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## **Raising the Curtain: Investigating the Practicum Experiences of Pre-Service Drama Teachers**

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*Abstract: The practicum is internationally recognised as a valuable component of teacher education. It is an opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop teaching skills in authentic ways and pursue professional inquiry into practice. While extensive research has been conducted into the practicum generally, little research focuses on the practicum experience for pre-service drama teachers. This article, investigates the preparation of drama teachers for the profession with a particular focus on the practicum component of pre-service education. Drawing on the experiences of 19 pre-service drama teachers from a Western Australian university, focus-groups were conducted in order to scope the key components of the enablers and constraints embedded in their practicum. Four key themes were identified: stress, self-efficacy, mentoring practices, and teaching craft. In addition, the dimensions of each theme in relation to the adequate preparation of drama teachers were further revealed. Particular to the research was the role played by the extra curricula demands associated with drama as a learning area, and the mismatch between participant's experience of drama and the culture shock many experienced in contemporary times. The research further emphasised the highs and lows of practicum, illuminating conditions most conducive to a quality practicum where pre-service drama teachers are able to develop pedagogy and the self-efficacy necessary to be an effective drama teacher, and importantly, one who remains in the profession.*

### **Introduction**

*I was not prepared for the emotional rollercoaster of prac [practicum]. One minute I was stressed out of my mind, the next minute I was having a ball. I'd go from hating it, to loving it and all in the matter of an hour. One minute I'd dread walking into class and the next moment I'd be exhilarated from teaching a great lesson. Luckily, I had a strong mentor teacher to learn from and support me. Prac is definitely the toughest part of this degree but then definitely the best too. (Sam, pre-service drama teacher)*

The practicum provides pre-service teachers with authentic classroom experiences so that they can apply previously studied theory to practice. Research has identified the practicum as integral to the development of effective teachers (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; de Leon-Carillo, 2007; Grudnoff, 2011; Segall, 2002; Wyckoff, Grossman, Boyd, Lankford &

Loeb, 2009). It is where pre-service teachers are mentored by experienced teachers so that they may learn their pedagogical craft and develop important practical skills needed for teaching. Furthermore, an effective practicum component in pre-service education increases the likelihood of retaining beginning teachers in the profession (Twomey, 2007).

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011) stipulate that graduating teachers need to be classroom-ready and able to perform at least at a “graduate standard”. Few would argue that these standards are not complex. Indeed, they require pre-service teachers to be in classrooms gaining experience with real students in order to develop these understandings. However, since time in real-school settings is limited, approximately 16 weeks out of a possible 160 weeks in a four-year course (Ministerial Council for Education and Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2011), it is important that the practicum provides the best opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn and gain personal and teaching efficacy.

The problem is, the quality of practicum experiences varies greatly for pre-service teachers (M. Anderson, 2002, 2003; Bloomfield, 2010; Ure, Gough & Newton, 2009) and research identifies that some pre-service education programs can fail to provide appropriate practicum experiences to adequately prepare beginning teachers for the realities of teaching (Grudnoff, 2011; Ralf, Walker & Wimmer, 2008). Additionally, research also identifies the practicum to be stressful (Badali, 2008; Caires, Almeida & Martins, 2010; Hastings, 2004; Murray-Harvey, 2001) in relation to workload (Badali, 2008), the pressure from being assessed (Cakir & Cesur, 2014; MacDonald, 1993), and a lack of belonging (Caires, Almeida & Vieira, 2012; Murray-Harvey, 2001; Sudeck, Doolittle & Rattigan, 2008). In this way, practicum is emotionally, physically, and interpersonally demanding with significant implications on teacher development (Bloomfield, 2010; Koerner, Rust & Baumgartner, 2002), and retention (Twomey, 2007). This means that a quality practicum is not only critical for preparing effective and resilient teachers, but also impacts directly on those who are more likely to remain in the profession (Twomey, 2007).

Drama teaching itself also has particular sets of demands drawing on the personal, social, intellectual, affective and expressive qualities of the teacher. This means that not only does a quality practicum for pre-service drama teachers need to provide opportunities to develop complex drama pedagogy (Wales, 2009), but also relate to the nature of the form and the added extra curricula responsibilities that go with it. Therefore, a deep understanding of the drama practicum with both its attributes and dimensions will strengthen pre-service drama teachers’ induction into the profession with benefits accruing to the teachers, students, and the profession itself.

## Key Concepts

The significance of the practicum component of pre-service education for beginning teachers is well recognised. For example, the Twomey Report, published in 2007, found that “The more effective the practicum component of the pre-service program, the greater the likelihood of retaining new graduates in the profession” (Twomey, 2007, p. 63). Relatedly, the report *How the World’s Best Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* (Braun, 2008) identified that building practical skills during pre-service education and time in real-school settings were shared features of the best education systems.

While the literature highlights the importance of the practicum in preparing pre-service teachers for the profession (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; de Leon-Carillo, 2007; Grudnoff, 2011; Segall, 2002; Wyckoff et al., 2009), it also reveals debate about how the practicum is best approached with placement, mentoring, support, flexibility, and feedback being key.

More specifically, Murray-Harvey (2001) found that the placement of two or more pre-service teachers in a practicum school was important as it prevented the social isolation so many pre-service teachers feel during the practicum. Furthermore, Murray-Harvey (2001) identified that a quality mentor teacher was integral to a positive practicum experience. Beck and Kosnik (2002) also revealed that pre-service teachers themselves had very clear ideas on the components of a quality practicum placement including in relation to the mentor teacher: (a) peer relationship and collaboration; (b) emotional support and feedback; (c) a mentor with sound approach to teaching and learning; (d) flexibility in teaching content and method; and, (e) a heavy but not excessive workload during the practicum. In addition to support and feedback, Moody (2009) identified that freedom to develop a personal teaching style and an approach to assessment which focused less on the appraisal of teaching and more on the process of learning was also significant.

### **The Importance of Self-Efficacy during Practicum**

The experience of success and the associated development of self-efficacy are highly valued components of practicum. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Furthermore, research has revealed that teachers with high self-efficacy are more resilient and more motivated to assist students reach their potential (Pendegast et al., 2011). Self-efficacy is also associated with the mastery of skills and knowledge (Bandura, 2001) and therefore, experiences that contribute to high self-efficacy are important to pre-service teachers’ developing pedagogy. Some researchers also report that these experiences can be transformative moments where pre-service teachers take control of their own development (Meijer, de Graaf & Meirink, 2011). Experiences such as these not only lead to improved self-efficacy but provide pre-service teachers with more positive aspects to focus on, and help them cope with practicum difficulties (Bloomfield, 2010; Edwards, 1993; Hrnecir, 2007).

Preparedness to teach is also important. A study conducted by Brown, Lee and Collins (2015) investigated how pre-service teachers’ practicum experiences impacted their sense of teaching efficacy and feelings of preparedness, and while participants reported benefitting from practicum in terms of preparedness and teaching efficacy, they lacked confidence in pedagogical content knowledge. Brown et al., stated, “This is an important finding since pre-service teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge is closely associated with their teaching practice and further associated with student achievement” (2015, p. 87).

Mentor teachers are also key to a positive practicum experience (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Moody, 2009; Morgan, Ludlow, Kitching, O’Leary & Clarke, 2009). K. Anderson, Walker and Ralph (2009) suggested that mentor teachers not only play an integral role in building self-efficacy in pre-service teachers, but recommended that mentors adjust their level of support so that it was in harmony with pre-service teachers’ confidence and competence to meet challenges.

### **The Quality Mentor Teacher**

Mentoring, in a pre-service teacher context, occurs during practicum because pre-service teachers are placed with in-service teachers to learn, develop, and practise pedagogical skills. Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn (2000) defined mentoring in teacher education as “complex social interactions that mentor teachers and student teachers construct and negotiate for a variety of professional purposes and in response to the contextual factors they encounter” (p.

103). Collaborative teaching experiences with quality mentors provide pre-service teachers with valuable insights into the way in which teachers cognitively engage in teaching and learning (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). Cairns et al. (2012) suggested that quality mentors can provide a sense of belonging for pre-service teachers and that quality mentoring not only assists pre-service teachers with their professional development but also with their socialisation into the profession. At their best “these affective-relational components can act as ‘buffers’, diminishing the levels of tension and distress which are frequently experienced [by pre-service teachers]” (Cairns et al., 2012, p. 165).

Given the significant role the mentor teacher plays in the practicum experience (Appl & Spenciner, 2008; Lai, 2005; Roehrig, Bohn, Turner & Pressley, 2008; Wyckoff et al., 2009) it is critical for quality mentors to be sought for pre-service teachers in order to maximise the practicum experience (Beijaard, Verloop, & Rajuan, 2007). M. Anderson (2003) highlighted the impact of an effective mentor for pre-service drama teachers. Tom, for example, a beginning drama teacher, reflected on a particularly effective mentor during a practicum experience:

*My main supervisor [mentor teacher] on my first prac was brilliant. She was what I imagined teachers were like. She taught effectively and intelligently and provided good feedback for me. She was dedicated and spent a lot of time at school, making sure she was well prepared. (M. Anderson, 2003, p. 49)*

Aside from this research conducted by Anderson over ten years ago, the practicum experiences of pre-service drama teachers has received little attention in the literature. Given this deficit and the importance of the practicum in preparing pre-service teachers, the present study makes a timely contribution to teacher education knowledge in exploring, from the lived experiences of the pre-service teachers themselves, the conditions under which their capabilities are best developed.

## Method

Three focus-group interviews with 19 pre-service drama teachers across two separate courses were held in order to gain these student’s views and perceptions about practicum. These views are important because they are both the beneficiaries of the practicum and the ‘sites’ where the practicum is experienced. These student voices go beyond the abstract communicating what was authentic to them, in this way helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and providing empirical evidence to the field.

Reflecting the gender ratio of teachers in Western Australia (26% male, 74% female) (Western Australian Government Department of Education, 2015), the gender composition of the focus groups included fifteen female and four male pre-service drama teachers.

The first focus group comprised seven pre-service drama teachers - five females and two males - in their fourth and final year of a double degree Bachelor of Arts (Education)/ Bachelor of Creative Arts program. The second focus group comprised seven pre-service drama teachers - six females and one male - also in their fourth and final year of a double degree Bachelor of Arts (Education)/ Bachelor of Creative Arts program. Students in this course combine education studies with specialist content studies in two teaching areas such as drama and English as well as a practicum component in schools. At the time of the focus-groups, participants had completed one practicum of three weeks in their second year of study, one practicum of five weeks in their third year of study, and were about to complete their final practicum of 11 weeks.

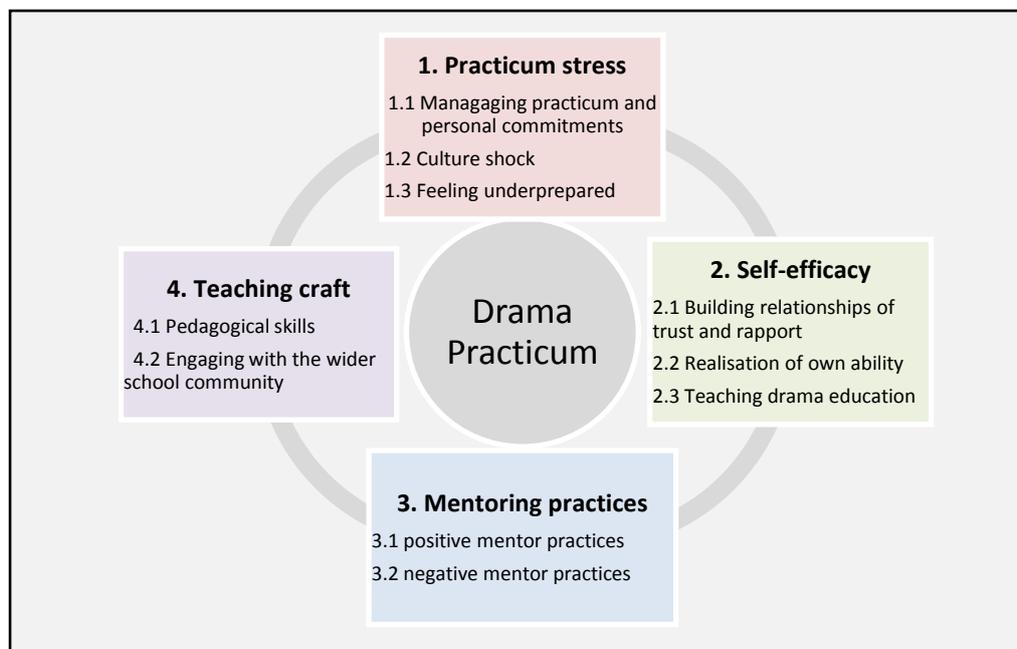
The third focus group (two females and one male) comprised pre-service drama teachers in the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) course at the university. This is a

one-year full-time, or equivalent part-time, course for students who have successfully completed a Bachelor Degree and includes an on-campus program of study as well as a practicum component in schools. At the time of this focus-group, participants had completed one practicum of two weeks, one practicum of three weeks, and were yet to complete their final practicum of seven weeks.

As part of the process of the inquiry semi-structured interviews focused on the participants' experience of the teaching practicum and included such questions as: "What is it like to be a pre-service drama teacher during a teaching practicum"? And, "what kinds of things contribute to the challenges of being a pre-service drama teacher during a teaching practicum"? The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, then analysed following the analytic procedures described by Miles and Huberman (1994). More specifically, the data were interrogated for key concepts, ideas, and descriptors. These were then grouped to form categories of generalised information or themes building on the data matrix of categories and supporting phrases. This process allowed us to identify both the attributes of each theme and their associated dimensions and was repeated for the remaining two focus-group interviews. This analysis assisted in identifying emerging themes as well as generating ideas and questions for subsequent research phases.

## Findings

Four themes emerged from the focus-group data: practicum stress; self-efficacy; mentoring practices; and, teaching craft. Within each theme were a number of key dimensions with these provided in Figure 1. While the themes are presented separately, they are, in fact, interwoven and linked. For example, participants found planning lessons and scaffolding learning activities particularly challenging components of practicum (teaching craft), yet believed their mentor teacher played an integral role in developing their lesson planning skills (mentoring practices).



*Figure 1. Themes and Dimensions of Drama Practicum*

### Theme 1 – Practicum Stress

Consistent across each focus group was the experience of stress. Participants described this stress stemming from three main sources. First, managing the demands of practicum along with their personal commitments. Second, experiencing schools which were vastly different to their previous experiences of school. And third, feeling underprepared for practicum, particularly the challenges of teaching drama. Each of these are now described in turn.

#### *Dimension 1.1: Managing Practicum and Personal Commitments*

Participants reported experiencing considerable stress from the heavy workload that practicum entailed, particularly from the time-consuming process of planning lessons and marking students' work. In fact, participants described spending between three and six hours each evening planning lessons in preparation for the next day. In Sam's case, keeping up with his lesson planning and marking students' work became increasingly stressful. He explained:

*To begin with, I was spending six hours a night just planning lessons. Then when the journals came in, I'd be trying to mark them too. I wasn't getting to bed before 2am most nights and it all just got too much.*

While participants agreed that the practicum workload was sustained and arduous, they also experienced stress while managing their personal commitments, including completing assessments from their university course work. Emily's experience encapsulates this view:

*Lesson planning was so time consuming. I'd go home after two hours on a bus and then spend six hours writing three lesson plans. We're still at uni, too, and I had two assignments due. It was so full on and stressful to say the least.*

Furthermore, all participants worked between eight and 15 hours a week in part-time jobs. As participants were unable to take leave from their jobs during the practicum—needing the income—they experienced considerable stress managing both practicum and employment commitments. Claire, for example, recalled, “*working all day at my prac school, going straight to work for a five hour shift and then it would be home to plan lessons for the rest of the night.*” Cindy also commented, “*I found juggling prac and my part-time job so stressful. I mean, prac is a full-time commitment but then we all have part-time jobs too. We have to work so we can afford to live.*”

Participants also discussed the added challenge of the non-curricular drama component of practicum such as attending or supervising rehearsals, assisting with direction or choreography for productions, sewing and mending costumes, and, assisting students with their character development and performance technique. It is this element of drama teaching that is unique in its demands on teachers, and these research participants in particular. Tessa's experience highlights the struggle she experienced balancing her part-time job and her practicum commitments, which included attending rehearsals for the school production. She explained:

*I work Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. So when we had the school production on, I was here all day, came back for rehearsals and performances and then went to work. It was an insane workload but I know it's what drama teachers do. I mean the workload is full on.*

While participants understood that non-curricular commitments were an integral part of being a drama teacher, they generally felt that such commitments were difficult to manage and that they contributed to participants' stress. It is interesting to note that participants seemed to accept that stress was an inevitable part of being a drama teacher and therefore an

inevitable part of being a pre-service drama teacher during practicum; this issue being worthy of further investigation.

### ***Dimension 1.2: Culture Shock***

The second dimension of practicum stress embodies the culture shock participants experienced whilst on practicum. In the case of this research, “culture shock” refers to participants’ heightened sense of uncertainty and anxiety experienced when placed in a practicum school that was unfamiliar and often different from their own school experiences or previous practicum experiences. While it is necessary to expose pre-service teachers to a variety of schools in order to prepare them for the diverse school cultures in which they may eventually work, it was evident that these participants were largely unprepared for the culture shock they experienced. Vanessa, for example, attended a conservative private school for most of her education and found the culture shock encountered on her first practicum overwhelming and stressful. She explained:

*I came from a good school where we had an amazing drama teacher. I was like – this is what I want to do and this is what every classroom must be like. And then I got out there [practicum school] and yeah it was a big shock. The whole school was just so different to what I expected. I hated my first prac. I didn’t want to be there and I would come home and cry most days.*

Other participants revealed that challenging student behaviour and the lack of respect for teachers contributed to their culture shock. Nella, for example, recalled feeling “*out of [her] comfort zone*” as she witnessed behaviour with which she was unfamiliar and uncomfortable. She said, “*We’d never behave like that at school.*” Alice similarly recalled:

*The first two weeks of my second prac was terrible. I’d never seen anything like it before and felt panicked as soon as I’d walk in the school gate. I got really upset because the kids weren’t very nice and it was completely different to how I went to school and how the kids were on my first prac. It was such a shock.*

It is evident that these pre-service drama teachers attended the practicum with an expectation of what teaching, in particular their drama classes, would be like. The culture shock experienced when expectations differed from the reality resulted in considerable stress.

### ***Dimension 1.3: Feeling Underprepared***

Participants in all three focus groups felt the coursework component of their pre-service education was inadequate, particularly the curriculum and content knowledge required to teach drama. Consequently, participants felt the lack of adequate preparation caused them unnecessary angst and stress. Mandy highlights these sentiments by describing the theoretical component of her teaching degree as being ‘unhelpful’ in preparing her for the practicalities of teaching:

*I really struggle with being overly bombarded with all the theory in this course. So much of it seems pointless. I sit in class and wonder how this is helpful to me. I dread standing in front of a class and being so unprepared. I have no idea about drama curriculum or how to assess students? I need to understand practical things about teaching. Uni just doesn’t prepare us for that.*

Participants also commented on the lack of drama pedagogical content knowledge in their teaching degree, and their dissatisfaction with generalised units that did not address the specific requirements of teaching drama. For example, Claire and Nella’s noted that:

*Claire: We’ve learnt all this stuff that isn’t relevant. We need more drama-specific – like the drama classroom. How do you teach in the drama room and where do*

*you stand? It's such a big space and the kids can muck around in there without being seen. This was something I was nervous about when I went out on prac.*

*Nella: Our education units looked at classrooms where students sit behind a desk. Well that's not drama. That's not going to help me. I'm sick of hearing about maths teachers, English teachers etc. It's all from that perspective. Drama's different to all those subjects. It's practical for a start and it has kids moving around the space, working in groups, even operating the lighting board.*

What both Claire and Nella's comments highlight is the unique nature of teaching drama that is embodied and soma-aesthetic. The lack of drama-specific pedagogical content knowledge, which saw some participants attend practicum feeling unprepared and anxious about their ability to teach drama, suggests a need to re-examine the content and approaches taken in the coursework component of the participants' teaching degree.

## **Theme 2 – Self-efficacy**

The second theme identified the improved self-efficacy participants' gained during practicum from positive key experiences. Participants agreed that, despite the challenges it presented, the practicum affirmed their career choice, belief in their capacity to be a good teacher, and ignited their passion for teaching drama. Furthermore, participants believed that these positive key experiences, which as Tom suggested, "*gave [them] more positive things to focus on*" helped to mitigate the effects of the stress they experienced. Three dimensions of self-efficacy were identified: (2.1) building relationships of trust and rapport; (2.2) realisation of own ability; and, (2.3) teaching drama education, and we now turn to these.

### ***Dimension 2.1: Building Relationships of Trust and Rapport***

Participants spoke at length of the enjoyment and satisfaction gained from working closely with students and the participants' capacity to develop trust and rapport. The emotion, evident in participants' voices and body language during focus groups, indicated the depth and significance of such encounters upon them. Simone, for example, described the effect a student with learning difficulties made on her during a practicum:

*I was so touched when some of the kids gave me thank you cards at the end. There was a girl I was teaching who was dyslexic. She made me a card, drew a picture of me and worked hard to write as well. I was like...wow.*

Similarly, participants described the enjoyment and fulfilment gained from seeing the impact of their teaching on their students' learning. Some participants recalled specific moments when they had made a difference. Rebecca explained, "*I love the glint in the students' eyes when they start to comprehend what you're trying to do. The excitement when you introduce something new. I really enjoyed that.*"

In fact, participants agreed that the highlight of practicum was working with students, particularly in the connections participants made with students and in the gradual development of trust. For example, Vanessa recalled, "*When kids test the boundaries with you and then start to gradually develop a bit of respect, there's like a click that goes off and they start to trust you.*" It is evident that the participants' ability to relate to their students and to build rapport, strongly affirmed their enthusiasm to work with young people

### ***Dimension 2.2: Realisation of own Ability***

Added to the personal satisfaction and enjoyment gained from working with students,

participants spoke enthusiastically of the moment when they realised they had an ability to teach. For many of the participants, the practicum was their first opportunity to work with young people; therefore, being able to test their skills in the drama room was an important component. Carla explained, *“I can know all the theory but if I can’t convey that to students then there’s no point me being a teacher. So being on prac and seeing that I can convey it, is the most affirming thing.”*

Participants recalled key experiences when they were presented with what seemed an overwhelming challenge, yet through their determination, they were able to succeed, learn, and grow in confidence. Kyle described an experience whereby the absence of his mentor teacher provided an opportunity to assume responsibility and experience success. He said:

*My best experience on prac was a day my mentor teacher was sick and I was in charge. I was worried about the whole day because the teacher wasn’t there - but it went really well. That was the best moment on prac knowing I can do this and I can teach drama.*

It is evident that this positive key experience was a turning point for Kyle and gave him the confidence to take control of his situation.

### ***Dimension 2.3: Teaching Drama Education***

Even though participants had identified feeling unprepared for teaching drama education, it was evident that they also experienced success with some of the drama lessons they had prepared and delivered. Participants spoke avidly of the enjoyment and rewards of teaching drama as they shared stories of feeling empowered by the effect their lessons had on individual students. Skye recalled:

*When you see students going into the space and bravely explore issues such as racism, alcohol abuse and violence. You can explore these issues safely through drama. When it really clicks for them, I feel like I’ve helped them learn about certain issues and about themselves. That’s a pretty special thing to be able to do.*

Aoife similarly experienced satisfaction in constructing lessons designed to develop students’ self-confidence. Aoife explained that while observing a particular year 10 class, she noticed two students did not want to participate in the activities and believed this to be from a lack of self-confidence. She said:

*These two girls just sat at the back and hid behind the others. I could see that they wanted to join in but didn’t have the guts to get up with the other kids. That night, I decided to specifically write them into the lesson by beginning with some drama games that would bring them out of their shells. It worked wonders. From that moment, I included little games at the beginning of each lesson to help these kids. By the end of my prac, I could see it had made a difference. That’s the beauty of drama.*

It is clear that these positive key experiences are a valuable component of practicum, providing participants with reassurance and improved self-efficacy. Further, they provide participants with more positive experiences to focus on, rather than the challenges and stress practicum engendered.

### Theme 3 – Mentoring Practices

Mentoring practices were widely discussed in each focus group. Some participants spoke appreciatively of the support received and admiration developed for their mentor teachers while others discussed those they deemed to be ineffective and unsupportive. Two dimensions of mentoring practices were identified: (3.1) positive mentoring practices; and, (3.2) negative mentoring practices.

#### *Dimension 3.1: Positive Mentoring Practices*

For some participants, the support and guidance of their mentor teacher was appreciated and deemed integral to their development and enjoyment of practicum. These participants spoke with admiration of the mentor's ability to model effective teaching practice, provide constructive feedback, as well as their generosity with resources. For instance, Skye recalled, *"My mentor was amazing. She gave feedback that encouraged me but showed what I needed to improve on. She was helpful with resources and had strong strategies put in place so it was great to see how they're demonstrated."* In addition, Rebecca attributed her practicum 'survival' to the support and leadership provided by her mentor teacher, saying, *"The only reason I got through my second prac was because I had an amazing mentor teacher. If I hadn't had her there I would have asked to move. I probably wouldn't continue teaching if I didn't have her."*

The participants believed that having a mentor teacher who gave them freedom and flexibility during practicum was important to their development. Furthermore, participants appreciated having mentor teachers who acknowledged and valued the skills they brought with them, and also facilitated opportunities for participants to teach areas they were interested in or familiar with. Skye, for example, recalled that in her first practicum she 'earned' her freedom, saying, *"My mentor teacher gave me a lot of freedom but she had to actually test the waters first, like in the first couple of days, just to see what I was like."*

However, while some participants were able to benefit significantly from the collegial guidance and support of their mentor teacher, others experienced the relationship differently.

#### *Dimension 3.2: Negative Mentoring Practices.*

Some participants expressed feeling 'unwanted' by their mentor teacher. Ben, for example, commented, *"You can see that the mentor teacher is frustrated because you're taking a step out of their normal program."* Alana added, *"Then through the grapevine you hear about teachers complaining about having prac students and having to get their students back on track once the prac teacher has left."* For these participants, feeling unwanted and an 'annoyance' for the mentor teachers made them feel anxious and as Alice stated, *"made me feel like I didn't belong."*

Participants also spoke about the difficulty of having conflicting teaching styles to those of their mentor teachers. More specifically, several participants felt they were expected to teach like their mentor teacher, even when it conflicted with their own emerging style and beliefs. Tom stated, *"I noticed my teacher came from an English teaching background. I struggled with her philosophies on drama education considering I'm from an acting and theatre background."* Despite differing styles, these participants found themselves 'going along' with the expectations of their mentor teachers in order to avoid conflict, or as Alice described, *"To keep the peace."*

Participants discussed mentor teachers who exhibited unprofessional and poor teaching practice. Fiona explained her experience with a mentor teacher who spent each lesson working with a select group of students while other students sat and watched. She

recalled, “*All they did was one production after another and they rehearsed during class. Some kids would just sit down and watch while he directed his favourite kids.*”

Aoife felt her mentor teacher had exploited her and said:

*I wrote her job application for her while I was there. Some things she asked me to do were totally unreasonable but I didn't want to break the expectation she had of me. I thought I did go above and beyond what was expected but at the time I was desperate to not annoy her.*

In addition to exhibiting unprofessional and poor teaching practice, some mentor teachers were perceived to have bullied participants. Samantha recalled a practicum she had shared with a peer and the mentor teacher who had belittled them in front of students and treated them badly for the duration of the practicum. She described her experiences in this way:

*I just felt sick at the end of each day. It made me question if this [teaching] was what I wanted to do. I didn't know why I felt sick; I guess I was just so nervous. The other student dropped out after the first week and I never saw her again. That was such a shame as I think she would have been a great teacher.*

A perceived lack of power to manage the relationship was a common feeling amongst participants, even when they knew they were being treated unfairly. Kyle recalled an experience where his mentor teacher had ignored him for the duration of his practicum, leaving him feeling isolated and dreading each day. The lack of communication with his mentor teacher had rippling effects in the drama room. Kyle explained:

*On my last prac, I would have days where I'd go in and the mentor teacher wouldn't even say hello. At the end of the day she would just leave without saying goodbye. So it would be a whole day with no communication. She didn't even introduce me to classes so the first few days I was just this stranger in the corner. That set up my relationship with the students for the entire prac. I was that stranger in the corner and that stranger taking the class. It was terrible.*

The experiences of these participants highlight the considerable impact the mentor teacher has on the practicum. This influence is of particular concern when the mentor teacher exhibits unprofessional behaviour and the pre-service teacher feels powerless to speak up or seek help.

The final theme identified in this phase of the research focused on the pre-service drama teacher's work, both in and out of the classroom.

#### **Theme 4 – Teaching Craft**

Consistently, participants reflected on a number of pedagogical skills they found challenging, including planning for student learning and assessment, and instructional skills such as questioning. Participants also reflected on the different opportunities the practicum provided to experience and engage with the wider school community. Consequently, two dimensions of teaching craft were identified: (4.1) pedagogical skills; and, (4.2) engaging with the wider school community.

##### ***Dimension 4.1: Pedagogical Skills***

Participants agreed that practicum provided a valuable opportunity to develop the pedagogical skills necessary to be an effective drama teacher; however, more time was needed in schools in order to hone these skills. For example, Sam said, “*I don't see why*

*teaching can't be more like an apprenticeship. You learn so much more when you're out in the classroom than you do sitting in lectures back at uni!"* Carla agreed, and said:

*Yeah, we had no school observation until second year. Even if it's once a week where we could observe our mentors teach and start to develop some of these skills. There just isn't enough time in the classroom.*

Consequently, given the lack of time in schools, participants found planning for student learning particularly challenging. Participants struggled to understand students' prior knowledge and how to scaffold activities. Sometimes the participants had inaccurate notions of students' achievement levels. This was reflected in Ken's comment, "*A challenge for me was the students' prior knowledge. Where to pitch it? At times I was pitching up here, when their actual level was much lower. Of course I wouldn't realise that until half-way through the lesson.*" However, despite the challenges participants experienced, it was evident that they remained optimistic and eager to improve their pedagogical skills. Some participants highlighted the role their mentor teacher had played in helping them develop their skills. Mandy said, "*My mentor had really good questioning skills and she helped me to develop mine [questioning skills]. She said on my next prac we will continue to strengthen these skills.*" Other participants employed self-reflection strategies to improve their teaching practice. Skye said:

*I preferred reflecting privately. When I was on prac, I not only reflected on my teaching practice, but also on when I was a teenager. Through that you form empathy because you know it is a hard time [growing up].*

It is not surprising that the practicum was a considerable learning experience for the participants, where their preconceived ideas of student learning and of their own pedagogical skills were tested.

#### ***Dimension 4.2: Engaging with the Wider School Community.***

Emerging from discussions on pedagogical skills, was the importance of moving beyond viewing the practicum as merely an opportunity to teach lessons, to an opportunity to understand and engage with the wider school community. Participants spoke about attending a variety of activities such as staff meetings and social events where they learnt about school procedures, met staff from other subject areas, and, as Mandy stated, "*become familiar with the extra things teachers do.*"

Participants emphasised the need for more time in schools in order to adjust to the school and, in Emily's words, "*soak up the school's culture.*" In fact, participants believed that shorter practicums were problematic, particularly as they did not allow sufficient time to 'settle in'. Mandy relayed:

*It's like – I haven't been in a high school since I was in high school myself. So I walk in and observe for a day and then I'm teaching a lesson. I didn't know the kids or how the school worked or how the discipline system worked. Being able to go and observe the school before prac would have been really helpful.*

In addition, participants highlighted their dissatisfaction with how little exposure they had had to schools within their pre-service education; they deemed this a hindrance to developing realistic understandings of what happens in schools. Participants yearned for further opportunities within their pre-service education to develop their understanding and familiarity with a variety of schools. Carla commented:

*For me to be more prepared for prac there needs to be more experience within a school culture. Not just the classroom – the actual culture of being in a school. It comes down to the lifestyle, career...it's not just a job.*

It is evident that pre-service drama teachers place high value on the role of practicum to acculturate them to working within schools. However, it appears that the low number of practicums and their short duration are problematic, with insufficient time to develop important pedagogical skills and to engage with the wider school community.

## **Discussion**

Taken together, the focus groups enabled an overview of these participants' drama practicum and in doing so revealed the considerable highs and lows which characterise the experience. These findings confirmed many of the initial concerns that prompted this research. Three highlights of practicum were identified: (a) authentic experience; (b) self-efficacy; and, (c) professional collegiality.

### **Authentic Experience**

First and foremost, and consistent with the literature generally speaking, participants in this study recognised that teaching drama was complex and that time in real school settings with effective mentor teachers was integral to their professional development. It was evident that despite the testing moments or challenges experienced during practicum, participants retained a sense of the value of practicum in providing them with time, albeit condensed, to experience how schools operate, and gain exposure to the diverse tasks carried out by drama teachers. The high regard these pre-service drama teachers placed on gaining authentic experience in schools to learn their pedagogical craft is similarly recognised in M. Anderson's (2002, 2003) research.

### **Self-efficacy**

Consistent with previous research (Bloomfield, 2010; Edwards, 1993; Hrnčir, 2007), participants enjoyed a range of positive key experiences during practicum that supported their development. These positive experiences were diverse and stemmed from relationships built with students, engaging with students in non-curricular drama activities, and teaching successful lessons where participants experienced enjoyment and fulfilment in teaching drama. This finding also affirms earlier research revealing how positive experiences often signify a turning point where pre-service teachers take active control of their own development and gain enhanced self-efficacy (Meijer et al., 2011).

### **Professional Collegiality**

The importance for pre-service drama teachers having an effective mentor teacher is highlighted in this research, and supports earlier research claiming that an effective mentor is vital in developing pre-service teachers' professional efficacy (Flores & Day, 2006; Harrison, 2008; Langdon, Alexander, Dinsmore, & Ryde, 2012; Morgan et al., 2009). The experiences and perspectives provided by participants, led to the identification of six attributes of an effective mentor teacher for pre-service drama teachers. These attributes describe the mentor

teacher as: (a) supportive; (b) provides guidance and constructive feedback; (c) models effective teaching practice; (d) shares resources; (e) encourages freedom and flexibility; and, (f) values the individual skills of the pre-service drama teacher.

While some of these attributes have been identified in previous mentoring and practicum research, such as the importance of mentor teachers providing quality feedback and moral support (Ganser, 2002; Hayes, 2004; Ralf et al., 2008), this research revealed that for these participants, a mentor teacher who fostered collegiality and a sense of belonging was significant in enhancing participants' self-confidence and professional efficacy.

While it is helpful to understand the practicum highs, it is the lows that are of most concern and a hindrance to the pre-service drama teachers' induction into the profession. Two of these lows of practicum identified by the participants were: (a) stress; and, (b) ineffective mentoring.

### **Stress**

Consistent with previous research, the participants' experience of stress during practicum was multifaceted (Badali, 2008; Caires et al., 2010). First, the difficulty in managing personal and practicum commitments exacerbated by additional non-curricular drama activities was a key contributor to their stress. The stressfulness of this intense workload highlights the reality of higher education in contemporary times, where many tertiary students also work part-time, and in some cases full-time, to support themselves financially through their studies (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Lingard, 2012; McInnis & Hartley, 2002). As this research has revealed, workload stress has negative repercussions to participants' well-being.

Second, the culture shock encountered when participants' expectations differed to the reality of teaching caused considerable stress (Lortie, 1975). While the experience of culture shock during practicum is recognised in previous research (Pendergast et al., 2011), this research revealed for the first time, the influence of previous school experiences of drama on participants' expectations of practicum and consequently their experience of culture shock and stress.

Third, participants reported stress about their perceived lack of preparation to manage the rigours of practicum, particularly the content and pedagogical knowledge required to teach drama. For example, participants were unprepared for teaching in an open space, managing class dynamics and facilitating effective group work, which as Wales (2009) emphasised, is essential drama pedagogy.

It is also interesting to note that while participants were aware of being stressed, and consistent with the findings of Fives, Hamman and Olivarez (2007), they had little idea how to manage it. Furthermore, participants believed that stress was an inevitable reality of the practicum, and, an inevitable part of being a drama teacher; these beliefs about drama teacher stress being formed from their previous experiences during both their own schooling and during practicum. Indeed, stress in the lives of drama teachers is well recognised in the literature (M. Anderson, 2002, 2003; Donelan, 1989; Haseman, 1990; Wales, 1999).

### **Ineffective Mentoring**

Participants with ineffective mentor teachers felt anxious, powerless to change their situation and as noted in Moody's (2009) observation, generally experienced a more stressful practicum. Ineffective mentor teachers were deemed by the participants to be those who lacked enthusiasm for teaching and/or mentoring, exhibited unprofessional behaviour, and/or made them feel unwelcome. The findings from this research supports earlier research

revealing the negative repercussions on pre-service teachers' self-confidence and attitude towards practicum when lacking mentor support (Hastings, 2004; Ralph, 2000).

## Conclusion

There are three significant points to highlight in considering the implications of these findings for pre-service drama teachers and practicum. First, the highs and lows depicted in this research reveal the humanness and complexity of practicum for pre-service drama teachers where they faced new experiences and challenges, in every class and activity, both curricular and non-curricular. This research has shown that practicum involves participants stepping into the unknown and embarking on a steep learning curve where they encounter a range of positive and negative experiences and emotions, some familiar and some unfamiliar. The complexity of practicum is recognised in the research as well as its capacity to be a psychologically demanding experience for pre-service teachers. Therefore, providing adequate preparation and support for pre-service drama teachers to manage practicum challenges is key.

Second, many of the experiences described by participants were consistent with findings in the literature, such as the tendency of practicum to be stressful, the high value pre-service teachers place on practicum, and the impact of the mentor teacher on practicum experiences and teacher development. A unique finding of this research, is the impact of added non-curricular drama activities on participants' experience of stress during practicum. This finding is important, as it not only builds on previous research which highlights the implication of extra non-curricular responsibilities on a drama teacher's physical and mental health (M. Anderson, 2002, 2003; Donelan, 1989; Haseman, 1989; Wales, 1999) but confirms a need to revise practicum workload for pre-service drama teachers, which factors in the non-curricular component of being a drama teacher in contemporary times.

Third, this research revealed that the quality of practicum varied greatly between participants, with some participants benefitting significantly from quality mentoring, positive experiences, and opportunities to build self-efficacy. By contrast, other participants endured unsatisfactory experiences with ineffective mentoring and insufficient opportunity to learn necessary pedagogical skills and understandings required for drama teaching. This finding highlights that inconsistent practicum quality continues to be a concerning reality for pre-service education programs. Therefore, providing quality practicum experiences for all pre-service drama teachers to learn their pedagogical craft and develop the efficacy required to be classroom-ready and able to thrive is necessary.

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