in agendas and perspectives to be shared and acknowledged (Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman & Stevens, 2009). Le Cornu (2009) described a re-conceptualised practicum programme where a faculty lecturer took responsibility for the 25 pre-service teachers in a workshop group (learning circle) – on-campus, on-line, and in-school components of the course. Pre-service teachers in the learning circles entered a dual commitment to share and listen to peers and ask enabling questions to assist their peers to explore on a deeper level their own understandings of what they were learning. Such learning circles can be viewed as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). With the focus on collaborative relationships there is also the potential for pre-service teachers to be involved in more team teaching and shared risk-taking rather than individual teaching and individual risk-taking (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

With a shift towards pedagogies that make use of social interaction, tertiary educators are beginning to place more emphasis on how to support knowledge construction amongst pre-service teachers (Westberry & Franken, 2013; Korthagen, 2010). This new perspective is consistent with educational theories that view learning as a fundamentally social process (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989; Salomon and Perkins, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978), and that describe learning as a "collective participatory process of active knowledge construction emphasizing context, interaction, and situatedness" (Salomon and Perkins, 1998, p. 2). Evaluations of a re-conceptualised, professional experience for pre-service teachers, around the notion of learning communities, where pre-service teachers were paired on practicum showed evidence of the important role that peers can play in providing personal and professional support to each other (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Le Cornu, 2009). Placing pre-service teacher pairs in classrooms has been found to hold promise for providing richer and more educative early field experience for elementary pre-service teachers than the traditional practice of single placement allows (Bullough, Young, Erikson, Birrell, Clark, Egan, Berrie, Hales & Smith, 2002). At the start of their study into paired practicums, there was concern about the increased workload for a single teacher with two pre-service teachers in the classroom, however, it was found that mentors in partnership placements were more flexible in planning with pre-service teachers and appeared to be more trusting than when they had a single pre-service teacher. Pre-service teachers in partner placements felt better supported and were able to engage in more teaching roles within the classroom.

The practicum experience is frequently regarded as the most significant part of teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009; Hoban, 2005). Goh, Wong, Choy, and Tan (2009), and Grundnoff (2011) suggest that one end-of-year placement cannot, however, facilitate pre-service teachers' understandings of how to set up their classroom environments, introduce curriculum programmes, establish routines and develop behaviour-management strategies. If practicum experiences do not expose pre-service teachers to the full range of work demands and responsibilities in which their associate teachers are engaged, their expectations of the range and amount of work entailed in teaching can be unrealistic (Chong, Low & Goh, 2011; Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2012). In order to provide more realistic teaching experiences within ITE, Musset (2010) recommends that continuous school-based education should be embedded within, and implemented from, the outset of the ITE programme. Walkington (2007) goes further

to suggest that by varying periods of placement in both the school and classroom setting, pre-service teachers are engaged in a developmental process of observing and experimenting with teaching practice as well as learning about the skills, knowledge, philosophies and attitudes of the professional teacher. Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that ITE programmes must be powerful enough to break a pre-service teacher's conditioning by enabling them to understand that teaching is different from their own experiences as a student. Internships are best done in tandem with university courses throughout the entire year rather than at the end of the programme and must teach pre-service teachers to both think like a teacher and act like one.

A Social Theory of Learning

With this growing emphasis on ITE being situated within an authentic and collaborative community of practice, Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning provides a valuable framework for understanding the developmental process of learning to become a teacher within such communities of practice. Based around the central premise of learning resulting from social participation, Wenger maintains that through the active participation in the habits, routines and procedures of social communities, identities are actively constructed through shared meaning making. From this perspective, learning is not solely an isolated and individual endeavour, as communities work alongside individuals to actively make meaning from both their individual and collective experiences. Wenger identifies four key components that integrate social interaction with the process of learning: *practice, meaning, community* and *identity.* For pre-service teachers in the initial stages of their ITE, this social theory of learning provides a framework for understanding how pre-service teachers attach meaning to the practice of teaching and the development of their own teacher identity within an authentic community of practice.

Background to the study

This redeveloped model of the University of Waikato's ITE programme saw the restructuring of the placement/practicum experience for first-year BTchg, pre-service, primary teachers. Pre-service teachers were placed in pairs in a classroom with an associate teacher (AT) and experienced one full day in this classroom every week for two school terms (one semester of 13 weeks). In Semester B, pre-service teachers were re-paired and placed in a different classroom at a different class level within the same school for half a day a week. This was followed by a three-week practicum in this classroom during the fourth and final school term. It was also expected that this reframed model would provide pre-service teachers with an authentic and continuous teaching experience that would be supported by a community of learners within a unique school context from the early stages of their ITE.

In Semester A of their first year, University of Waikato lectures for the Prof Prac 1 course were redeveloped into in-school tutorials run collaboratively by the university's Prof Prac lecturer and the school's associate lecturer. While the content of the Prof Prac 1 course remained the same, repositioning the teaching of this course to collaborative in-school tutorials meant that the content of the course was delivered in a contextually relevant setting and allowed practitioners within each school context to contribute towards the teaching of this course. These school-based tutorials also

engaged pre-service teachers' in discussion around central themes in the Prof Prac course and provided an environment that was conducive to on-going reflection, collaborative problem-solving and questioning.

The redevelopment of such a course presented some initial challenges as the delivery of the course was shifted from the university to the school context. Because of the uniqueness of each school community, the differing school programmes and structures, and the varying areas of expertise within the school staff, this meant that it was not longer possible to provide a standardised Prof Prac 1 experience. Each school context demanded a unique approach to the delivery of the Prof Prac 1 course that was reflective of that learning community. This initially required lecturers and associate lecturers in each school to adapt and adjust the delivery of course content to reflect their school community. Increased workload for lecturers and associate lecturers as well as ensuring benchmarks of consistency in the Prof Prac 1 course content were some of the initial challenges that resulted from this redeveloped programme.

This reframed ITE programme provided an opportunity to research the developmental process through collaboration with researchers from the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER) who, although members of the Faculty of Education, were not directly involved in the teacher education programme. The intention was that Faculty of Education staff, teachers, principals, and the researchers would collaborate to collect data to follow the implementation of this CUSP programme in schools.

Methodology

Study Design

The research was collaborative and developmental in nature (Patton, 2008), in that it both followed and informed the project into the pilot year. In 2012, the Normal schools, Faculty of Education staff and the researchers collaborated in the developmental research process with researchers taking the main responsibility for summarising data to feedback into discussions by and with Faculty of Education and Normal school staff. In this way both groups could "add their own experience to exploring the question as well as seeking to listen to and understand the experiences of others" (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000, p. 12). As such, this required an analysis of the perspectives of the partners (Faculty of Education lecturers, associate teachers, and pre-service teachers) with data collected from each group in two of the participating Normal schools.

These data have been complied into two case studies within a multi-case approach (Burns, 1994; Stake, 2006) in which each case is defined by one school. This approach allowed for refinement and further development of findings based on multiple instances of the same phenomenon under different conditions (Willig, 2001). The two independent school case studies were intended to stand alone as an account of each particular school's experiences of the implementation process within the school. This approach made provision for a rich and thick description of the experiences of the school, lecturers, associate lecturers, associate teachers and pre-service teachers as they implemented and engaged in this re-framed ITE programme.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research in each school involved three interviews with the Prof Prac lecturer assigned to each school, three semi-structured interviews with school principals and associate lecturers, two surveys for associate teachers, and one survey and a focus group for pre-service teachers. Triangulation of data types and sources was intended to enhance the credibility and quality assurance of findings. Likert-scale-type items in surveys enabled the quantification of ratings of various items related to the pre-service teacher placements, from both the associate teacher and pre-service teacher points of view. This study, therefore, employed a mixed method approach by drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a rich description of the experiences of pre-services teachers, associate teachers, associate lecturers, principals and lecturers in each of the case study schools.

The BTchg (primary) pre-service teachers were invited to complete an online survey immediately following the completion of their first 13-week placement. All 159 pre-service teachers enrolled in the BTchg (primary) programme were invited to participate in this survey during a lecture towards the conclusion of their first semester. This invitation included the 63 pre-service teachers who were based in the two case study schools. This online survey was intended to investigate the perspectives of pre-service teachers in the first 13 weeks as they learned what it means to be a teacher through this reframed ITE programme. This survey consisted of 16 questions that included a mixture of qualitative short-answer responses, and quantitative Likert-scale items. These questions investigated the extent to which the collaborative nature of this reframed CUSP programme supported pre-service teachers in developing an understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

Quantitative data from this survey was analysed using SPSS. This provided statistical information on both the demographic composition of the pre-service teachers, alongside their perceptions of their own developing professional teacher identity. This statistical data allowed the researchers to identity emerging patterns, which later supported the coding of the qualitative survey data. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes in this qualitative data, which followed a process of revisiting and interrogating the data until emerging patterns were identified, interpreted and understood (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). This qualitative survey data was coded into the thematic categories, with the researchers paying particular attention to any possible instances of data that may disconfirm the previously identified themes. These themes were contrasted and compared with the statistical information gained from the quantitative data. Consistent findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data supported the reliability of the research data. Through analysis of both these quantitative and qualitative survey data, an understanding of the development of teacher identity within a reframed community of practice emerged.

Results

This section reports on the findings from this online survey, which was answered by 80 pre-service teachers (50% of all pre-service teachers) at the end of their 13-week placement. This included responses from 30 pre-service teachers who were in the two case study schools (50% of case study pre-service teachers). While this response rate appears small, compared to a similar study of pre-service teachers (Pendergast, Garvis, & Keogh, 2011), it is in fact a positive response. Findings from

this on-line survey were triangulated with data from the associate teacher on-line survey, and the semi-structured interviews with associate lecturers and lecturers from the two case study schools. By corroborating the perspectives of pre-service teachers with additional data sources, this enhanced the validity of these findings. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes used to report the findings are from pre-service teachers who participated in this online survey. Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning will be used as a framework to discuss the findings from this survey. The key components of this social theory of learning - *practice, making meaning, engagement in community* and *development of identity* - will be used to consider how pre-service teachers in this study learned what it means to be a teacher in the early stage of their ITE.

Engaging in Practice: Learning as Doing

One of the most frequent comments from pre-service teachers was that they appreciated the hands-on practice and experience of teaching (58%). Being actively involved in the practice of teaching early on in ITE was identified as a central way that pre-service teachers came to understand what it means to be a teacher. The aspects of the full-day placement that were most frequently cited as enhancing their understanding of the role of teachers was having a hands-on experience of teaching.

> *I love interacting with the children, and I believe that for this course, we do need to have the opportunity to be actively involved in the children's learning*

These pre-service teachers particularly appreciated being given some responsibility in the classroom, with active involvement in the practice of teaching leading to an early realisation of the requirements of teaching and the workload associated with these requirements. There was some surprise at the amount of work that teachers had to do, with ten comments regarding the variety of tasks and time required to ensure the daily programme was successful. Active participation in the practice of teaching seemed to lead to an early understanding of the complexities of teaching.

> *I have been actively involved as a teacher and have been allocated groups to work with and help. I have realised that there is a lot more work put into the teaching in order for the children to reach their highest learning potential.*

Nearly half of the pre-service teachers (49%) noted the importance of forming strong relationships with their students and knowing students as individuals alongside acquiring the necessary pedagogical skills to teach. Associate teachers also noted that this strengthened relationship between pre-service teachers and children led to more effective teaching practices:

> *I was impressed with their ability to work with the whole class and later half the class each. I think having had the time to build relationships with the children, knowing their names and their personalities definitely made their lessons much more successful as they had built rapport and had establish teacher presence. (School B AT10)*

Confidence was an important factor in determining to what extent pre-service teachers initially involved themselves in the practice of teaching. A third of pre-service teachers (33%) experienced an initial lack of confidence or hesitancy in taking the initiative, as they were troubled as to how to develop an appropriate relationship with the children, found it strange to be treated like a teacher, or they did not know what to expect or what was expected of them. While lack of confidence constrained involvement, the support of a peer working in the same teaching environment appeared to enhance involvement and enable engagement in the practice of teaching. Almost all pre-service teachers (91%) found it easy to engage in learning conversations with their classroom partners. Having the support of a peer who was also engaging in similar 'learning through doing' experiences provided the confidence for pre-service teachers to actively involve themselves in the complexities of teaching.

Developing Meaning: Learning as Experience

Making meaning from the observed and participatory teaching experiences was enhanced through ongoing involvement in a classroom and further supported by in-school tutorials facilitated by the in-school associate lecturer and faculty lecturer. Pre-service teachers appreciated that the full day placement where tutorials were taught on the school site was the best way to understand what happened in the classroom. Pre-service teachers found this a timely and efficient way to learn within a community of learners experiencing the same school culture. This ongoing engagement challenged them to reflect on their own emerging teaching philosophy.

> *I am getting direct insights each week to the commitment required, the work, planning, management. I am observing an excellent teacher who is always talking to us about why she does things. The readings each week help me to notice things when I'm in the classroom.*

Observing an experienced teacher on a long-term basis exposed pre-service teachers to quality teaching and different teaching strategies. Ninety-three per-cent of pre-service teachers surveyed indicated that they were aware of the value of placement in providing a chance to see and experience theory being put into practice.

> *I can see the day-to-day workings of a classroom. I am able to see strategies I have been taught used with students and the outcomes, which helped me better understand the theory of these strategies. I have been able to see and learn ideas I have yet to be taught at university and will hopefully find it easier to learn them with this prior knowledge.*

The principal of one of the case-study schools also commented on the noticeable difference in the commitment of the pre-service teachers, which she attributed to the connections they now made between theory and practice:

> *If they hadn't been in those classroom spaces all year, they wouldn't have contributed in that way. They used to come in to do a task and leave. They were not interested in the school. The praxis at classroom level links theory and practice - that's what I see now* (Principal – Case School B – post practicum)

Four pre-service teachers saw that covering the Prof Prac course work in the school context as being a useful strategy provided by the university lecturer. Pre-service teachers talked about how they could apply what they had learned in tutorials to their work in the classroom on their placement day.

> *After the tutorial we can go to the classroom and often see what we have learnt in action. Sometimes this doesn't go well in the classroom so we can reflect and ask why and get feedback from our associate teacher.*

One of the constraints with in-school tutorials was that withdrawing pre-service teachers for these tutorials could disrupt and interrupt the classroom experience for the classroom teacher, the pre-service teachers, and the children. Because timetables and activities varied considerably in each classroom, the practical challenge of negotiating a suitable timeframe for these tutorials within the school day led to changeable tutorial times which invariably did not suit all pre-service teachers and associate teachers. Most pre-service teachers valued these in-school tutorials, however, 12% indicated that this aspect of their placement disrupted the continuity of their classroom experience.

Making meaning from the observations, experiences and practices that pre-service teachers engaged in during their placement was, therefore, supported and enhanced by in-school Prof Prac tutorials. Professional discussions with associate teachers, university lecturers, the school associate lecturer and peers were also indicated as powerful enablers that supported these pre-service teachers in understanding and making meaning from their experiences in the classroom.

Immersed in Community: Learning as Belonging

Being immersed in a school community from the beginning of the ITE programme was identified as a supportive structure that appeared to facilitate an early understanding and awareness of what it means to be a teacher. This community consisted of associate teachers, pupils, peers, senior school management, an associate lecturer and university lecturer. As 80% of the pre-service teachers had recently completed secondary school, transitioning from a student to a teacher role initially presented uncertainty at the beginning of the full-day placement. Understanding school policies, routines, rules, and codes of conduct from the perspective of a teacher was a challenge for some.

The role of the associate lecturer in each school setting was important in helping pre-service teachers develop a sense of belonging to the school community, as they were welcomed into a collaborative community of learners. Being part of a learning community, therefore, seemed to provide the necessary support to understand and make meaning from these early teaching experiences.

> *The associate lecturer worked together with the university so that we are being taught the same thing and being supported by them when we have tasks to do within the school.*

The associate lecturer was said to be that of an 'approachable and friendly advisor' who advised pre-service teachers on what to observe in the classroom, children's needs, classroom teaching strategies, and school organisation.

> *She is constantly telling us why they do things and the expectations of the students. She gives us lots of useful resources and is very open to questions.*

The role of the associate teacher was critical for pre-service teachers in being able to develop a sense of belonging to the school community. For the 81% of pre-service teachers who said that they found it easy to engage in learning conversations with their associate teacher, this positive relationship appeared to facilitate a strong connection to the wider school community. Furthermore, the strength of this relationship enabled pre-service teachers to gain confidence in their abilities as a teacher as they readily interacted with their associate teachers to gain understanding from their early teaching experiences.

> *My associate teacher sits down with my partner and I and answers any questions we may have. He shows us all his planning and overview for the year and we saw all the work that goes into it*
>
> *I have been given the opportunities to see good teachers at work, and that gives me something to aspire to.*

The importance of this relationship was also highlighted in 10% of instances where this relationship was not strong. Six pre-service teachers noted that they 'had not sat down and talked to the associate teacher properly yet' or perceived their associate teacher was 'too busy'. Interestingly, these pre-service teachers did not have a favourable perception of their relationship with the school.

Having the opportunity to work in pairs throughout the school placement provided pre-service teachers with an extra layer of support that enabled them to make meaning from their early teaching experiences and to feel more confident in their own abilities as teachers. The majority of pre-service teachers (90%) found that working in pairs helped them to gain confidence and began to see themselves as a 'teacher' as they engaged in learning conversations with their partner.

> *The first time I was teaching, I found my head was spinning because I was trying to do the lesson, trying to remember what I am doing, trying to watch out for kids talking….with 34 children. There is just so much to remember, so having a great partner with the same focus was really good – we were on the same page.*

Through continued opportunities to reflect, discuss and solve problems collaboratively, these paired partnerships provided a supportive environment of shared experience where meaning and understanding could be co-constructed.

Developing Identity: Learning as Becoming

The majority of pre-service teachers (93%) felt their placement had helped them to have a better understanding of what it means to be a teacher by providing them with authentic experiences that actively involved them in the realities and complexities of teaching.

> *Understanding that I am a teacher, not a guest, has been the hardest part for me so far… It is more grasping the concept in my head that I am treated as a teacher rather than a student.*

As previously highlighted, moving from an initial position of uncertainty and lack of confidence was facilitated through active involvement in a supportive learning community. Through such experiences, pre-service teachers seemed to transition from a 'student' to a 'teacher', as their confidence, sense of teacher presence and their identity as a teacher was strengthened. Twelve pre-service teachers commented on how having the opportunity to 'try out' teaching tasks within a familiar classroom and school setting facilitated this, as highlighted by this pre-service teacher:

> *Placement has helped me to have a better understanding of what it means to be a teacher interacting with children and experiencing first hand what a teacher does. It is basically learning through doing which is what we encourage students to do.*

Associate teachers also noted that this transition from 'student' to 'teacher' resulted in increased professional commitment, preparedness and responsibility. This is evident in the following statements:

> *I was very fortunate with my student teachers as they were very capable and committed to their practicums. (Case-study school B associate teacher 7)*
>
> *The student teachers I had were just great. So keen and well prepared and they related positively to my children. Wonderful role models. (Case –study school B associate teacher 9)*

Experiencing an initial lack of confidence was the biggest challenge for over half of the pre-service teachers in the two case study schools. For 20% of those responding to the survey, not knowing what to expect or what was expected of them was the biggest challenge at the start of placement. Not being fully aware of associate teacher expectations caused pre-service teachers to shrink from taking the initiative and not take advantage of opportunities to be active in the classroom. This comment highlights this interplay between confidence, initiative and teacher identity.

> *Overcoming my fears of failure and not knowing what to do [as a teacher]. I am getting better, and more confident as each Wednesday goes by however!*

Developing confidence in their own abilities as teachers, therefore, appeared to support their involvement, engagement, and ultimately the development of their identities as teachers. Becoming a teacher within an authentic teaching context further challenged these pre-service teachers to reflect deeply on their teaching experiences and their own emerging teaching philosophy.

> *I have learnt and developed my thoughts and understandings on what teaching, learning, and educating means to me as an individual.*

> *It is helping me to think about the sort of teacher I want to be and the skills I need to develop.*

Identifying the teacher they want to become was evident from an early stage as they sought to reflect on, and align themselves with experiences that would further develop their identities as teachers.

Discussion and Implications

Situating learning within a community of practice as advocated by Wenger (1998), appears to have supported these pre-service teachers in understanding what it means to be a teacher and developing a sense of teacher identity early in their ITE. This following section will consider the findings from this research within the framework of Wenger's social theory of learning as one example of a possible model of authentic, flexible and responsive teacher education.

Engaging in Practice: Learning as Doing

Musset (2010) addresses the need for pre-service teachers to be engaged in school experiences that are integrated with academic content early in the ITE programme so that pre-service teachers gain a realistic understanding of what it means to be a teacher. In this study, weekly paired school placements that started at the beginning of the ITE programme and led into a three-week practicum at the end of the school year proved to be beneficial in actively involving pre-service teachers in the roles and responsibilities of teaching from the commencement of their teacher education. This ongoing, authentic teaching experience within a supportive school context seemed to provide the opportunity for these pre-service teachers to gain a realistic understanding of the nature of teaching and the many complexities and challenges faced by teachers.

When relating this to Wenger's social theory of learning, we can understand this relationship between practice and learning what it means to be a teacher. Wenger ascertains that it is the 'doing' of a task in a historical and social context that provides the structure and meaning to any activity. It is the said and unsaid, the represented and the assumed, the tools, the documents, the well-defined roles, regulations, codified procedures, the explicit practices, subtle cues and shared world views that bring meaning to practice. While many of these practices are never articulated, Wenger argues that they are indicators of membership in communities of practice and, therefore, success of membership inevitably involves the demonstration of such codes of practice. Communities of practice, like the CUSP experience, provide the opportunity for such practices of assumed 'common sense' to be understood through mutual discussion and engagement. The nature of learning is further strengthened as actions and knowledge are combined with theories, and ways of understanding are developed, negotiated and shared within a community of practice. From this, we can draw understanding as to why engaging in the practice of teaching has supported an early understanding of what it means to be a teacher with the pre-service teachers in this study.

Developing Meaning: Learning as Experience

Wenger (1998) argues that meaning is created through meaningful engagement in experiences and is negotiated through participation. An ongoing process of interactions, interpretation and action enables meaning to be further negotiated and constructed. Participating in a social community, therefore, shapes individual experiences as well as individual experiences shaping the communities. In this study, pre-service teachers' experiences in the classroom were supported by continued interaction, with reflection and negotiation of meaning being supported through in-school tutorials, and discussions with associate teachers and peers. Providing the opportunity to work collaboratively to make sense of the classroom experiences moved this placement from merely engaging in 'acts of teaching' to a deeper and reflective teaching experience that facilitated an early understanding of what it means to be a teacher. This was demonstrated in the pre-service teachers' heightened awareness of the roles and responsibilities of teaching, an appreciation of the professional requirements of teachers, and an acknowledgement of the complexities and challenges associated with teaching.

Making explicit some of the subtle 'codes of practice' embedded in the implicit nature of teaching through collaboration with peers, associate teachers, the associate lecturer and lecturer provided the support for pre-service teachers to 'make sense of', and draw awareness to, the complexities and realities of teaching at an early stage of their ITE. The requirements for 'membership' in this community of teachers was made clear in the initial stages of their ITE and, therefore, the roles, responsibilities and professional requirements needed to be a teacher were reinforced through a supportive learning community. The early professional 'apprenticeship' experience helped build resilience (Le Cornu, 2009) as pre-service teachers acknowledged the demands associated with teaching early in the ITE programme.

Not only did this enable the pre-service teachers to make sense of their experiences, but it also enabled them to make connections between theory and practice as they continually reflected on theoretical understandings within a situated school and classroom context. This deepened understanding of what it means to be a teacher at such an early stage of ITE challenged their pre-existing notions of learning and teaching and provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to relate theory and practice concurrently in an authentic and timely way (Chong, Low & Goh, 2011). As Musset (2010) highlights the need for teacher education to situate theory within a practical context, this CUSP programme presents one model of how this authentic alignment between theory and practice can be actualised.

Immersed in Community: Learning as Belonging

Musset (2010) highlights the possibilities that shared partnerships and responsibilities between teacher education institutions and schools could bring in further enhancing teacher education. In this study, the success of such collaborative partnership in providing a supportive learning community through which pre-service teachers developed and early understanding of what it means to be a teacher was evident. Wenger provides a framework for understanding how this community of practice can be particularly effective in providing a supportive structure for enhancing the learning process. As accountability within a community is evident, it helps to

develop a sense of belongingness and awareness of the roles and responsibilities of community members.

In this study, it was evident that the supportive network of peers, associate teachers, in-school associate lecturer and university lecturer provided multiple layers of community through which pre-service teachers could utilise to make meaning of their teaching experiences (Hoben, 2007: Lind, 2004; Ferrier-Ker, 2009; Haigh & Ward, 2004; Wenger, 1998). The findings of the study highlighted that pre-service teachers found both the in-school tutorials and the paired placements particularly beneficial as this provided extra opportunities to discuss, clarify, problem-solve and make sense of their classroom experiences. This finding was consistent with similar research by Bullough et al., (2002) who also found that pre-service teachers in partner placements felt better supported and were able to engage in greater instructional tasks within the classroom. In this study, the pair relationship played an important part in providing personal and professional support to each other (Le Cornu, 2009). The paired placements enabled pre-service teachers to 'bounce ideas off each other', support each other and practise 'working in a team', mirroring the way they had seen some syndicates working in the school. Being in a pair also enabled pre-service teachers to plan and teach together and share risk-taking (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Another layer of support was evident in the opportunity to discuss and clarify understandings in the in-school tutorials that were taught in tandem with the in-school associate lecturer and the university lecturer. This affirms the importance of being connected within a wider learning community so that a 'sense of belonging', as noted by Ussher (2010), is developed from an early stage in the ITE programme. The role of the associate teacher remains a critical factor in determining a sense of connection to the wider school community. Beck and Kosnik (2002) also found that collaboration with, and emotional support from, the associate teacher were important factors in pre-service teachers' experience in schools, and this was a consistent finding in this study. The findings from this study suggest that the inclusion of both in-school tutorials and paired placements have accelerated the learning process as pre-service teachers have had multiple opportunities to make meaning from their experiences, leading to a realistic and early understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

Developing Identity: Learning as Becoming

One of the findings from this study highlights that pre-service teachers established teacher identity early in their ITE. Wenger (1998) argues that identity is built when individuals negotiate meanings from their experiences through membership in a social community. In this study, the continuous and collaborative placement experience seemed to provide a supportive structure to enable these pre-service teachers to transition from a student to a teacher. They began to think like a teacher and act like one as they developed the discourse, experiences and shared histories to frame their teaching experiences. The children's response to them as 'teachers' also affirmed this sense of teacher identity. Teacher identity appeared to be gradually assimilated throughout the 13 week placement as these pre-service teachers engaged in teaching experiences that supported their understanding of what it means to be a teacher. These findings support earlier research by Chong, Low and Goh (2011) and Olsen (2008), which indicates that there is a relationship between active involvement in the roles and responsibilities of teaching and the enhancement of teacher identity.

Confidence appeared to play a critical role in either constraining or enabling the development of teacher identity. Lack of confidence seemed to inhibit the ability for pre-service teachers to actively involve themselves in teaching experiences, which impacted on their perceptions of their own identities as teachers. It is possible that this lack of confidence could be related to an uncertainty of some of the implicit 'codes of practice' noted by Wenger. These subtle codes may either have not been explicitly communicated or clearly understood by the pre-service teacher within that particular learning context. In contrast to this, confidence appeared to promote active involvement in teaching practices which strengthened pre-service teachers understanding of what it means to be a teacher. It was evident that a collaborative learning community provided the necessary support to enable pre-service teachers to gain confidence to involve themselves in teaching practices. As noted earlier, peer support, strongly supported the development of confidence in the early stages of this classroom experience as did a strong relationship with the associate teacher. On the other hand, a lack of relationship with the associate teacher seemed to impact on confidence, involvement and the development of teacher identity.

Early acquisition of teacher identity is extremely desirable as it enables pre-service teachers to understand what it means to be a teacher at the beginning of their ITE and consequently build on these understandings, discourses, subtle codes and practices associated with the profession of teaching throughout the remainder of their ITE. A stronger alignment between the perceptions and realities of teaching at an early stage of their ITE as advocated by Haggarty and Postlethwaite (2012) and Chong, Low and Goh (2011) may help to ensure that the transition into the teaching profession as a beginning teacher will be realistic and may reduce much of the 'praxis shock' (Friedman, 2004) in the initial years of teaching.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored one example of an integrated and collaborative ITE programme that has provided a supportive foundation for the early development of teacher identity in pre-service teachers. Findings from this study appear to support earlier research, which suggests that continuous school placement (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and paired class placements (Bullough et al., 2002) provide a supportive structure to allow for authentic teaching experiences. The benefits of situating the teaching of course content within the school context, in collaboration with school and university staff were also evident in this study. Data showed that this early and continuing school placement experience appeared to sow the seeds for pre-service teachers to develop their teaching identities early in their ITE.

While it is acknowledged that this early sense of teacher identity was evident in the initial stages of this ITE programme, it is not yet clear if this sense of teacher identity will be retained throughout the ITE programme. Having a clearer understanding of the development of teacher identity in a collaborative model is important so that ITE providers can determine if there are long term benefits to this integrated experience. Further research now needs to examine the development of teacher identity throughout the duration of an integrated ITE programme and, in particular, the factors that enhance and constrain this development of identity. What is also important to acknowledge is the highly complex nature of an integrated and collaborative ITE programme. While this study has highlighted some of the benefits of such an integrated approach, there are challenges in establishing and creating an

integrated ITE model that is manageable, beneficial and suitable for each ITE provider and school context. The challenge here is that this may not present itself as a standardised programme of implementation, but rather as a flexible, responsive and continuously evolving approach.

Wenger's social theory of learning helps us to understand why communities of practice, such as this CUSP programme, are particularly effective in supporting pre-service teachers entry into the teaching profession and facilitating an early understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Being nurtured, fed and watered within a supportive learning community that is based on the university and school having shared responsibility for the education of pre-service teachers appears to be a promising mix to facilitate early growth of teacher identity. It is hoped that this early development of teacher identity may support a more realistic understanding of teaching and, therefore, provide a more robust foundation for entry into the teaching profession.

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