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**SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS' AND UNIVERSITY STAFF MEMBERS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION PRACTICUM: A  
COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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**Abstract**

The importance of strong school-university partnerships in bridging the so-called theory-practice gap in pre-service teacher education has been well established in the literature. The experiences of pre-service teachers during practicum have in particular been shown to be enhanced where there are strong links between the two educational sectors. This paper draws from research conducted in two diverse Australian pre-service teacher education programs to evaluate factors that are perceived to profoundly impact on the professional experiences of pre-service teachers during practicum. The particular focus of this paper is the beliefs and experiences of school practitioners and university staff members regarding the efficacy of the practicum in enabling students to enact theory in practice. A mixed methods approach was adopted for both studies, one of which was located in an urban university in Tasmania, the other in a regional university in Queensland. Findings generated from the comparative study of both programs revealed some differences but predominantly a number of similarities between the perceptions of the two samples of school practitioners and university staff members towards practicum. Three key findings are presented and discussed in this paper.

**Use of terms**

“Colleague teacher” is the school teacher who supervises the pre-service teacher during practicum.

“Lead teacher” refers to the (usually senior) school teacher who has oversight of the group of pre-service teachers doing practicum in his/her school and acts as their mentor.

“Practicum” refers to the pre-service teacher’s professional or field experience.

“Teaching School Model” (TSM) is the term used in the Queensland program to refer to the in-field experience component of the program.

“University coordinator” refers to the academic staff member responsible for monitoring the pre-service teacher’s progress during practicum.

**Introduction**

The merit and indeed relevance of university pre-service teacher education programs have long been contested. Particularly in current times with many western governments and commentators demanding higher levels of accountability in teacher performance, questions are increasingly being raised about how well teachers are prepared (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Neville, Sherman, & Cohen, 2005). Further, a range of recent reports and policy responses (Churchill, 2007; Eyres, 2005; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Masters, 2009) provides evidence of the issues associated with the gap between theory and practice in pre-service teacher education. According to Levine (2006), a widely held concern is that “one of the biggest dangers we face is preparing teachers who know theory and know nothing about practice.” Others suggest that separating theory from practice creates a false dichotomy and that teaching is a profession in which theory is embedded in and inseparable from practice (Schön, 2003).

The literature also raises concerns about linking theory to practice and highlights the practicum as especially problematic in this regard (Allsopp, De Marie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Bloomfield, Taylor & Maxwell, 2004; Cochran Smith, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2005, 2010; Korthagen, 2007; Vick, 2006). One of the predominant factors in the perpetuation of the “theory-practice gap” in the practicum has been shown to be the continuing separation of teacher education responsibilities between universities and schools (Dean, Lauer, & Urquhart, 2005; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009; Zeichner, 2010). This disconnection between campus and field-based teacher education is regarded as a perennial problem (Vick, 2006) and the need for “stronger partnerships between schools and teacher education institutions” (OECD, 2005, p. 30) is a regular call for change. Indeed, collaborative partnerships between universities and schools have been identified as one of the critical components in creating stronger, more effective teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Louden & Rohl, 2006). While such partnerships have the potential to bridge the theory-practice gap, they also provide opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and skills between sites and, in so doing, simultaneously renew the settings that comprise the partnership (Stephens & Boldt, 2004). However, forging and sustaining collaborative models of this nature is problematic. Sachs (1999), for example, argues that a lack of reciprocity between academics and teachers in recognising the differences between their cultures, histories and expectations creates ongoing tension. An associated concern is the lack of clarity surrounding the roles of school and university personnel in the students’ practicum (Allen & Peach, 2007; Cherian, 2007). This vagueness can foster a free interpretation of what practicum entails (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Hayes, Capel, Katene, & Cook, 2008), which often leads to conflict (Boydell, 1991).

In Australia, a 2007 federal government report into the nation’s teacher education programs highlighted problems associated with the practicum and advocated the need for “major reform” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007, p. 73). In response, there is productive work being done in this area (Allen, Howells, & Radford, in press; Turner, 2011). Darling-Hammond (2010, p. 40), in her investigation of the attributes of “powerful” teacher education programs, identifies in particular the need for strong “interwoven coursework” that makes explicit links between what is learned on campus and during the practicum.

This paper is concerned with the way the so-called theory-practice gap is addressed in two diverse Australian pre-service teacher education programs, one of which is located in an urban university in Tasmania, the other in a regional university in Queensland. In particular, the paper focuses on the beliefs and experiences of school practitioners and university staff members regarding the efficacy of the practicum in enabling students to enact theory in practice. Findings generated from the comparative study of both programs revealed some differences but predominantly a number of similarities between the perceptions of the two samples of professionals towards practicum. Three key findings are presented and discussed in this paper.

### Context

As well as being located in diverse geographical areas (rural Queensland and urban Tasmania), the two pre-service teacher education programs discussed in this paper are quite differently constructed. The Queensland under-graduate (four-year) program was created in the early 2000s with the core aim of creating a paradigm shift in the provision of pre-service teacher education (Turner & Lynch, 2006). The in-field experience component of the program, entitled the Teaching School Model (TSM), is claimed to address the theory-practice gap in the practicum (Smith & Moore, 2006; Smith, Lynch & Mieniczakowski, 2003; Turner 2006). Based on the concept of the teaching hospital, the TSM seeks to build the practicum around partnerships between the university and schools and school systems. Teaching staff from both the universities and the schools take part in the conceptualisation, design and implementation of the practicum. Specific elements of the TSM Model have been reported elsewhere (see, for example, Turner, 2006; Turner & Lynch, 2006).

The Tasmanian program, the Master of Teaching (MTeach), is also newly developed and accredited, having been implemented for the first time in 2010. As a graduate-level entry program, the two-year MTeach is undertaken by students with a prior degree and involves a more traditional approach to the pre-service teacher education practicum than that of the TSM. Although-school university partnerships exist and are deemed important in the success of the in-field experience (Allen, Howells & Radford, in press), stakeholder responsibilities are generally quite separate in terms of the construction and implementation of the practicum. That is, teacher educators design coursework and prepare pre-service teachers for practicum on campus; teachers and leaders in schools mentor and supervise them during their in-field experience<sup>1</sup>.

**Methods and data sources**

This paper reports on a comparative study drawing on data from two previously-conducted studies in two Australian universities. In each of the original studies, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select key stakeholders in the pre-service teacher practicum. However, samples and the numbers of participants differed slightly between the two studies. Table 1 includes an overview of the research samples and sizes. For ease of reading, the same nomenclature (e.g. “lead teacher” and “colleague teacher”) is used here for the two programs, despite some differences between the terminologies currently in place.

A sequential mixed-methods approach was adopted for both studies, using an online survey instrument and follow-up interviews or focus groups. The online survey was administered to large samples over large geographic areas and was, therefore, an efficient way to gather data on participants’ perceptions of the practicum. Preliminary data analysis of survey data was used as a basis for the design of the interview/focus group schedules. The interviews/focus groups provided the researchers with the means of gathering more contextual data and allowed them to further probe the key issues that had emerged from the quantitative data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Data analysis methods used across the two studies included Rasch analysis and factor analysis to generate descriptive statistics from the survey data and categorical analysis of the interview data. An overview of these research methods is provided in Table 1.

*Table 1* Overview of Methods and Data Sources: QLD and TAS Studies

	<b>Queensland study</b>	<b>Tasmanian study</b>
<b>Sampling method</b>	Purposive sampling	Purposive sampling
<b>Research sample</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Teaching School” staff, including school principals, lead teachers and colleague teachers</li> <li>• University coordinators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School staff, including lead teachers and colleague teachers</li> <li>• University coordinators</li> </ul>
<b>Sample size</b>	242 in sample	166 in sample
<b>Quantitative data collection instrument</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online survey comprising a seven-point Likert scale questionnaire of 44 closed questions</li> <li>• 76 valid responses (32% response rate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online survey comprising a five-point Likert scale questionnaire of 30 closed questions and a set of six open questions</li> <li>• 43 valid responses (26%</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> A small number of pre-service teachers annually receive Scholarships under the National Partnerships Smarter Schools Initiative. Partnership arrangements function differently under this initiative and are reported elsewhere (Allen, Howells & Radford, in press; Independent Schools Tasmania, 2011).

		response rate)
<b>Qualitative data collection instrument</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Five focus groups of six participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interview</li> <li>• 28 participants</li> </ul>
<b>Quantitative data analysis method</b>	SPSS Version 17 to obtain descriptive statistics and for factor analysis	Rasch analysis of Likert scale survey items to obtain descriptive statistics
<b>Qualitative data analysis method</b>	Categorical analysis	Categorical analysis

After analysing their findings individually, researchers from Queensland and Tasmania executed a comparative analysis of the data. SPSS Version 17 was used to generate descriptive statistics and for factor analysis across the combined survey data set. Qualitative data (i.e., interview and focus groups responses) were analysed following the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that enabled key themes to be identified as they emerged from the data. Through subsequent cross-tabulation of the findings derived from the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, researchers were able to discern the most salient themes concerning school and university staff members’ perceptions of the practicum.

**Findings**

This paper focuses on three key themes that emerged from the comparative analysis of the data from both studies, namely that:

- 1) linking university coursework and assessment to the practicum is an important way to integrate theory and practice;
- 2) sustained and open communication between stakeholders is essential; and
- 3) effective school-university partnerships are crucial to the success of the practicum.

The importance of these particular themes lies in the fact that, despite the diverse programming arrangements for practicum between the two universities, school practitioners and university coordinators held a number of similar beliefs about how practicum can most effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice. Table 2 lists the themes and selected associated findings across the two programs.

*Table 2* Themes and selected associated findings

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Queensland study:</b>	<b>Tasmanian study</b>
Linking university work and assessment to the practicum is an important way to integrate theory and practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During practicum, pre-service teachers are required to undertake tasks, known as “portal tasks,” to demonstrate the application of knowledge presented on campus in the workplace.</li> <li>• University coordinators considered the portal task of central importance to the Teaching School Model, claiming that it facilitated the interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty policy stipulates that pre-service teachers should not be required to perform any assessable coursework during practicum.</li> <li>• University coordinators supported the inclusion of coursework assessment into the practicum and were concerned that this was proscribed.</li> <li>• School practitioners supported the in-principle</li> </ul>

	<p>of theory and practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School practitioners perceived the portal task to be effective in that it required “specific” and “practical” action from those working in the school.</li> </ul>	<p>notion of linking assessment to the practicum but were to an extent dissuaded by the practicalities of such an approach.</p>
<p>Sustained and open communication between stakeholders is essential.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School and university staff saw the lead teacher as playing a fundamental role in facilitating open communication between the pre-service teacher, colleague teacher and university coordinator.</li> <li>• University coordinators were seen as critical to bridging the gap between knowledge taught at university and what is learned in schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both university coordinators and school practitioners believed that their roles and responsibilities regarding communication were, in the main, clearly demarcated and articulated, but that they were not always effectively enacted.</li> <li>• Both school practitioners and university coordinators would welcome more involvement by the university coordinator.</li> </ul>
<p>Effective school-university partnerships are crucial to the success of the practicum.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School staff expressed a strong commitment to the Teaching School Model and its inherent partnership arrangements.</li> <li>• Strong collaborative arrangements between school and university staff were seen to signal the strength of the inter-sector partnership.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School and university staff supported the fostering of school-university partnerships as a means of enhancing the practicum.</li> <li>• A number of impediments to the success of current partnership arrangements were acknowledged by both groups.</li> </ul>

**Discussion**

The three themes identified across both programs are discussed in this section.

**Linking university work and assessment to the practicum**

The inclusion of university coursework and assessment in the practicum was endorsed in both programs. Currently, programming arrangements in this area are distinctly different in the Queensland and Tasmanian models. On the one hand, in the Queensland model, pre-service teachers are required to undertake tasks, known as “portal tasks,” to demonstrate the application of knowledge presented on campus in the workplace. Portal tasks are an inherent feature of the practicum and, indeed, of the Teaching School Model (Turner, 2006). On the other hand, in the Tasmanian model, Faculty policy stipulates that pre-service teachers should not be required to perform any assessable coursework during practicum. (Written reflections of observations of practice are encouraged.) Rather, they are assessed on a number of performance indicators in the areas of professional knowledge, professional relationships and professional practice. Colleague teachers are responsible for awarding a Pass (ungraded) or Fail.

The Queensland research confirmed that, in the view of school and university participants, the portal task underpins much of the activity in the TSM and is integral to fulfilling the model's aim of bridging the gap between theory and practice. School staff noted that the portal task determined the "specific and practical action" required by themselves and pre-service teachers in the application of knowledge and skills learned at university. Factor analysis of the responses of school staff revealed that they found the portal task to be concerned with "action," "application," "performance" and "mentoring." Further, school participants reported on the capacity of the portal task to better prepare pre-service teachers for entering the profession. University coordinators also considered the portal task of central importance to the TSM, claiming that it facilitated the interaction of theory and practice. They proffered strong support for the strength of the portal task in framing the activity of what happens in the teaching school.

Findings in the Tasmanian study suggest that the Faculty policy prohibiting the linking of specific coursework and assessment to practicum is contested - to differing degrees - by both school and university staff. University coordinators supported the inclusion of coursework assessment into the practicum and were somewhat disconcerted that this was proscribed. Many expressed concern that the gap between theory and practice was widened, rather than reduced, under current arrangements. However, a number of predominantly pragmatic issues were acknowledged, such as catering for pre-service teachers following non-traditional program trajectories and ensuring that colleague teachers were "on side" with supervising any set tasks. This comment is indicative: "From my experience, colleague teachers don't like students doing assessment tasks during prac. I think this is something we need to work on." Similarly, school practitioners supported the in-principle notion of linking assessment to the practicum but were to an extent dissuaded by the practicalities of such an approach, such as the following: "Teaching is all consuming; doing it properly is all consuming. [Coursework assessment during practicum] is probably a great idea in theory, but I don't think it could happen." Nonetheless, most school and university staff were keen to explore the notion further.

### Sustained and open communication between stakeholders

Not surprisingly, school and university staff in both studies expressed the belief that sustained and open communication was critical to the success of the practicum, particularly in ensuring the enactment of theory into practice. From the research results of the Queensland study, it was possible to identify two pivotal roles in this regard. Specifically, effective inter-sector communication was seen by both school and university staff to "hinge" on the roles of the lead teacher (the school teacher with a mentoring role with pre-service teachers and the oversight of the practicum experience) and the university coordinator. Focus group data revealed that the lead teacher is the "go to" person within the teaching school for all involved, namely, the pre-service teacher, school staff and leaders and the university coordinator. Most participants believed that lead teaching roles were successfully enacted and that staff in these roles had effectively opened up communication channels both within the school and with the university, as evidenced in one principal's comment that lead teachers had "transformed practice" in terms of how schools approached hosting pre-service teachers, thus facilitating a more coordinated participation in the program. The university coordinator role was seen as equally important to the success of the TSM. Principals and lead teachers praised their easy access to the university coordinator and the timely responses provided by the university coordinator to school-requested support. Comparisons were made to other pre-service programs in which responses were less forthcoming and in which contact with the university was often limited to administrative staff with little knowledge of the pre-service teachers. The university coordinator was perceived to have "explicit knowledge" of the program, as highlighted in this principal's comment: "I would [no longer] be comfortable dealing with an admin officer... I want to talk with one of the lecturers, or coordinators, from the university." However, the study also confirmed that there was a perceived need to more clearly define these and other roles through explicit role statements.

Research results from the Tasmanian study highlighted a perceived fracture between ways in which, on the one hand, stakeholder roles and responsibilities regarding communication were defined and, on

the other, how they were enacted. According to participating school and university staff, their respective roles and responsibilities in this regard were, in the main, clearly demarcated and articulated. That is, the university documentation was seen as effective in informing all those involved in the practicum of what was expected of them. However, there were differences of opinion about how well individual stakeholders interpreted and lived out their roles and responsibilities. Interestingly, many university coordinators iterated the types of concerns often expressed by pre-service teachers (see, for example, Allen, 2011) in arguing that they needed to collaborate more effectively with school staff in order to gain shared understandings about how best to support the pre-service teacher. This comment is indicative of many others: "There are misunderstandings, contentions [and] the reality is we could do more to communicate between the uni coordinator and the colleague teacher." Many said they were unable to adequately support their students "from afar." School staff echoed many of the university coordinator concerns, claiming that they would welcome more university involvement in the practicum. Although the university documentation clearly spells out such practices as the (usual) frequency of coordinator visits to the practicum school, such practices were questioned by school staff. This comment is representative of such concerns: "It's not that I am not sure of what [the university coordinator's] role is, but I don't really see how involved they are in the practicum that the student is dutifully doing."

### School-university partnerships

The two themes discussed above point to the relative strengths of the school-university partnerships currently in place in the Queensland and Tasmanian programs. The need to create and foster strong partnerships in teacher education has been widely acknowledged (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Louden & Rohl, 2006). In particular, the move to the professionalisation of teaching in the 1960s and the associated separation of theoretical and practical learning has highlighted the need for alignment between the two sectors (Allen, 2009; Bullough & Draper, 2004). The Queensland research revealed that, according to participants, many of the key elements of a successful school-university partnership can be found in the TSM. Participants from both sectors claimed to hold a shared philosophy around the practicum; they believed that both sets of stakeholders played active, rather than passive or "at a distance" roles; and they voiced strong support for the work of each other (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). The results indicate the existence of a partnership consistent with Zeichner's (2010, p. 89) "hybrid space to more closely connect campus courses and field experiences in teacher education." Zeichner (2010, p. 89) suggests that this "hybrid" or "third space" is required to overcome the traditional dichotomy of academic and practitioner knowledge and to resolve one of the "central problems that has plagued" university-based teacher education, namely, "the disconnect between the campus and school-based components of programs."

Findings in the Tasmanian study show that school and university staff believe partnerships play an important role in enhancing the pre-service teacher experience during practicum. Both at the level of personal engagement and also at a systemic level, participants noted ways in which the partnership can impact on pre-service teacher engagement and learning:

Community needs to be valued and we all need to engage with schools. This should occur in a one-on-one capacity, such as during prac, but we also need to have it written into our role. There should be an expectation that we work to establish partnerships, just like there's an expectation that we write our unit outlines and that sort of thing. (University coordinator)

If the uni doesn't talk to the school and vice versa you might as well give up. Systematised changes would really help create/sustain relationships. (Colleague teacher)

Participants also noted a number of shortcomings, mainly due to limited time availability, in current partnership arrangements. Both colleague teachers and university coordinators expressed concern that they did not have the capacity to invest more heavily in fostering partnerships. For the most part, they were also sympathetic to their inter-sector colleagues who they believed faced similar constraints in terms of workload, as exemplified in this university coordinator's comment: "The frantic, professional

life of colleague teachers means that they often don't have time to get involved. There's so much going on for them, as there is for us." Possible solutions were put forward as a means of strengthening the partnership. Resoundingly, participants called for more personal contact between university and school staff through such initiatives as regular, formalised discussions and social events and more frequent visits to schools by university staff. Several university coordinators suggested that there should be more consistency in the allocation of university staff to (the same) practicum schools.

### Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper on a comparative study into two diverse pre-service teacher education programs are threefold. First, the study showed that, across both the Queensland and Tasmanian programs investigated in the study, school and university staff consider the linking of university coursework and assessment to the practicum as an important way to integrate theory and practice. In the Queensland model, prescribed practicum tasks, known as "portal tasks," were deemed by both sets of stakeholders to be integral to the facilitation of theory-practice integration. The Tasmanian practicum policy currently proscribes embedding coursework assessment into the practicum, a policy principle contested by many in both the school and university sectors. Although they acknowledged a number of mainly practical constraints to linking assessment to the practicum, many participants in the Tasmanian study argued that doing so would help to align university theory with classroom practice.

Second, this study highlighted the importance of sustained and open communication between stakeholders and showed how such communication is facilitated and hindered in the two programs. On the one hand, participating school and university staff in the Queensland study saw the lead teacher as playing a fundamental and largely successful role in facilitating open communication between the pre-service teacher, colleague teacher and university coordinator. University coordinators were considered critical to bridging the gap between knowledge taught at university and what is learned in schools and were deemed to fulfil this role as it was intended. On the other hand, both university coordinators and school practitioners in the Tasmanian study believed that their roles and responsibilities regarding communication were, in the main, clearly demarcated and articulated, but that they were not always effectively enacted. Both sets of stakeholders said they would welcome more active involvement in the practicum by the university coordinator.

The third and associated finding is that stakeholders across both programs considered effective school-university partnerships to be crucial to the success of the practicum. In the Queensland study, school staff expressed an ongoing commitment to the Teaching School Model and its inherent partnership arrangements. Strong collaborative arrangements between school and university staff in this program were seen to signal the strength of the inter-sector partnership. In the Tasmanian counterpart study, school and university staff supported the fostering of partnerships as a means of enhancing the practicum but acknowledged a number of impediments to the success of current partnership arrangements. Several possible solutions were put forward as a means of strengthening the partnership.

In conclusion, this study provides insight into how two diverse teacher education programs construct and implement the pre-service practicum. Each program serves a distinctly different "clientele" and, as such, the successes of one program might not necessarily be achievable in the same way in the other. Similarly, the same impediments might not apply. Nonetheless, the perceptions of key stakeholders reported above shed some light on ways in which teacher educators and school staff might work collaboratively to design practicum experiences that best assist the pre-service teachers with whom they work to integrate theory into practice. Although the practicum is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of pre-service teacher education (Fazio & Volante, 2011), there is still much to be discovered and reported about how best to create and sustain powerful practicum. It is hoped that this paper makes a contribution in this area.



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