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School Co-ordinators: Essential Partners in Professional Experiences

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School Co-ordinators: Essential Partners for Quality Professional Experiences

Abstract

It is widely accepted that professional experience or practicum is ‘a critically important part of teacher education courses and is consistently valued highly by student teachers’ (eg Ramsey, 2000; Teaching Australia, 2006; Parliament of Australia, 2007). In Australia and overseas there is a growing emphasis on teacher educators working in partnership with schools to construct professional experiences that maximise student teacher engagement and learning (Parliament of Australia, 2007).

The literature on professional experience in pre-service teacher education provides varied and detailed accounts of the roles of the Pre-service Teacher, the Mentor Teacher and the University Mentor (see for example, Gaffey & Dobbins, 1996; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Zeichner, 1999). However the School based Professional Experience Co-ordinator, usually the principal or deputy principal, has, according to Martinez & Coombs (2001), “been dismissed as an administrative outsider to the essential triad of pre-service supervision” (p. 275). Consequently the Co-ordinator’s role has received very little attention in the literature. The study on which this paper is primarily based fills a gap in the existing literature on professional experience with its focus on the *School based Co-ordinator role*.

The data for the study come from individual interviews and a focus group involving six primary School-based Co-ordinators. The aim of the study was to identify the roles played by these Co-ordinators and to document their exemplary practices in supporting professional experience framed around *learning communities*. This paper presents some of the findings of this study. It will be seen that the School-based Professional Experience Co-ordinator is crucial to the successful implementation of professional experiences framed around learning communities. It will be argued that Co-ordinators are essential in developing ‘new’ school-university partnerships which are necessary in ensuring high quality professional experiences.

Key words: professional experience; school-based co-ordinators; school-university partnerships; practicum

Introduction

As we know, the idea of partnerships in teacher education is not new. There has been a long established call for school-university partnerships in the literature (eg Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Goodlad, 1998; Peters, 1997; Yeatman & Sachs, 1995) and government reports (eg Parliament of Australia, 2007). What is new however is a growing recognition in the literature of the ‘complex and contradictory aspects of partnerships’ and the difficulties that arise when the notion of partnerships is presented un-problematically (Cardini, 2006; Bloomfield, 2009; White, Bloomfield & Le Cornu, 2010). As a result there has been a resurgent acknowledgement of the need for ‘new’ school-university partnerships. Such partnerships have a commitment to ‘reciprocal learning relationships’ (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Kruger et al, 2009; Zeichner, 2010) and are deemed essential if professional experiences are to be of high quality and sustainable.

However the question needs to be asked; Who are the partners? Traditionally the literature on professional experience in pre-service teacher education has concentrated on three participants– the student teacher, cooperating teacher and university supervisor. Varied and detailed accounts of their roles have been provided (see for example, Gaffey & Dobbins, 1996; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Zeichner, 1999) and indeed these three participants continue to be referred to as the ‘key triad members’ involved in practicum (Valencia, Martin, Place & Grossman, 2009; Kruger et al, 2009). Whilst there is no doubt that these three roles are important I want to argue that there is another essential partner, that of the ‘School based professional experience Co-ordinator.’ This role has received relatively little attention in the literature. It is only in the last decade that empirical work has been conducted on this role and even then, it is scant in comparison to the other roles.

Traditionally, where the role has been reported in the literature, it has been the managerial and administrative responsibilities of the Co-ordinator that have been highlighted. Martinez & Coombs (2001) were among the first to conduct an empirical study on the role, given their concern that the Co-ordinator had “been dismissed as an administrative outsider to the essential triad of pre-service supervision” (p. 275). Whilst acknowledging that efficient and competent administration is a key factor for successful practica experiences, they considered the role to be far more than that. Their small study confirmed this when it identified a diverse range of practices that were “crucial in ensuring that practicum is an occasion for quality learning” (Martinez & Coombs, 2001, p. 2). More recently, Mutton & Butcher (2007) conducted a study in the UK which also challenged the earlier view. They found that the range of roles and responsibilities of school-based ITT co-ordinators was wide and might generally be seen as falling into 4 distinct categories: 1/managerial and administrative, 2/pedagogical, 3/monitoring and assessment and 4/pastoral” (p, 51-52). Interestingly though, of the four aspects, the Co-ordinators themselves regarded their managerial and administrative responsibilities as the most important.

This paper presents the findings of a small empirical study, which, unlike the two earlier studies that set out to capture the full nature and scope of the Co-ordinator role, concentrates on the Co-ordinators’ pedagogical role. That is, it highlights what a small group of Co-ordinators did to support their student teachers’ learning during their professional experiences at their schools. The paper starts with some contextual information including details of the study. Some of the findings are presented next and the paper concludes with a discussion of the key insights.

Background

Context

In a number of the programs and courses in the School of Education at the University of South Australia, attempts are being made to reconceptualise professional experience around the notion of *learning communities*. This particular model of professional experience has a commitment to encouraging Pre-service Teacher (PST) agency and providing increased opportunities for PSTs to engage with their peers and mentors in

more collegial ways. Changes have been made to how professional experience is structured and to the roles of the various participants involved.

This paper is based on the Graduate Bachelor of Education (primary) program which is an eighteen month program that includes three professional experience courses, each having a series of on-campus workshops, an online component and a professional experience which consists of four – six individual introductory days over as many weeks preceding a two - five week block. The following initiatives have been introduced:

- Professional experience course teams;
- Clustering in schools;
- Mentoring/site model of support;
- Learning Circles.

These initiatives have been described elsewhere and so will not be repeated here, given the word limitations of this paper. Suffice to say that evaluation of the range of initiatives is ongoing (see Le Cornu, 2007; 2008; 2009, 2010). Findings from each of the studies have illuminated many benefits for reframing professional experiences around the notion of learning communities, as well as the challenges and dilemmas. One of the findings that emerged from all of the evaluations was how important the Co-ordinator role was to the successful implementation of the learning communities model and the contributions they made to PSTs' learning. This was the catalyst for the study on which this paper is based.

The study

The study focused on six Co-ordinators who were involved with the Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary/Primary) Program - 3 principals and 3 deputy principals. The Co-ordinators were highly experienced, both in the role itself (each had held the post of Co-ordinator for over five years) and as teachers/leaders in general (each had been teaching for more than 20 years). The criteria for their inclusion in the study was that they had been involved with the graduate Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary/Primary) for a minimum of two years and they had been identified in the earlier studies as having an impact on Pre-service Teachers' (PSTs') learning.

The specific aims of the study were to identify the Co-ordinators' perceptions of their role and to capture and document their exemplary practices. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted initially. Each interview took approx 60 minutes and these were taped and transcribed. A focus group was then conducted with the Co-ordinators to further explore emerging themes. The transcripts and meeting notes were analysed using a process of coding and categorizing which led to key themes being identified.

Findings

This next section presents the findings in relation to one of the research questions; How does the role of the School-based Professional Experience Co-ordinator contribute to high quality professional experiences for Pre-service Teachers? In answering this question the Co-ordinators illuminated their thinking behind *why* they do what they do. They discussed

the role of professional experiences, what contributes to high quality professional experiences and how they perceived their Co-ordinator role.

The role of professional experiences

The Co-ordinators were obviously very committed to initial teacher education given their ongoing involvement in hosting PSTs in their schools. Therefore it is not surprising that every Co-ordinator recognized the central role that professional experiences play in learning to teach. They cited the main reasons as the need for the theory/practice link, learning in context and testing PSTs' commitment to teaching. All of the Co-ordinators focused on professional experience as a *learning* time for PSTs. Whilst they acknowledged the learning that comes from being in classrooms, they particularly emphasized the learning for PSTs beyond the classroom. They wanted them to learn about the whole role of a teacher. The following comment was indicative; *"they need to learn the big picture, the reality of what life is like in a school"* (C5). The Co-ordinators also wanted PSTs to understand the collaborative nature of teaching and that they needed to be "team players". They believed that teaching was no longer about *"teachers being insular in their own little world in their own class"* (C3). The Co-ordinators ensured that they conveyed these messages to the PSTs in their work with them (see Appendix for a range of strategies).

A number of the Co-ordinators acknowledged that their view of professional experiences differed from some of their teachers' views. As one co-ordinator said, there is a *"commonly held view that classroom based work is the most critical therefore there is tension between classroom time and wider school/educational issues"* (C4).

What contributes to high quality professional experiences?

The Co-ordinators identified four key elements that they believed contributed to high quality professional experiences: the quality of Mentor Teachers (MTs); commitment from leadership, the quality of the University Mentors and the Program's commitment to the notion of a *learning community*. The quality of MTs was mentioned first by all six Co-ordinators. They wanted MTs who were prepared to share their classrooms, spend time with the PSTs and provide authentic feedback.

The second element that they regarded as important for high quality professional experiences was commitment from the principal. The Co-ordinators acknowledged that teachers would be more willing to accept PSTs into the school community if there was explicit/clear support from the principal and the Leadership team. (In South Australian public schools the leadership team consists of the principal, deputy or assistant principal and Key Teachers or Learning Co-ordinators). Interestingly, all participants stressed the importance of the Co-ordinator role being adopted by a member of the leadership team. The main reason given was in the message it would send to the PSTs and/or the Mentor Teachers. Two of the principals in the study explained; *"Having the co-ordinator as part of the leadership team is crucial...they [pre-service teachers] are getting a very clear message that they are valued"* (C1). And another said *"By me being involved it makes a statement to the rest of the staff that it [professional experience] is valued"* (C2).

The third key element was the University Mentor. The Co-ordinators valued the reconceptualised role of the University Mentor in this program which enabled support to be given to them, as well as the MTs and PSTs. Ongoing shared dialogue, during school visits and meetings, was a feature of the University Mentor's work which was particularly appreciated. Also, the Co-ordinators had all been working with the University Mentor for at least two years and in some cases, four or five years, so that a respectful, trusting relationship had been developed. This, they felt, was crucial to the Partnership. As one principal said, "...it is very much a partnership... a collaborative relationship" (C6).

Finally, in regard to the issue of quality, was the Program's commitment to the development of a 'learning community'. The Co-ordinators valued the Program's commitments to reflection, collaboration and reciprocity. They felt that these concepts were congruent with the philosophy of their schools and that each would support the other. That is, that both the PSTs and their teachers would benefit from their involvement in the Program. As one said; "*It is exciting to see the impact that the PSTs have on the culture of our school*" (C5). Here again, the Co-ordinators implemented strategies that explicitly demonstrated their belief in the importance of reflection and collegial relationships (see Appendix).

Three of the Co-ordinators also mentioned the quality of the PSTs themselves as a key factor in determining the quality of professional experiences. These Co-ordinators wanted and expected PSTs "*to be learners*".

How the Co-ordinators perceived their role

The Co-ordinators all took their role very seriously and felt that they had a "*moral obligation to future teachers*" (C6) and a "*responsibility to the system*" (C2). They saw their role as having three main inter-related components; supporting MTs; supporting PSTs and being the link between their school and the university. This latter one involved building a relationship with the University Mentor and also being an advocate for the program with staff.

The Co-ordinators described their role in a variety of ways, depending on which aspect of the role they were highlighting. One of the leaders concentrated on his role with the PSTs, when he said; "*I have the responsibility of setting up learning opportunities for them...*" (C6). This particular Co-ordinator was adamant that "*the experience of student teachers shouldn't rely on a roll of the dice of being with a good mentor or not*". Another Co-ordinator focused on the role she now played with her MTs;

I have learnt that I can't assume that mentor teachers are going to understand and know the information and the expectations fully so my job is as much about working with the mentor teachers as working with the student teachers. (C2)

Several also commented on how their perceptions of the role had changed since they had become more involved in the program. For example, one said; "*When we started I saw it*

mainly as an organizing role...I have learned that it is no different to the role that you have as an education leader with your own staff...” (C1).

All of the Co-ordinators unreservedly saw their role as supporting the Program’s explicit commitments to reflection and collaboration. They all implemented strategies to support these foci (see Appendix). They saw their role as one that complemented the Mentor Teacher’s very necessary focus on the classroom to ensure that they had a whole school focus in keeping with their beliefs about the role of professional experiences. Four of the Co-ordinators mentioned doing the ‘bigger picture’ things with the PSTs. For example, *“I deliberately discuss issues with them that have conflicting arguments”* (C5).

Discussion

This study has provided some insights into why the Co-ordinator in these schools has played such a crucial role in the successful implementation of the learning communities model of professional experience. Firstly it is clear from the Co-ordinators’ willingness to work with PSTs, MTs and the University Mentor in the ways that they did, that they enacted the role of ‘leaders of learning’ (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). That is, they were leaders who placed *learning* at the centre of their practices. They focused on the PSTs as learners and they positioned themselves as learners also. Secondly, these Co-ordinators were leading the development of their schools as learning communities and so the notions of reflection and collaboration, upon which the Program is based, were encouraged and explicitly supported. ‘Learning relationships’ and ‘learning conversations’ were seen as vital aspects of a learning culture. Ewing (2002) also found that changes to professional experiences based on a learning communities model were most successful in schools which were themselves professional learning communities.

The key finding from this study is that School Co-ordinators are essential players in implementing the notion of ‘new’ school-university partnerships. If we want to maximize PST learning from their professional experiences, we need to acknowledge the vital role that Co-ordinators can play *directly* with PSTs’ learning. It is no longer useful to talk about the ‘prac triad’ as though there are just three main players in professional experience. We must recognize, as Valencia et al (2010), have done, that “...there are multiple structures and relationships that shape the student teaching experience” (p. 320). This study has shown that the Co-ordinator’s pedagogical role can ensure that PSTs maximize their learning from their whole professional experience, with their broader focus on ‘learning to be a teacher’ as well as ‘learning to teach’.

This study has also highlighted the vital role that Co-ordinators can play in the reculturing of professional experience. That is, in bringing about changes in the shared beliefs, customs, attitudes and expectations around professional experience. I have been arguing for over a decade now that;

If changes to the way the practicum is structured are to result in ‘deep change’ rather than ‘superficial change’, they must be accompanied by cultural change in work settings’ and universities’ values, beliefs, habits, assumptions and ways of doing things. (Le Cornu, 1999, p. 90)

In supporting the move to a *learning communities* model of professional experience, the Co-ordinators were supporting a change from a classroom based professional experience with a 'skills' focus to one that is school based and has a wider professional understandings focus. They were also advocates of the program with their staffs. They needed at times to 'talk up' the changes, particularly with some of the MTs who believed that 'prac' was only about classroom based activity. They were prepared to 'overthrow the status quo' (of traditional professional experiences), which Preskill & Brookfield (2009) argue, is a component of 'learning leadership'.

A second finding from this study is that the role of Co-ordinator is best undertaken by a member of the Leadership team in a school. The Co-ordinators in this study willingly took on this role even though their Leadership role in the school was already busy and time consuming. They did this because they believed that support from Leadership was essential for high quality professional experiences. Mutton & Butcher (2007), in their study of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Co-ordinators, found that a factor that appeared to be of importance was the status within the school of the teacher carrying out the responsibilities of the ITT Co-ordinator. I would agree. Whilst there is no doubt that there are many capable teachers who could take on the role of the Co-ordinator, I would argue that if we want to bring about substantial sustainable changes in professional experience, then we need the support of leaders in schools to do this.

The findings highlight the significance of the development of reciprocal learning relationships between all of the participants in professional experiences. Reciprocal learning relationships are at the heart of the reconceptualised professional experience framework (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). By emphasizing the reciprocal nature of the learning process and the development of reciprocal ways of working, opportunities are created for people to relate differently and for different professional experiences to result. Different kinds of relationships can evolve that are not so heavily concentrated on a hierarchy of power. One might argue that new partnerships are developed between and amongst pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, school co-ordinators and university mentors. As Cardini (2006) noted, while the discourse within partnerships often emphasizes co-operation and trust it 'hides the complex struggles for power that take place in working relationships' (p. 410). It is no secret that there are many traditional barriers between schools and universities (often referred to as the schools-university divide in Teacher Education reports) which often exacerbate efforts of teachers and teacher educators working together in collaboration. Kruger et al (2009) explained; "intentional or not teacher education is commonly experienced as sets of hierarchies: the university and the school; the teacher educator and the teacher; the teacher and the pre-service teacher and the teacher educator and the pre-service teacher" (p. 94).

This is not to suggest that the power imbalances between all participants in professional experience are obliterated in the learning communities model but by having an explicit focus on learning and by having the commitment of leaders in schools, it ensures that at least there is the potential for reciprocal learning relationships to be developed. These relationships are in direct contrast to the traditional relationships often perpetuated in

professional experience. However it is in keeping with more recent calls in the literature for what have been described as ‘altered relationships’ (Kruger et al, 2009) or ‘de-institutionalised relationships’ (Smyth et al, 2008). Such relationships require changes to the deeply entrenched ways of relating in teaching and teacher education which continue to thwart innovation in the field.

To help illuminate the complex dynamic and processes at work in new forms of school-university collaboration, it is useful to embrace the concept of a ‘third space’. The notion of a third space comes from hybridity theory which recognises that individuals draw on multiple discourses to make sense of the world (Bhabba, 1990). Zeichner (2010) has used this notion of third space to call for the creation of hybrid spaces in preservice teacher education ‘that bring together school and university-based teacher educators and practitioner and academic knowledge in new ways to enhance the learning of prospective teachers’ (p. 92). The learning communities model creates these hybrid spaces by providing new opportunities for the various participants involved in professional experience to work differently and more collaboratively. This paper has specifically focused on the role of the Co-ordinator and the crucial role they play, together with University Mentors, in creating a third space.

It is not possible within the confines of this paper to discuss the many implications that arise from a consideration of new school-university partnerships. *Suffice to say that if the development of learning communities is to be taken seriously, there are implications for teacher educators, teachers, leaders, pre-service teachers, systems personnel and policy makers alike. Kruger et al (2009), in their study on ‘effective and sustainable partnerships’, wrote; “No finding is clearer in this study than the need for active contributions by school systems and governments” (p. 12). It is very apparent that this contribution would need to come in the form of funding for new institutional arrangements and initiatives that highlight reciprocity and involve key stakeholders. Leaders in both institutions, schools and universities, need to be working together in new ways if we are serious about the changes we want to see in professional experiences. It will not be easy. It is well recognized in the literature that “it will take massive efforts to transform the deeply entrenched culture of existing field experience arrangements and practices.” (Bullough & Russell, 2010, p. 93). However it can be done as exemplified by Le Cornu & Ewing (2008) and Kruger et al (2009).*

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that Co-ordinators are essential partners in professional experiences which are framed around the notion of *learning communities*. Their role is critical at multiple levels - at both the micro (school) level and the macro (professional experience reform) level.

It has also been argued that for substantial changes in professional experience to be sustained, the role of Co-ordinator is best undertaken by a member of the Leadership team in a school.

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Appendix: Strategies for Co-ordinators to support PSTs' learning

This list of strategies is based on an analysis of evaluation data from 52 PSTs and interview data from 6 Co-ordinators. There were three key areas identified in Co-ordinators' work directly with PSTs: *Develop relationships, Encourage reflective practice, Provide assistance to maximise learning from their whole school experiences.* (N.B. There are other aspects of the Co-ordinator role which involve working with Mentor Teachers, the University Mentor and other staff but they are not presented here).

1/Develop relationships

- be welcoming: into them at staff meeting, writing a welcome message in the day book, pigeonholes, name badge, etc
- be passionate about the school
- structure scheduled times to talk – get to know PSTs, have professional and personal conversations
- establish clear lines of communication (open door policy) – offer support and encouragement
- induction: let PSTs know about grievance procedures, set clear expectations – ie induction meeting – duty of care issues;

2/Encourage reflective practice

- encourage pre-service teachers to question what they see;
- have critical reflection times with them – teach them how to engage in 'rigorous dialogue' and how to be articulate in a staff group (use rehearsal); Help them examine their own world views
- ask challenging questions eg Are there other ways of looking at that? What does that say about the belief? What is your understanding of...? Why?
- observe in classrooms and provide useful feedback (ie great things happening/things to consider and pose questions eg "Did you think about how the task might be more open ended to better cater for your high achievers?")
- Talk to them about 'being a learner'
- Encourage risk taking
- Model 'being a learner' eg being open about your mistakes
- Be positive about their Learning Circles

3/Provide assistance to maximise learning from their whole school experiences

- talk to them about school-wide issues eg behavior management, NAPLAN, etc
- organise talks with specialist teachers
- encourage them to go to different places to see different learning environments
- refer them to curriculum documents
- expose them to different experiences ie with parents, support staff, etc
- help organise school-wide/extra-curricular activities

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