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Enhancing teacher education: The School-Community Integrated Learning (SCIL) pathway

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Abstract

National Australian reviews advocate exploring new models for preservice teacher education. This study investigates the outcomes of the School-Community Integrated Learning (SCIL) pathway as a model for advancing preservice teachers' understandings of teaching. Thirty-two final-year preservice teachers were surveyed with extended written responses on how the SCIL pathway advanced their understandings of teaching. Results indicated 100% agreement on 6 of the 27 survey items. Indeed, 78% or more preservice teachers agreed that they had a range of experiences across the five categories (i.e., personal-professional skill development, understandings of system requirements, teaching practices, student behaviour and reflective practices). Extended responses suggested they had developed understandings around setting up classrooms, whole school planning processes with professional development, the allocation of teacher responsibilities (e.g., playground duties), parent-teacher interviews, diagnostic testing for literacy and numeracy, commencing running records of students' assessment results, and the development of relationships (students, teachers and parents). Although a longitudinal study is required to determine long-term effects, the SCIL pathway may be viewed as a positive step towards preparing final-year preservice teachers for their first year as fully-fledged teachers.

Keywords: preservice teachers, university-school partnerships, mentoring

Introduction

Reviews on preservice teacher education call for more practical connections to school practices, (e.g., Masters, 2009) requiring partnerships to “bridge the gap between theory and practice, particularly for practicum” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Educational and Vocational Training [HRSCEVT], 2007, p. xxi). Despite well reported “inadequate funding of teacher education” (p. xxi), there are expectations for universities and schools to deliver on review recommendations, including rethinking practicum. For decades it has been recognised that school experiences assist preservice teachers to gain necessary pedagogical experiences with opportunities to apply university theory to practice (Little, 1990); however reviews and evidence suggests theory-practice connections become a challenge (e.g., Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009; Moore, 2003), particularly within existing teacher education models (Putnam & Borko, 2000). To advance practices in alignment with

reform recommendations, preservice teachers need “diverse experiences in a range of school contexts and with a variety of students” (HRSCEVT, 2007, p. 74). As a result of multiple issues surrounding the implementation of reform measures (e.g., funding, school and classroom issues such as behaviour management, political national testing programs, and timing of practicum), other models of teacher education need to be investigated. One study (Hudson & Hudson, 2013) proposed a model of School-Community Integrated Learning (SCIL) and suggested that such cost-effective programs may lead to positive preservice teacher learning outcomes. This current paper analyses the SCIL pathway as a cost-effective model for engaging final-year preservice teachers in understanding teachers’ roles and responsibilities.

Context

This study was part of *Teacher Education Done Differently* (TEDD) project that aimed to provide additional school experiences for preservice teachers. In 2009, as a result of ongoing university-school partnership discussions (Hudson & Hudson, 2006; Hudson & Hudson, 2008), the School Community Integrated Learning (SCIL) pathway was developed to extend the existing teaching experiences. The SCIL pathway involved final-year preservice teachers being placed in schools at the beginning of the school year as volunteers for three days per week until university commenced; at which time they visited their schools one day per week leading into two final-year practicum experiences and a four-week internship at the same school. It was recommended that preservice teachers change their grade level and teacher for the second practicum experience to ensure a variety of classroom experiences. The SCIL pathway was a voluntary option for final-year preservice teachers and not a compulsory part of the BEd primary program. Mentor teachers could volunteer to have SCIL pathway preservice teachers without assessment pressures; yet roles and responsibilities were outlined for the preservice teachers and mentors.

Stakeholders from the university and schools decided the SCIL pathway would be a non-teaching experience with preservice teachers participating in suggested activities that were outlined to the mentor teachers through university documents. The types of activities included preservice teacher observations of their allocated mentor teacher and other teachers in the school, getting to know the students and daily routines, assisting in small group activities, visiting special education units and specialist teachers, participating in playground duty and staff meetings, assisting with sports and swimming carnivals, and becoming familiar with school policies and procedures. However, the preservice teachers could negotiate teaching experiences with the mentor teacher. When the SCIL visits commenced, the faculty of education university coordinators stayed in regular contact with the school site coordinators to ensure the preservice teachers were fulfilling their requirements and attending their allocated schools. Each school site coordinator stayed in regular contact with their mentor teachers. The university coordinators visited each school to oversee the working of the SCIL pathway and discuss the progress of the preservice teachers.

Participant demographics

The study involved 32 final-year preservice teachers (7 males, 25 females) from two campuses (18 from the larger campus and 14 from the smaller campus) involved in the SCIL pathway. The teaching classes varied from Preparation (around 5 years of age) through to Year 7 (about 12 years old), which included 60% who indicated they were on composite classes. Twenty-five percent of participants surveyed identified themselves as mature-aged students.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

This study used a survey with extended written responses to understand the impact of the School-Community Integrated Learning (SCIL) pathway for final-year preservice teachers. The survey drew from other works (e.g., Hudson & Hudson, 2011; Hudson & Hudson, 2012) as a basis for survey item construction. The survey items were collated under broad categories (i.e., personal-professional skill development, understandings of system requirements, teaching practices, student behaviour and reflective practices). For instance, under the category “personal-professional skill development” there were six items constructed around: enthusiasm for teaching, communication with students, confidence as a teacher, professional relationships with colleagues, understanding of teacher’s relationships with parents, and understanding the teacher’s role. Respondents used a five part Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (uncertain in the middle) to respond to each item. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations) were collated for analytical purposes (see Creswell, 2012).

The extended written responses focused on the following broad areas: new experiences, developing knowledge and skills, relationship with the mentor, and program implementation. Example questions for the preservice teachers included: (1) Which aspects of schooling and teaching were you able to observe, or be part of, as a result of commencing the school year? and (2) What specific skills do you think you developed or enhanced as a result of this SCIL pathway? Data were collated into themes (also known as categories), that is, “similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea”, and analysed through descriptions provided by the participants (see Creswell, 2012, p. 245).

Results and Discussion

Final-year preservice teachers ($n=32$) were surveyed across the five categories (personal-professional skill development, understandings of system requirements, teaching practices, student behaviour and reflective practices) to understand the degree the SCIL pathway had contributed to their understandings of teaching and associated practices. All participants ($n=32$) agreed that the SCIL pathway helped them to understand the teacher’s role, facilitate communication with students, and develop professional relationships with colleagues (Table 1). All but one participant claimed that it increased their confidence towards becoming a teacher and for understanding parent-teacher relationships. Reviews highlight beginning teachers’ abilities “to communicate with parents” as a consistent concern for teacher education (HRSCEVT, 2007, p. 8). Data indicated that SCIL presented as an opportunity for these preservice teachers to develop understandings about parent-teacher relationships.

Table 1: *Personal-professional skill development*

Practice or attribute	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Understanding the teacher's role	100	4.75	0.44
Communication with students	100	4.66	0.48
Professional relationships with colleagues	100	4.66	0.48
Confidence as a teacher	97	4.59	0.56
Understanding parent-teacher relationships	97	4.50	0.67
Enthusiasm for teaching	94	4.72	0.58

* Percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed.

These final-year preservice teachers will more than likely graduate to enter the profession the following year for which understanding the education system requirements will be essential to their induction into a school. Their survey responses indicated 100% agreement that the SCIL pathway assisted them to understand staff roles and responsibilities along with school practices and policies (with minimal variation in most responses, see standard deviations, Table 2). Although understanding whole school planning was signalled by 78% of participants, this also infers around a quarter were uncertain or disagreed that the SCIL pathway lead them to understand this practice.

Table 2: *Understanding system requirements*

Practice	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
School staff roles and responsibilities	100	4.66	0.48
School practices and policies	100	4.63	0.49
Creating a safe and supportive learning environment	97	4.59	0.56
School aims	88	4.34	0.79
Whole school planning	78	4.06	0.98

The majority of participants agreed that the SCIL pathway presented experiences to build their teaching practices. Reviews indicate consistent concerns for teacher education around dealing “adequately with classroom management issues, [and] to perform assessment and reporting tasks” (Certo, 2006; HRSCEVT, 2007, p. 8). 78% of participants agreed the SCIL pathway provided more understanding about strategies for assessing students’ learning. Beginning teachers report that they need to understand how to set up a classroom from day one of the school year, for which 97% of final-year preservice teachers in this study suggested they have gained such understandings. 97% also agreed that the SCIL pathway provided more experiences for understanding the educational language for teaching. Indeed, 78% or more participants claimed the SCIL pathway assisted in understanding teaching practices (Table 3).

Table 3: *Understanding teaching practices*

Practice	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
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Educational language for teaching	97	4.53	0.67
Setting up a classroom for the future	97	4.44	0.80
Content knowledge	94	4.28	0.58
Appropriate educational challenges	91	4.34	0.75
Monitoring of students' activities	91	4.19	0.69
Planning in teams for teaching	88	4.41	0.95
Well-designed activities	84	4.19	0.69
Strategies for solving teaching problems	84	4.13	0.75
Ideas for effective hands-on activities	81	4.16	0.81
Strategies for assessing students' learning	78	3.84	0.88

Ninety-one percent or more preservice teachers indicated that the SCIL pathway assisted in their understanding of student behaviour and reflective practices (Table 4). Beginning teachers can have “struggles with classroom management” (Blair, 2008, p. 99). All but a few agreed or strongly agreed that the SCIL pathway assisted their understandings around classroom rules and routines (97%) and developing a positive emotional climate (94%). According to the participants, this pathway developed their reflective practices and viewpoints for teaching with all agreeing that they understood ways to improve teaching practices (Table 4).

Table 4: *Understanding student behaviour and reflection on practice*

Item number and practice	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Establishing class rules and routines	97	4.56	0.56
Effective classroom management	94	4.44	0.62
Developing a positive emotional climate	94	4.44	0.72
Ways to improve teaching	100	4.56	0.50
Reflective practices for improving teaching	91	4.25	0.62
New viewpoints for teaching	91	4.28	0.73

Extended written responses provided further insights into the preservice teachers' opportunities for learning as a result of the SCIL pathway. For instance:

- Everything that they [mentor teachers] did, marking work, observing students, helping students (Participant 1)
- Reading groups, maths groups, IEP [Individual Education Plan] meetings, classroom setup, buddy class, sight word activities (Participant 3)
- Individual assessment, small group, whole class science unit (Participant 4)
- Classroom management, spelling activities, roll marking, art lessons (Participant 5)
- Roll call, rotational activities, maths and science lessons, classroom management, spelling assessments (Participant 6)

Their written responses were collated into the following themes: professional development with teachers, working with students in literacy and numeracy groups, observations of classroom practices, development of classroom management techniques, planning and implementing differentiated learning lessons, devising assessment on learning, planning for

teaching, and undertaking the breadth of teachers' duties. These students detailed ways in which the SCIL pathway supported their professional learning and development.

- Nine participants (8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 19, 24, 29, 27) highlighted, as a response to one question, working with teachers through professional development opportunities as a way to understand and engage with teachers' work.
- Nine participants (3, 7, 9, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21, 22) emphasised learning how to differentiate teaching strategies, for example, through setting up inclusive classroom environments, establishing standards of social interaction and for behaviour, and the grouping of students.
- Seven participants (4, 10, 11, 13, 23, 24, 32) specifically highlighted the value of observing the classroom teacher for understanding the teacher's roles and responsibilities.
- Six (3, 5, 6, 8, 15, 19) participants wrote about involvement with classroom and behaviour management.

Importantly, these preservice teachers began to recognise the breadth of teachers' roles and responsibilities, including playground duties, swimming schemes and cross country running involvement, school camps, teachers' meetings, parent-teacher nights, and interschool sports. It also allowed the participants opportunities to investigate other roles and responsibilities within the school for which teachers have close interactions: "Learning support (program, roles of teachers and teacher aides and school officers), library – role of librarians and purpose of library lessons" (Participant 21). Furthermore, to understand teachers' roles and communicate effectively with teachers requires knowledge about the education discourse, which can be confusing for those entering the profession. These SCIL opportunities provided ways for the preservice teachers to develop educational discourse: "I was able to be a part of the planning process and understand all the educational jargon" (Participant 17).

When probed further about their learning, most participants claimed developing relationships with students, teachers and parents as a highlight. Various participants observed how the teacher interacted with parents during informal and formal meetings. Indeed, all participants claimed the SCIL pathway was of value except for participant 10 who stated it was valuable: "only in some ways, the teacher knew what she was doing but did not explain unless I specifically asked for clarification, as lots of the teacher's work and planning is done at home". Yet nearly all responses claimed emphatically the SCIL pathway was valuable in providing experiences that they would not normally encounter in a practicum, in building networks and partnerships within the school and wider school community. Some noted the value of the SCIL experience as a theory-practice connective, and the opportunities they had in trialling the theory being learnt in lectures.

All participants except 12, 19 and 22 commented they did not need any other support to be involved in the SCIL pathway, and the majority believed that SCIL should be compulsory for

all students. The exceptions brought forward possible improvements to the pathway that involved focussed communication between the university and the school site coordinators and teachers regarding roles of all participants “to ensure SCIL learning guidelines are being met”. There were other unanticipated advantages to the SCIL pathway such as organising and allocating teacher aide time, altering timetables, everyday duties (e.g., roll marking), involvement in specialist lessons, dealing with multi-aged settings and managing stressful situations, some of which can be noted in the following:

- How teachers create a community of learners to make students feel part of the classroom (Participant 25)
- How teachers cater for a multi-aged setting – how this differs from a more traditional model (Participant 25)
- I loved having the opportunity to jump from class to class, seeing how different grades implemented their planning and what different methods they used. I also spent time teaching or assisting in specialist lessons with different grade levels. An experience we are not able to do with one select class on prac (Participant 31)
- It was really great to see how teachers dealt with the start-of-the-year stress and tasks and how they managed it all. It was great to see them organising their classroom and meet students for the first time. Put me more at ease for my first time next year! (Participant 18)

Conclusion

The final-year preservice teachers involved in the SCIL pathway indicated that from the beginning of the school year they were able to observe the setting up of classrooms, whole school planning processes with professional development, the allocation of teacher responsibilities (e.g., playground duties), parent-teacher interviews, diagnostic testing for literacy and numeracy, commencing running records of students’ assessment results, and the development of relationships, particularly for behaviour management. The development of collaborative parent-teacher relationships was emphasised as a learning opportunity for these preservice teachers. As a model for advancing teacher education, the SCIL pathway appeared to offer a supportive learning environment for the preservice teachers to engage in practices that may not be available during practicum experiences. Fostering positive relationships early in the school year may assist in facilitating professional commitment, as a way to retain teachers in schools (Waddell, 2010). These preservice teachers indicated a sense of purpose around teachers’ activities within the school, whether teachers’ professional development sessions as insights into professional learning, teachers’ multiple school roles or how teachers manage multi-grade levels.

Governments and universities seek cost-effective measures to address reviews into teaching and teacher education. Connecting theory with practice, understanding how classrooms are set up from the beginning of the school year, establishing literacy and numeracy programs, and forming collaborative relationships with teachers and parents are noted in review recommendations (e.g., HRSCEVT, 2007; Masters, 2009). The SCIL pathway provides cost-effective measures to address these issues, where preservice teachers and mentor teachers volunteer to be involved. One aim of the pathway is benefits for all in which the preservice teacher learns about the diverse functions of a school, and the school benefits through the active contribution of the preservice teacher to the school community. The pressures of assessment are replaced by preservice teachers’ learning about teachers’ roles and

responsibilities, and the school and classroom environments while providing voluntary classroom assistance. A further study is needed to determine how mentor teachers and school students directly benefit from this SCIL arrangement. Although a longitudinal study is required to determine long-term effects on preservice teachers entering the profession, the SCIL pathway may be viewed as a positive step towards preparing final-year preservice teachers for their first year as fully-fledged teachers.

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