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## Remembering Reflection in Pre-service Teachers' Professional Experience

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*Abstract: In an Australian education policy environment where professional standards are determining the parameters of effective teaching and learning, it is important that we revisit ways to ensure reflection and collegial engagement are embedded in pre-service teachers' professional experience. This article reports on a university program initiative that used a non-clinical model of professional experience to centralise opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage in reflection and research of their practice in a collaborative and largely non-hierarchical learning and teaching environment. Ultimately the results of their experience indicated that pre-service teachers were able to theorise about their practice in ways that cognitively and affectively resonated with them and allowed them to gain insights into the complexities of the teaching and learning process and of themselves as teachers*

### Introduction

Creating opportunities for pre-service teachers (PSTs) to critically reflect on and theorise about their practice is frequently regarded as an essential component of professional experience, yet professional experience is commonly organized using a clinical supervision model that sidelines such practices. A heavy reliance on the feedback and assessment provided by mentor teachers and university supervisors that characterise a hierarchical, clinical model of supervision does not encourage PSTs themselves to theorise about their practice, engage in pedagogical risk taking, or to assimilate critical reflective practices as a considered and natural part of their work. This is because the ultimate role of the supervisor or mentor teacher is as an assessor, rather than as a collaborator working in a collegial context with the PST. Furthermore, the focus of a clinical model is frequently based on PSTs' performance within whole classroom settings where their anxieties over performance and obsessions with practical and procedural issues (Fuller, 1969; Moore, 2003) can override PSTs' intentions to theorise about themselves as teachers and of good practice. It is not that clinical models used in whole classrooms preclude critical reflection but anecdotal evidence suggests that such models do not actively and of themselves, promote such perspectives.

These broad understandings about the importance of reflection and collegiality come into even sharper focus in light of current Australian government education policy initiatives. As part of a much larger context of increasing government interest in teachers' work, the current policy environment is characterised by demands for teacher accountability and compliance with standards to ensure professional excellence. Of particular relevance to this article is the introduction of teacher standards that are contained in the *Australian Professional Standards for*

*Teachers* developed by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2011). While standards are increasingly commonplace internationally (eg. UK and many states in the USA), such an approach to ensuring teacher professionalism and competence runs the risk of suggesting that a checklist of competencies will suffice to improve practices. In this way, standards can act as outcomes, rather than as a participatory process that features reflection as a core component of developing teacher effectiveness. Importantly and regardless of their merit or their use, the introduction of standards offers a timely reminder of the necessity to re-examine the essential characteristics of an effective professional experience, including one that focuses on process; that centralises reflective practice and research within a more horizontal and collegial professional culture.

As Ingvarson (2005) reminds us, “the kinds of change that really matter in education are not structural changes but those that build on teacher capacity and professional culture” (p. 63) and PSTs need to be given meaningful opportunities to be part of that ‘professional culture’. Similarly, as critically reflective researchers of their own practice, PSTs need to be encouraged to problematise notions of professionalism (Bloomfield, 2006) in ways that acknowledge their assumptions and emotions (Britzman, 2003) and situate themselves as part of a community of practice (DuFour, 2004; Lave and Wegner, 1991). Such a position is based on the belief that the ‘professional self’ is not “forged in response to institutionally sanctioned discourses but also within ... the realms of the biographical and the emotional” (Bloomfield, 2006, p. 8). That is, the cognitive, affective and social elements that contribute to a PST’s understanding of the role of the teacher and teacher effectiveness cannot be solely accounted for through compliance to standards. It was these perspectives that were used to frame a new approach to professional experience.

With this brief theoretical and contextual backdrop, this article reports on a university program initiative that introduced a model of professional experience that not only ‘permitted’ but also encouraged PSTs to use their newly-acquired knowledge of developmental and pedagogic theory from on-campus units to think out aloud about their understandings about effective teaching and learning based on interactions with a small group of students in a secondary school classroom context. At the same time, an overall internal review of the structure of the Bachelor of Education courses offered by the School of Education provided an additional initial impetus for this change. In essence, the initiative was intended to develop a shift in mindset about what it means to be a teacher in a changing context. It aimed to encourage PSTs, in a collegial and non-hierarchical environment, to develop a degree of autonomy that encouraged risk taking in their work and provide them with a chance to take ownership of their professional learning and development. As Kincheloe (1998) reminds us, teachers need to:

construct their own views of their practice; ... not implement the constructs of others or act in response to officially-certified knowledge base. They discover asymmetries and contradictions ... (in) ... the untidy world of learners and schools (p. 40).

## **Theoretical Orientation**

There were two key theoretical orientations that framed this professional experience initiative. The first was a commitment to embed reflective practice about effective teaching and learning in a school context (Schon, 1987). Such a perspective acknowledges that PSTs need to “situate learning characteristics belonging to a given theory within specific classroom

situations”. (Moore, 2003, p. 32). That is, PSTs need to be able to apply their theoretical understandings to a school and classroom context. The second orientation was to position those reflective practices, as far as practicable, within a collegial school culture and under the stewardship of a mentor teacher so that opportunities for engaging the personal and professional self could emerge. Each of these orientations will now be discussed.

## **Reflective practice**

A recognition of the importance of reflection and research in teaching and teacher education is hardly new. Several decades ago, Gore and Zeichner (1991) claimed that the fundamentals of such an approach may be found in Dewey (1933) and in the 1950s, through the work of Beckman (1957) and Perrodin (1959) who each demonstrated how such an approach may be used with PSTs as part of their teacher education program. Numerous other authors (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Brookfield, 1995; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith, 1988; Cruikshank, 1987; Ghaye, 2011; Gibbs, 1988; Moon, 2004; Ng & Tan, 2009; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Price & Valli, 2005; Schon, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1996; Tripp, 1993; Valli, 1990; Van Manen, 1977) have contributed to the discussion about the value, nature, processes and outcomes of reflective practices and action research in teaching and teacher education. Again, according to Gore and Zeichner (1991), reflective orientations have long been ‘fashionable’ to the extent that ‘there is not a single teacher educator who would say that he or she is not concerned about preparing teachers who are reflective’ (p. 120). According to Carver (1997), the benefits of such an approach where knowledge is generated from ‘below’ and utilized in ways that inform and are applied to real situations, can encourage PSTs to develop a sense of belonging and competence. As such, the popularity of reflection cuts across ideological lines in that it ‘offends no-one’. However, the rhetoric associated with engagement in reflective practice can reduce the process to simplistic captions or prescriptive checklists (Broud & Walker, 1998) which are not helpful in assisting PSTs to corral their thoughts and structure their (tentative) conclusions and theorising.

In order to highlight the complexity of critical reflective practices, Van Manen (1977), in an allusion to Habermas’ typology, referred to three domains of reflection: technical, practical and critical. Similarly, Gore and Zeichner (1991) describe four essential orientations that have characterised the focus of critical reflective practice. First, an academic orientation refers to Lee Shulman’s (1987) thesis of orienting reflection on the process of transforming academic knowledge to pedagogic content knowledge. Second, and in a similar vein, a social efficiency orientation refers to reflections on the implementation of research on pedagogy, or, putting theory into practice. Third, a developmental orientation recognises the importance of incorporating student interests and needs in developing teaching and learning activities. Fourth, and in a shift towards a more contextual and critical, rather than a pedagogical, focus is a social reconstructivist understanding of reflective practices. Such a position recognises and analyses the systemic inequalities that determine outcomes of schooling (Gore & Zeichner, 1991, p. 121). Characterised by inquiry, participation, dialogue, inclusivity, an appreciation of diversity and a commitment to reflection and empowerment (Shor, 1992), such an orientation encourages PSTs to construct understandings of teaching and learning that have relevance and meaning for them but also recognizes the importance of context and the capriciousness of any definitive responses.

## Communities of Practice

The construction of professional experience in this study was also underpinned by a commitment to ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), so that the tasks undertaken by our PSTs were positioned, as far as feasibly possible, within a professionally collaborative and supportive environment. Learning for the PSTs was intended to be part of a process of socialisation where over time, they could move from marginal to more central participatory positions (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in designing and implementing learning activities for students. In an environment that was less likely to be shackled by hierarchical conditions associated with formal graded assessment and ‘performance’ such as in a more clinical approach to supervision, it was intended that the focus would shift for PSTs to a greater interrogation and ownership of performance. Furthermore, the work of Bloomfield (2006) was also useful in highlighting the role of emotions and life stories in forging ‘the professional self’ (p. 30). Based on the principle that learning to teach is largely a discursive practice affected by relationships, emotions and contexts, where there is “a struggle for voice and ... a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences and available practices” (Britzman, 1991, p. 8), the changes made to the focus of professional experience recognised the importance of the personal in the formation of the professional teacher self. It also recognised that learning to teach is an “uncertain experience that one must learn to interpret and make significant” (2003, p. 3). The task for our PSTs was to acknowledge and celebrate such a perspective and to have the courage and honesty to recognise the importance of this element of learning to teach.

## A Revised Professional Experience

In consideration of these theoretical perspectives, the professional experience initiative that is the subject of this article recognised a level of engagement that flattened hierarchies and foregrounded participation and a trust in the PSTs to make sense of their professional experience. In a practical way, the initiative was about acknowledging the capacity of pre-service (and practicing) teachers to generate theory from practice in a cycle of reflective and purposeful change (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), and through cognitive and affective engagement. Furthermore, the critical element was that there was an intentional and explicit approach to understanding the reality of PSTs’ work and their capacity to be an agent of change (Tripp, 1993). In summary, Carver (1997) states that such a process can involve confronting both cognitive and affective elements that are all part of a professional enculturation process. For Carver it is about:

... facing challenges ... conquering fears, building strengths, overcoming weaknesses ... developing social skills including active listening ... making mistakes, struggling, reflecting on experiences and being exposed to constructive feedback (p. 146).

It was this broad framework that ultimately informed the changes that were made to professional experience for our PSTs. It recognized that professional experience should encourage PSTs to think out aloud, articulate and expect the conundrums between what they expected and what they experienced, to articulate and account for any dissonances between the theory they had learned and the theory that they ended up applying. The reflective methods were intended to challenge common assumptions about learning, teaching, knowledge, power and relationships in a context that was supportive and non-threatening and that recognised their

personal assumptions and relationships. These orientations, along with practical issues associated with their course, were used to position the new professional experience unit that is the subject of this article.

A revised professional experience unit was made compulsory for all students enrolled in the second year of a four-year Bachelor of Education (secondary) degree and represented the only professional experience unit in this year of their studies. The unit required the PSTs to attend a school two days a week for five weeks (=10 days in the school). As per other professional experience units, each PST was allocated a mentor teacher in the school and a university supervisor was assigned to liaise with and support (not assess) them during the professional experience. The unit was intended to directly connect with other on campus units (especially those units that addressed theories of learning, teaching and assessment and issues of social justice) and was designed to “extend the students’ understanding of teaching and learning in secondary school classrooms ... and ... the complexities involved in identifying and responding to the needs of learners” (EDN 2101 Unit Guide, 2012). It should also be noted that PSTs had not at this stage of their course completed units related to curriculum development so the focus was not on aligning their experience with particular curriculum requirements. This reality provided an additional catalyst to reinvent professional experience so that it did not rely on or be framed by specified curriculum or pedagogical constructions. An excerpt from the Unit Guide describes the key aims and outcomes of the unit.

<p>PSTs need to demonstrate an ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• undertake relevant research into student needs using a cycle of reflective practice</li><li>• critically reflect on the role of the teacher in teaching and learning contexts in schools</li><li>• position personal theories of teaching and learning within a broader context</li><li>• write a professional report on their findings</li></ul> <p>More specifically, by engaging in this professional experience, students should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• articulate the individual learning needs of a small group of students</li><li>• undertake research (eg. further reading of academic literature, policies, discussions with teachers, students) to decide on possible actions to address these students’ needs within the particular school and classroom context</li><li>• design appropriate learning experiences, strategies and resources to address those needs within the classroom context</li><li>• engage in a process of action learning, including reflection on the efficacy of approaches used and suggested alternatives</li><li>• prepare a report on findings about the nature of their own and students’ learning and teaching</li></ul>
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**Figure 1**

In the school, a PST’s immediate focus was to assist the learning of a small group of secondary school students in the mentor teacher’s classroom. As part of the project, the PSTs were asked to identify the learning needs of their assigned students, and articulate the reasons for their conclusions. They were to conduct research into the possible causes and manifestations of

these students' needs and prepare teaching and learning strategies and resources to assist the students. Throughout their placement, they were required to collaborate with their mentor teacher and supervisor, maintain a critical reflective journal of their thoughts and actions, conundrums and dilemmas, read relevant academic or policy literature as required and to submit a small research report on their work. It should be noted that students were not required to teach whole classes, but rather to work with small groups within the mentor teacher's classes. Such a focus also meant that PSTs were not required to manage large groups or deliver whole class lessons and thus, were not constrained by anxieties over 'control' or procedural issues (Moore, 2003).

### **Schedule**

This cohort of PSTs met twice prior to their placement. At the first meeting, the shape and practicalities of the unit were discussed while at the second meeting, the focus was on the nature, processes and outcomes of reflective practice, action research and assessment. In the initial briefing, a Unit Guide, which described the outcomes and requirements of the unit, was distributed to the students and supervisors (later posted online) and an explanatory presentation elaborated on the pragmatic and conceptual details of the professional experience. Students and supervisors were encouraged to complete a feedback sheet at the end of the unit, about their response to the innovation and this was later used as a source of data to inform future constructions of the unit.

The PSTs were given readings on reflective practice and action research to complete and were encouraged to link their placement to relevant developmental or pedagogic theory they had learned on campus in several other units. Because of the distributive nature of the placement, there were few opportunities for PSTs to collaborate or meet together during the placement to discuss the readings. After the placement, an additional, longer workshop provided an opportunity for the PSTs to debrief about their experiences and to position their learning within a broader theoretical context. Pragmatic issues, pedagogical issues, issues around teachers' work and commitments, and their own understandings and shifts about themselves as teachers and as learners were discussed. Importantly, the workshop provided an opportunity for the PSTs to understand that they had the capacity to theorise about their work, to assess the extent of the connections between theory learned on campus and its application in schools and to recognize that making mistakes and expecting personal and professional dissonances were integral to developing competence.

### **Mentor Teachers**

The mentor teachers invariably determined the selection of secondary school students with whom the PSTs worked. It should be pointed out that not all the identified school students were under-achievers nor were they students with particular physical or intellectual needs, although this was a common assumption held by many of the teachers in the early stages of the professional experience. Some of the assigned school students were people who may have lacked motivation or who required extension and further challenge. It was also stressed that the PSTs were not to be considered as teacher assistants who were there to undertake the more menial tasks associated with teaching. The PST's task was essentially to understand the

students' learning needs, discuss the basis of their determination of those needs, work with the students and the mentor teacher to consider how they might go about addressing them, and to evaluate and critically reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies and their experience. PSTs were also given opportunities to express changes that they experienced in their perceptions of students or themselves as teachers – and what these experiences might mean for their future practice.

The mentor teacher was also required to complete a school-based report on the PST's activities (see Appendix 1). In this report, the criteria were adapted from AITSL standards (2011) but recognised that the PSTs were in the very early stages of their four-year course and could not be expected to achieve the standards set out for graduates. Thus the criteria focused, not on full classroom performance, lesson planning or even using a range of pedagogies, but on ensuring that PSTs had engaged with the process of 'reflective practices', had consulted and 'negotiated' with mentor teachers, worked towards being part of the 'school community', and had undertaken 'research'. As mentioned previously the focus was on a mindset and a way of working, rather than on levels of 'performance' and 'standards' in the classroom (even though most of the domains of competence and the standards could be adapted to suit this professional experience).

Mentor teachers were informed of the changes to the professional experience through several means: through a letter sent to the school coordinator, through the Unit Guide, and through conversations with the university supervisor and with the PSTs. Through these means the emphases and foci of the professional experience were described and theoretically substantiated. No formal professional learning was considered or initiated as it was believed that there were sufficient opportunities for teachers to understand the ways in which this model of professional experience could support and develop PST learning.

## **Research Report**

In their final research report, the PSTs were provided with a proforma to structure their written responses. Following a similar model used by Kruger and Cherednichenko (2006, p. 5), the report was divided into four sections: The Context (school and classroom context); The Students (a description of the needs of their students and on what bases they ascertained this); The Action (a description of the literature that was consulted, the strategies used, their relative effectiveness and how they knew whether strategies were effective or ineffective); and The Learning (what they as teachers learned about effective teaching and learning and about themselves as learners and teachers) (see Appendix 2). These sub-headings were intentionally broad to provide scope for the PSTs to describe and validate their experiences. A major component of the PSTs' final research report featured an analysis of what she or he had learned about teaching and learning within the particular school and classroom context as well as their understandings of themselves as teachers and as learners. In this sense much of the initiative aligned with Gore and Zeichner's (1991) typology with a focus on the developmental and pedagogical orientation of reflective practice. While contextual elements were noted in their report, it was not a singular focus in the unit. Rather the emphasis was "to investigate their own professional practice through an integrated process of describing, explaining, theorising and attempting to change practice" (Arnold, Edwards, Hooley & Williams, 2012, p. 67).



## Method

The introduction of the new unit, as the focus of this research, was set up with a view to generate knowledge to inform and improve future constructions of professional experience units, or to 'research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action' (Lewin, quoted in Showler, 2000, p. 2). As such the research followed the principles of action research as articulated by Lewin (1946) and others such as Grundy (1995) and Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) and incorporated the collection of valid data to make informed choices about ways to improve practices. Using a 'process of exploration' (Hammersely & Atkinson, 1983, p. 10), the research sought and drew on the interpretations and realities of the participants.

During the first meeting prior to the professional placement, the 30 enrolled PSTs and two supervisors were informed that the unit would undergo an evaluation and that they would each be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the strengths and challenges of the unit. Stakeholders were informed that I, as the unit coordinator, would be conducting the evaluation. It was stated that there was no compulsion to provide feedback and that ethics approval from the University ethics committee for the conduct of this research had been sought and received.

At the completion of the unit, data were generated from feedback from interviews/structured conversations with a sample of PSTs, mentors and supervisors (Patton, 2002, p. 9). Data collection thereby used a process that was both 'systematic [and] intentional' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 7).

Participants in the evaluation were selected after an email was sent and/or telephone contact made to remind stakeholders of the evaluation and invite them to participate. Audio taped interviews/structured conversations with these voluntary respondents (mentor teachers [n=3]; supervisors [n=2]; and PSTs [n=9: 2 males, 7 females, including one mature aged female]) were conducted several weeks after professional experience placement had finished and the PSTs' research projects had been assessed. In this way, the PSTs' responses were more likely to be valid in that all their results had been finalized. Such timing also ensured that the integrity of the PSTs' assessment was in no way compromised. Furthermore, as the unit coordinator and researcher, in this article, the anonymity of participants' responses has been safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms.

Given the large amount of data generated by responses from the sample of PSTs' interview data from each stakeholder group, the focus for this article is on the nine PSTs' interview responses. While responses from mentor teachers and supervisors were useful in terms of informing subsequent practical adjustments to this unit, my research interest, as stated earlier, was in the way in which the PSTs constructed their understanding of themselves as teachers. It was about how a different model of professional experience might foster the ingrained use of critical reflective practices and professional theorising, as well as contribute to greater professional collegiality among PSTs and mentor teachers. The PST participants were asked about their experiences of the unit, the challenges they faced and their experiences of themselves as teachers. Interviews were then transcribed and a number of common themes were identified.

## Responses

### Challenges

There were several challenges that characterized the introduction of this unit. For PSTs, there was initial confusion over what this unit was really about; the timing of the unit; and 'doing' reflective practice and research.

As this new unit did not 'look' or 'feel' like any of the other professional experience units, there was a considerable degree of initial trepidation about doing things differently. The greatest challenge for all people involved in the new unit was in coming to grips with its purposes and the tasks that were required. The unit required all stakeholders (PSTs, mentor teachers and supervisors) to conceptualise the professional experience in ways that were unfamiliar and for some, quite confronting. The PST's role in this professional experience did not mirror the role that PSTs undertook in more common, clinical models of professional experience. A number of PSTs commented that it would have been far easier if they had just been allowed to 'take a class'. The common assumption behind this comment was that it was considered to be more valid, and less challenging, to continue with familiar ways of doing things.

Also interesting was the way in which pragmatic considerations muddled the PSTs' initial perceptions of the new unit. In the early part of the interviews, PSTs were asked generally about their experience of the unit. Without prompting, most PSTs referred to the difficult timing of the experience (fourth term and close to examinations) or that the distributed days over five weeks interrupted their study schedule. These practical issues dominated the initial phase of the conversations with the PSTs and many were insistent that this aspect of the unit be re-considered. Some PSTs became quite emotional when discussing this aspect of the experience and it tended to override other positive aspects of the initiative (which many later acknowledged). In this way some PSTs saw that the professional experience 'disadvantaged' them in that it took time away from their other (more important?) commitments.

In addition, some of the PSTs expressed their apprehension about the reflective and research foci of the unit. Despite the fact that concepts such as reflective practice were a part of their lexicon and undertaking research a familiar component of their studies, many PSTs were initially apprehensive about their ability to engage with this 'real life' example of research involving real issues and having to scrutinize their beliefs and assumptions. It was quite confronting for these students even more so than having to teach a whole class. For them, whole class teaching provided a more familiar construction of what teaching was 'really' all about.

Even though these concerns were shared by many of the PSTs, more positive responses were also revealed in the extensive conversations with the participants.

### Emerging Themes

While a considerable amount of data was generated as a result of the formal feedback and conversations with stakeholders, the following brief snapshots provide a glimpse of several common themes to emerge from the PSTs' theorizing: the importance of developing positive relationships, not only with their students but also with the mentor teacher (Britzman, 2003); and the importance of recognizing and addressing the complexity of students' needs. It is also clear

that for some of the PSTs, engaging in reflective practices enabled them to understand these complexities in deeper and more nuanced ways.

Many spoke about the centrality of building effective relationships as a necessary prerequisite for effective teaching and learning. Almost all of the PSTs, in one way or another commented on the importance and the pleasure of building relationships with students. For example, Amy<sup>1</sup>, one of the PSTs, insisted on the importance of “building individual relationships and building a sense of trust [with the students] before trying to go further”; and another, Byron, said “... There are lots of hidden things [in teaching] but you have to get to know the students”. Similarly, Joanne said that “the key factor was knowing your students” and in this regard she mentioned her struggle over the extent to which she needed to expose parts of her own self in the process of getting to know them. The fine line between the safety of professional distance and the need to gain trust and develop empathy was an issue that emerged for her, especially in the early stages of the professional experience.

Others mentioned that their collaborative relationships with the mentor teacher enabled them to ‘feel’ like a teacher because “[the mentor teacher] included me in a lot of the things that she was doing ... [and] ... I felt like a colleague rather than a teacher assistant”. Similarly, Cassie said that “the most beneficial aspect of this [professional experience] was the interaction with teachers, where they included me in their planning and their conversations”. This approach encouraged Cassie to later say that “I felt more confident that I can actually do this (ie teach)”. Here the collaborative process, allowing a transition between a ‘peripheral’ to a more central role would support Lave and Wenger’s (1991) claims about the socialisation process required of PSTs during their professional experiences.

In addition, many of the PSTs commented on the range and diversity of students’ needs and the adjustments that teachers need to make in order to cater for them. Joanne mentioned that “I didn’t realise the impact I might have” on the students’ attitudes to learning. Danika reflected on herself as a teacher when she commented that “accommodating each student is a task in itself”, and later, “I understood them more towards the end when I could reflect on things more. My understandings changed after having been with them for a period of time”. In another example, such a discursive element was clear for Joanne who noted the folly of judging students’ needs on the basis of immediate and superficial behaviours. Kathy too, felt that she “had just skimmed the surface” of understanding the students’ needs. She saw that she needed her to go deeper into understanding the conditions of her students’ lives, thoughts and desires, while for others it was about ensuring that they did not make judgments based on superficial observations of a student’s behavior, or, in some cases, the opinion of the mentor teacher. This feature emerged in the interviews with almost all of the PSTs. As an example, many PSTs commented on their students’ lack of motivation for school and to ‘succeed’. A number of PSTs were initially appalled at the ‘lack of trying’ and the feeling of futility among students who had stopped bothering to learn or to complete schoolwork, let alone homework. However, over time many PSTs were able to problematize the lack of motivation and appreciate that issues of motivation are the result of numerous factors that cannot always be reduced to ‘laziness’ or ‘inability’ to do the work. Here some PSTs commented on the importance of reflection and keeping a detailed journal because “then you can see the links” (Joanne) and “note the trends and the patterns” (Kathy) of behaviours shown by students on different days. These PSTs’

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<sup>1</sup> All names used are pseudonyms

comments indicated how conclusions regarding a student's motivation required systematic observation and reflection. Joanne also reflected that she saw how her mentor teacher was able to adapt and modify her practices to suit the students and the topic she was teaching. She realised that she could "create her own [teaching] style using snippets" (of different theories of learning). Such a situation is reminiscent of Bowen's (2010) claim that while theory has a central place in informing practice, PSTs "may need to extrapolate, reinterpret or redefine approaches depending on the specific circumstances of their students, classroom environment, school and community" (p. 51). Such a claim may well apply in Joanne's case. In another instance, Geordie made a general comment about a 'problem' student with whom he was working and who would have likely to have been overlooked in the usual classroom context. Geordie noted that the experience of working with this student highlighted the folly of adopting pre-conceived or superficial notions of student abilities and needs. By later using the student's perspective as a starting point, Geordie was forced to reassess his own assumptions and implement strategies that more closely aligned with the reality of the student's needs.

In other interviews, additional issues were raised. Elizabeth described how the interaction with her students reminded her of how difficult it can be to learn new things and how this process varies between people: "when I'm trying to learn something I forgot how long it actually takes to learn something new ... things happen at different rates for different people ...". Or, they spoke about the dissonances between theory they had learned on-campus and their experience of the practical realities of teaching:

At uni... there's been talk about student oriented teaching approaches ... but the teacher I was with ... was ...very teacher oriented ... and some students seemed to respond very well to that but it was really obvious that there were some students who seemed to be too ... intimidated to ask for assistance or to make comments ... and I found it very enlightening ... (Farah)

From this brief description of the professional experience unit several observations may be made.

These insights demonstrated that in general the PSTs enjoyed the interactions with teachers and feeling 'like a teacher' despite their initial worries over doing things differently by 'not taking a whole class'. More importantly they realized that they had the capacity to theorise and to develop the confidence to 'have a go'. By far the most common refrain, reflected in their interviews (and in their research reports), was the increasing awareness of the nuances of differences between students. Awareness of the differences between students and how they cater for them in a whole classroom was by far the most common challenge they expressed as they reflected on their future professional experiences. Furthermore, the responses would support Britzman's claims about teaching as a discursive practice that needs to acknowledge "asymmetries and contradictions" (Kincheloe, 1998) and Carver's (1997) imperative to develop "social skills" and face challenges.

More importantly, after the professional experience none of the PSTs commented on issues around classroom management or the pragmatic issues commonly associated with teaching a whole class. The experience allowed them, for a short while at least, to give their attention to considering for themselves the complexities of teaching and learning. This focus allowed them to internalize, apply and reconsider theory with real students, without the distractions over whole class management or formal clinical supervision and assessment.

## Conclusion

As compliance to professional standards for the profession gains traction, it is important that we devise ways of ensuring that critical reflective practice remains at the forefront of professional experience and from this overview of our revised professional experience, several claims may be made. The first claim is that for all of the PSTs, overcoming or reducing perceived practical hurdles was essential if PSTs were to begin to theorise about the teaching and learning process. Once the focus shifted away from pragmatic issues such as the timing of the professional experience, their personal reflections described in interviews quite clearly demonstrated their ability to use their professional experience to make sense of teaching and learning in ways that were meaningful and powerful for themselves. The critical issue that emerged was that these PSTs not only contemplated the learned theory from on-campus units, but were able to make personal connections with it. In this way, their responses resonated with Kincheloe's (1998) thesis on knowledge creation and Cochrane-Smith and Lytle's (1993) work on the context specific nature of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the importance of cognitive and affective connections (Britzman, 1991, 2003) cannot be underestimated. While the students were familiar with developmental theory, the professional experience allowed them to find out for themselves how theory might be applied and modified in the light of context.

Furthermore, the snapshot of comments from our PSTs has some resonance with Gore and Zeichner's (1991) claims. As a result of engagement with reflective practices and a collaborative approach, PSTs become "more thoughtful in general about their teaching; ... more aware of their own practices and the gaps between their beliefs and their practices ... [and] ... more aware of their pupils' thinking and learning" (p. 131). Moreover, while it would be an exaggeration to say that the use of reflective strategies to understand the teaching and learning process was fully embraced by all PSTs, the use of reflective practices provided a vehicle through which the PSTs could more deeply consider their students' learning needs and adopt more considered and theorised understandings about the components of effective practice.

In addition, further scrutiny of the ways in which mentor teachers might be encouraged and supported to collaborate and give greater responsibility to PSTs, could be the focus of future projects. While many PSTs lauded the collaboration they experienced with mentor teachers, it was also clear that clinical, hierarchical models of supervision with PSTs taking whole classes, were frequently seen as the norm. While such an approach is understandable, this research would suggest that alternative approaches are both possible and desirable.

As a provider of professional experience, our challenge is to ensure that our PSTs seek to understand teaching in ways that move beyond the pragmatic, such as the university timetable or competing commitments, and to reinforce the centrality of reflection as a way to understand the complexities associated with teaching and learning and with themselves as teachers. In this regard, Goodwin's (2010) imperative has resonance in that we need to

conceptualise teaching knowledge in ways that transcend the practicalities ... to develop in our students ways of thinking about and approaching teaching and learning to a vast array of problems and dilemmas, most of which cannot possibly be anticipated beforehand (p. 22).

In the case of this professional experience, we need to remember that professional standards may frame the parameters of teacher professionalism and teachers' work, but they cannot define all aspects of the induction of teachers into the profession. On a different level, the research has highlighted the potential to extend PSTs' learning to provide a greater focus on the

importance of school and classroom contexts (Gore & Zeichner, 1991) in determining responses to students and the complexities involved in responding to students' needs. This, together with a greater interrogation of the role of the mentor teacher in developing a community of practice, may well be the foci of further iterations of this professional experience.

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## Appendix 1

### RESEARCH REPORT

#### **PART I                    The School and Classroom Context**

- The school context (demographics, size, staff:student ratio, interesting features and programs, purpose)
- The classroom/s in which you observed the targeted students (subject, year level, number of students, layout, resources, timetable, role of teacher and any other issues that you regard as impacting on student learning)
- Reflections on how the school and classroom contexts may have impacted on student learning

#### **PART II                    The Students**

- Description of learning needs of **two** students and the basis of those needs (ie, how do you know?)
- Indicate the extent of changes to your original understandings about students' needs and the basis of changes in perception (why did you change your perspective?)
- Literature related to your topic, appropriately referenced
- Relevant policy documents (eg. DoE, School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA), School) that assisted you in understanding your students and the types of interactions you designed

#### **PART III                    The Action**

- Using evidence from journal entries, describe strategies used to address two of 'your' students' needs
- Indicate relative success of these strategies and the way in which you judged that success (ie, how do you know it worked or didn't work?)
- Note any changes of plan that you implemented and the results of changes

#### **PART IV                    The Learning**

- To what extent has your work in this school assisted your understanding of the key aims of this unit, viz.:
  - understanding of the range of cognitive, physical, social, emotional factors that may affect student learning
  - ability to undertake relevant research into student needs using a cycle of reflective practice
  - ability to critically reflect on the role of the teacher in teaching and learning contexts in schools
  - ability to position personal theories of teaching and learning within a broader context
- What, if any, blockages occurred during the placement? How would you deal with these in the future?
- To what extent was the use of reflective practice and journaling a useful device to assist your understanding of and approaches to students' learning? (and your own?)
- To what extent did your understandings of student learning, the role of teachers, role of student teachers change as a result of your participation in this professional experience?
- What approaches, dispositions and contexts contribute to effective learning – both your own and your students?
- What further questions does your work raise?

## **Appendix 2**

### **SCHOOL BASED REPORT**

*NB: Mentor teachers completed this report. Levels of engagement with each criterion were rated as 'rarely', 'sometimes' or 'always'. Spaces for comments were provided for each domain and at the end of the report.*

#### **DOMAIN 1 PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE**

##### **Standard 1 Know students and how they learn**

- Able to make reasoned and professional judgements about particular students and their range of needs based on process of critical reflection
- Understood the particular learning needs and interests of a small group of learners

##### **Standard 2 Know the content and how to teach it**

- Able to clearly and appropriately articulate content to students
- Reflected on how content may be organised and delivered to assist student learning

#### **DOMAIN 2 PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

##### **Standard 3 Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning**

- Using actions emerging from personal reflections and other sources, is able to plan and implement effective teaching strategies
- Negotiated with mentor teacher to design appropriate tasks and teaching resources

##### **Standard 4 Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments**

- Able to establish and maintain respectful & productive working relationships with a small group of students
- Used proactive strategies to ensure supportive and safe learning environments

##### **Standard 5 Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning**

- Able to articulate the extent to which students have learned intended and unintended outcomes
- Able to provide timely and relevant informal feedback to students about their progress

#### **DOMAIN 3 PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

##### **Standard 6 Engage in professional learning**

- Using actions emerging from personal reflections in journal and other sources, is able to plan and implement effective teaching strategies
- Negotiated with mentor teacher to design appropriate tasks and teaching resources

##### **Standard 7 Engage professionally with colleagues, parent/carers and the community**

- Collaborated with mentor teacher to generate ideas, shape experiences & initiate relevant & achievable learning outcomes

- Engaged in discussions with teachers about effective teaching and learning
- Attended meetings as appropriate & willingly participated in school activities to become part of the school community

*Additional spaces for feedback on the PST's punctuality, dress, use of time and being proactive in organizing meetings and communication with staff were also included.*