

The contextual and the cognitive: A trial first practicum in secondary teacher education

Vicki M. Carpenter, Sue Sutherland

Abstract

This paper reports on a trial first practicum programme which was undertaken in partnership by the authors (a teacher education lecturer and a school practicum coordinator), in an Auckland multicultural urban secondary school. An alternative inquiry-oriented approach was taken to the more traditional practicum. The move away from the historical apprenticeship model aimed to direct student focus on to both the cognitive and contextual issues which surround teaching. As a result unique insights were gained by the secondary student teachers. These findings are considered, along with their implications.

Introduction

We take the position that in teacher education programmes the first practicum should be both curriculum **and** school based. Intense curriculum focus at an early stage of teacher education does not produce the school-context grounded graduates necessary for effective secondary school teaching. Contextual and cognitive aspects of teachers' work are equally important.

This paper reports on an experimental alternative approach to secondary student teachers' first practicum¹ This approach involved simultaneous restructuring and reculturing (Hastings & Squires, 2002); collaborative power sharing and structural change were both integral to the programme. Our goal was to orientate students to teaching, issues surrounding adolescence, school systems and processes, and the

¹ The alternative practicum was developed in the late 1990s. The findings from this trial have influenced the way in which subsequent practicums have been structured.

contextual school world of students. This goal was to be achieved through programme innovation and group reflective practices. A teacher education partnership between the writers, Vicki at The University of Auckland, Faculty of Education formerly Auckland College of Education (ACE) and Sue at Penrose High School (PHS), an inner city multi-cultural secondary school, enabled the trial.

Rationale for change

Like Zeichner (1986, 1990), and Goodman (1986), we argue that as well as acquiring the basic teaching skills necessary to begin teaching, student teachers need to acquire aptitudes for learning to teach that will best allow for continuing professional development (Copeland 1986, p.4, cited in Zeichner 1986). Zeichner (1986, p. 24) advocates an “inquiry-oriented practicum”. This approach seeks to foster “greater reflectivity on the part of prospective teachers about the process of their own socialisation, their teaching practice and the various contexts (classroom, school and society) in which their teaching is carried out” (1986, p. 24). In later work Zeichner emphasises the importance of student teachers being able to sensitise “... to values, lifestyles, and cultures different from their own and generate a respect for human diversity” (Zeichner 1990, p.118).

Zeichner (1986, p.16) describes seven major obstacles to teacher learning if the traditional model of the practicum is used: the view of practicum as an exercise in apprenticeship, the lack of a specific curriculum (i.e. practicum objectives), the uneven quality of associates and their lack of specific preparation for the task of teacher training, the low status of the practicum in the eyes of tertiary providers, that schools are set up to teach pupils and not to provide teacher education, the differing perceptions of what a teacher’s role actually is (a professional decision maker or a technician), and the contemporary rhetoric of technocratic rationality which sees teachers in narrowly defined roles where the individual is responsible and accountable for problems, with little cognisance of the role of the macro system in the process.

While our programme response was predicated on all seven obstacles, the four we were most intent on addressing were: the low status of the practicum, the pupil rather than student teacher focus by associates, apprenticeship modelling, and the importance of reflection surrounding the role of the teacher.

What student teachers observe in New Zealand secondary school classrooms today is generally analogous to what they themselves experienced as secondary school students (Hood, 1998). At the outset of teacher education, many student teachers need encouragement to think critically, and to be inquiry-oriented about the systems they have come from and the systems they are confronting. Compounding this issue, some recent immigrant student teachers learned in education systems which are expository and didactic in teaching style. An alternative practicum had the potential to broaden student teachers' understanding of New Zealand's contemporary young people, their learning contexts, their lives and their issues.

By widening the focus of the practicum we hoped to avoid student teacher immersion in an apprenticeship model. Anecdotal information is that subject associates like to have competent student teachers in their classrooms who cope well and can be left in 'sole charge' early in the practicum. Associates ultimately write reports on student teacher performance, so it is in the interest of student teachers to behave and teach within the model of the associate. This is an apprenticeship model of professional learning:

The view is that as long as we put our students with good teachers (good being defined by the particular guiding ideology of a teacher education program), good things will happen (Zeichner, 1990, p. 107-108).

While we expected that student teachers would be placed with 'good teachers' and would gain much from that experience, we believed they would also benefit from an early awareness of the complexities of contemporary adolescent lives, and the wider

school culture. Consequently, the alternative practicum idea evolved. The practicum was experienced by 12 student teachers in Penrose High School.

Penrose High School

At the time of the trial practicum PHS had a management structure which used co-principals, and had a purposely designed pastoral care system. Of the 850 mainly working class pupils, 28% were of Pacific Islands nation descent, 24% were Maori, 24% were Pakeha, and 24% Asian. Forty-one different languages were spoken by pupils. PHS teacher profiles tended to reflect pupil diversity although there was a greater proportion of Pakeha. The school had a unique and successful pastoral care system in that most pastoral care issues were initially addressed at a 'one stop shop', the school. Within the school there was a health centre (with a full-time nurse, and a doctor two days per week), the Hei Atawhai unit which supported student learning, and a Mataora unit for students with anti-social or withdrawn behaviour. There was also a career centre and a guidance unit (Hunter, 1996).

The student teachers

The twelve secondary student teachers were enrolled in a one-year ACE graduate pathway programme. There were seven women and five men, and their ethnic origins included Maori, Pakeha, Iraqi, Indian, Samoan and Nuiean. All were members of the same Professional Development (PD) group. PD focus was on reflection (Schon, 1983), with an emphasis on the practical and critical (rather than technical) aspects of reflection. The student teachers' curriculum specialisms covered conventional curriculum and new technology areas.

The trial practicum

To achieve our aim, we worked as professional partners throughout the planning, inception and evaluation of the practicum. We formed a collaborative working and professional relationship, with equal accountability for the practicum's outcome.

Cognisant of Dunne et al (1996) who describe provider-school partnerships as “shotgun weddings”, our intention was to have a non-hierarchical relationship which was totally focused on meeting student teacher needs.

The personnel and structures of our respective institutions supported the trial programme. Vicki was able to be present in the school for as many days as required during the three week practicum, and Sue had non-contact time available to her as the Practicum Coordinator.

As a means of addressing Zeichner’s four obstacles we decided to expose student teachers to all that PHS offered. This was designed to help student teachers think critically about school systems generally, and to be inquiry oriented. The whole school domain thus became part of the practicum experience (Turney et al.1986 cited in Zeichner 1990:118) with our plan being to expose student teachers to the complexity of student lives, and the machinations of a large multicultural school. Through a variety of experiential and theoretical lenses, and through reflection, our hope was that student teachers would undertake a personal, ‘big picture’, reflective process of their practicum experience.

An early decision was that two thirds, rather than all of the time on the practicum, would focus on the student teachers’ curriculum areas. This would enable student teachers to observe and become involved in some initial teaching under the guidance of associates. The remaining third of the time was to be devoted to a school-domain based trial programme with an emphasis on broad exposure to what made PHS unique.

The alternative practicum programme:

Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1	Curriculum	Shadow a teacher, Reflection as a group	Curriculum	Curriculum	Reflection, Specialists, Curriculum
Week 2	Curriculum	Shadow a pupil, Reflection as a group	Curriculum	Curriculum	Reflection Specialists, Curriculum
Week 3	Curriculum	Pastoral care speakers, Group reflection	Curriculum	Curriculum	Reflection Specialists, Curriculum

As indicated above, one and a half days of each week were allotted to the alternative programme. Tuesday was chosen because it was a day with relatively little pupil absenteeism, and it was also a day when pupils and teachers appeared to have most energy. The first two periods of each Friday were also part of the alternative programme. We each 'relief taught' as necessary to enable teachers to be released to work with the Auckland College of Education student teachers.

On the first Tuesday, student teachers were each allocated a teacher who did **not** teach in their curriculum area. They 'shadowed' the professional for a whole day, throughout teaching, breaks, lunchtimes and any meetings. At the end of the day student teachers were asked to reflect on the complexity of teachers' work. A similar process operated the next week in shadowing a student. Each of the student teachers sat in with an allocated student for all lessons, and briefly monitored the student's activities during breaks. At the end of the day student teachers were asked to reflect on aspects of the student's day, as well as their student's particular learning style, and the teaching methodologies the student experienced.

The purpose of the pastoral care sessions was to reinforce the importance of teachers taking account of the lived realities of the students they were teaching, and

reflection centered on this. The sessions included talks by the school counselor, student support person, resident social worker, and nurse. Student teachers also gained skills in one-to-one communication from those insights. As part of these sessions the co-principals each spoke about the ways in which the school met the needs of the large multi-cultural student body, and the Social Sciences Head of Department (HOD) discussed how the school met its obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi.

On Fridays the first period was set aside for us to work together with the student teachers as a group, reflecting on the week's activities, facilitating discussion, and addressing any questions or concerns. 'Specialists' within the school community also facilitated sessions; these included a careers teacher and a teacher who worked with newly developed unit standards in the technology area.

During the alternative programme we co-planned and co-taught with each other as much as possible, utilising our particular strengths. Sue had expertise regarding the school structure and systems, and Vicki was able to use her counselling training in the pastoral care session, and her knowledge of teaching and educational theory in the reflective sessions. The reflective sessions involved us working together to address issues raised by the student teachers.

Throughout the three weeks both of us kept in close professional contact with the twelve student teachers. This enabled us to provide support, advocacy, and encouragement. On the final Friday student teachers completed a written evaluation that involved responding to comments on a Likert scale with related qualitative comments. The data provided an insight into student teacher reaction to the practicum, and the range of benefits or otherwise they felt the practicum afforded them. The following section summarises the findings.

Findings

Evaluations and anxieties

... other practicums will be hard to go to without the support we have enjoyed this time.

... comments really make or break you, we are lucky that we have such a supportive group.

While the complexities of teachers' work interested the student teachers, the day spent following teachers was not seen to be as valuable as other aspects of the programme. It is possible that the placement of the exercise (first Tuesday) meant that student teachers' unresolved anxieties of facing classes in curriculum area had not been attended to.

*Day was fairly unhelpful for me - felt I was missing out on my curriculum area.
Ended up doing my own work.*

Conversely:

I realise the links teachers have in between contact periods and how they managed time effectively.

Great because teacher taught three subjects, all different, and moved around the school.

The day spent following a student was rated more highly. Student teachers experienced what it was like to be a pupil in today's secondary schools, at the same time it enabled them to consider the parallel worlds of teacher and student teacher. The selected pupils encompassed a range of abilities, behaviour patterns and ages. Several student teachers decided to role-play a high school pupil for the day. As a result one mature woman student teacher was challenged to a press-up competition

in the gym (and won), and many formed close bonds with pupils. Long after the practicum concluded, pupils asked after their 'buddies' from College.

Lovely to feel like a 'student' again, made me see things from a student perspective.

I found out about students' interests which were reflected by their disinterest in some classes. An excellent exercise, fun.

I found it very tiring ... only about five out of twenty students did any work ... by the end of the day I had a migraine.

The pastoral care morning was rated most highly. Student teachers felt that the morning helped them understand the school's support systems, and enhanced their ability to work effectively with pupils. It was in the area of pastoral care that student teachers were introduced to some of the biggest challenges for pupils that occurred in both the community domain, and the school system. Student teachers were particularly interested in their prospective role as a teacher within a support network. Practical experiences that morning included the learning and practicing of various communication techniques and listening skills.

.. really good to do some activities..

... well worth it, you always think you have had a hard upbringing but there are others worse off than you.

... makes you aware of the complexity of ... issues which affect student learning.

Good to know where our boundaries for student support lie and when it is good to pass (problems) on to professionals.

The multicultural session involving a range of staff was rated almost as highly as the pastoral care morning. Student teachers especially appreciated the input from the co-principals who, they said, made them feel welcome.

... It was good to hear from people with experience, they had some good insights.

Good input from co-principals, yummy lunch, made me feel good about being here.

The HOD Social Sciences gave his perspective on the Treaty of Waitangi. This took place on the school marae and four student teachers commented that they would have liked to have spent more time with this person, reflecting on the Treaty:

John's (session) on the Treaty was informative and made me think about how my subject areas addressed this issue.

Professional development and reflection was the particular focus of the Friday morning sessions, and they also received mainly positive feedback:

... very good for talking about problems and positives.

... useful to have structured time out periods.

Even though we assess every lesson we teach, it is hard to stand back and see the bigger picture as our own.

The other support area which was visited on a Friday was the careers or transition room:

... helped me connect between my subject area and a responsibility to kids post school.

Very informative, shows that there are still aims in other areas for the student rather than in your own curriculum.

Some comments indicated how the practicum could be improved. Most felt that the practicum should have been longer. Others, unsurprisingly, felt they needed more time in their curriculum areas. In some departments the student teachers reported

that it became apparent that their knowledge was more current than that of their associates. While perhaps inevitable, this situation was not always acceptable to associates:

Sad to see some teachers felt intimidated by us.

Some student teachers commented on how the practicum could be improved:

I think the college should have been very clear about what was required of us during this practicum and communicated it to our school associates, in general associates expected too much and gave too little.

A strong emphasis in the evaluation was on thanking the school personnel, and us, for our work:

Having our Professional Development Group at the same school for the first practicum was marvellous. We supported each other, critiqued and helped, and some of us cried on each other's shoulders.

(The best things about this practicum were) having our tutor here to support us, the marvellous school, great friendly kids and teachers, associate teachers all wonderful.

Thanks Penrose! Enjoyable experience. Appreciate the help Sue and Vicki.

The practicum was generally well received. In particular student teachers appreciated the professional support they received, the welcome afforded them, the ranges of classes they were able to interact with, the culture of the students and the school itself, the awareness they gained of cultural issues, and the value of peer support.

Reflection

The placing of student teachers in a school rather than a classroom enabled a congruence to be established between the development of the student teacher, and the educational world of the pupils. The evolving relationships that positioning encouraged allowed for greater student teacher insight into the community aspect of PHS. Professional bonds developed which were to continue throughout that year between Auckland College of Education and PHS, Sue and Vicki, pupils and student teachers, student teachers and PHS teachers, Sue and Auckland College of Education, and Vicki and PHS. Many of those professional relationships continued and evolved. While the development of professional relationships does occur on 'standard' practicums, our contention is that the nature of this practicum enriched those bonds.

Conflicts of expectation

There were initial student teacher reservations about the alternative programme. Early in the practicum student teachers felt, and articulated, an urgent need to teach to their curriculum expertise. They wanted to negotiate and construct their identities as teachers and there was resentment by some to the notion that we had 'taken away' curriculum teaching time. We had not paid enough attention to their understandable need to experience teaching. The fear of being before a class, and the desire to perform effectively, were uppermost in their minds. We underestimated this tension, but quickly came to understand. The first teaching practicum can be particularly difficult and stressful for student teachers (Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Banfield, & Russell et al, 2000). Of most concern to the 300 Australian student teachers surveyed by Murray-Harvey et al (2000) were the high expectations they individually had around their teaching performance.

In our trial practicum, once the practicum was underway, and certainly by the end of the first week, enthusiasm for the teaching situation was matched by a similar enthusiasm for the alternative programme. We maintain that by undergoing the

variety of experiences of the alternative practicum students were in a better position to engage in effective teaching. The student teachers' understanding of pupils' worlds enhanced their relationships with pupils, and possibly enabled them to teach more effectively. The evaluations from the trial practicum demonstrated that a strong realisation developed on the part of student teachers that they were not purely teaching their subject; they taught teenagers, and they could be better teachers if they developed their understanding of pupils' lived realities.

Implementing a provider/school partnership

Working alongside each other in a partnership was refreshing for both writers as it enabled us to experience the reflection process we asked of the student teachers. We evaluated the practicum in an ongoing way, and talked about the student teachers as if they were a class we co-taught. Regular discussions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and wider structural issues generally meant that we learned and grew from each other's perspective.

Student teachers were aware of our close liaison and demonstrated that they felt safe to talk with either of us. Our evolving partnership meant that Vicki was accepted as a quasi staff-member for the three weeks and was often seen in the staffroom. Staff members were able to network with both, or either of us, regarding any student concerns. We found that staff used opportunities to discuss structural and professional concerns regarding student teachers and their practice. The alternative programme offered an ongoing range of networks and discourse that were not previously accessed.

Various events evolved from this practicum which had not been apparent in previous years. These included the PHS powhiri (welcome) to student teachers on the school marae, student teachers being invited to lunch by the co-principals, student teachers providing morning tea for teaching staff, and a student teacher addressing the school assembly to thank staff and pupils. This was followed by

ACE student teachers and Vicki singing a waiata (song in Maori) to the assembled school.

Discussion

To be effective in a teaching situation such as that provided by a school as ethnically diverse as PHS, student teachers, like all teachers, need to link teaching content to the cultural backgrounds and lived realities of students. An awareness of how pastoral issues affect students is necessary in the secondary school domain. The alternative practicum drew attention to the value of cultivating and developing skills and practices to address significant issues early in the student teachers' practicum experiences.

A first practicum focused totally in the curriculum area can attempt to focus too much on curriculum, with a resulting 'banking' model of teaching content (Freire, 1972). Aside from the perpetuation of arguably poor modelling in an apprenticeship style, this historical practicum can result in superficial understandings of what a teacher's role is. There is growing evidence that effective teacher engagement with diverse students involves a holistic approach where the how, what, and why of teaching are unified and meaningful (Ogbon, 1995). This alternative practicum orientated towards the school context was a structured way of developing understanding about pastoral and cultural issues that are valued in the community and broader society.

Our focus was on the student teachers, but the implementation of the programme did impact on other teachers and other lecturers. We received anecdotal comments from some who voiced concerns about the lack of time student teachers were involved in teaching curriculum content, and a perceived lack of teaching continuity in curriculum areas. We found this attitude disconcerting for a first practicum, but would have had some empathy had the observations been made in later practicums. These concerns draw attention to an area that seems to require far more

communication and dialogue between and within tertiary providers and schools generally.

Such standpoints of associates and lecturers perhaps indicate a technical approach to teaching content area, which has credence in the more traditional, non-reflective approach to teacher education.

Best model?

The percentage of time that should be spent in curriculum areas on the first practicum is an ongoing dilemma. A continuum model presents possibilities that range from no time at all, (ie. with a totally school and 'other subject' based practicum), through to the entire practicum being based in curriculum areas. In this continuum we obviously lean strongly towards the former end, and encourage debate on the rationale for curriculum immersion. If time is spent in curriculum areas during the first practicum where should that time be positioned? At the beginning of the practicum? Near the end? Interspersed throughout? On this particular practicum our final position was a compromise, but we are cognisant of student teachers' need to experience teaching in their curriculum areas.

Benefits

There have been ongoing benefits from this alternative practicum for the school. PHS gained a high profile at ACE as the 12 student teachers returned to their college studies and spoke favourably of their experience at PHS. As a consequence, that year, many other student teachers chose to request a practicum at PHS. This was in sharp contrast to the situation in the previous two years, when the then DP of PHS informed Vicki of his concern that student teachers appeared to be avoiding the school.

A strong collaborative relationship evolved between the writers/researchers during this practicum. We enjoyed the challenges, and could each identify benefits for our respective institutions.

Transferability?

PHS is unique, as is every other secondary school in New Zealand. What worked at PHS will not necessarily work elsewhere. Other partnerships between schools and tertiary providers would enable schools to share their distinctiveness. An alternative practicum may work best in schools that are innovative, flexible, and willing to work in discretionary ways with student teachers. We suggest a collaborative process where the tertiary lecturer and school practicum coordinator identify a particular school's unique characteristics, and arrange a programme accordingly. A 'top-down' curriculum imposition could destroy the ability of two key people to 'lock into' a particular school's uniqueness.

Recommendations

A generic focus of the practicum could be inquiry-based on teaching and learning, at the same time as focusing on professionalism. This would enable rather than restrict innovation with practicum content. The benefits of exposing students to a range of experiences within the school could also be mirrored by their involvement beyond it. We would therefore encourage far greater involvement in aspects of the wider school community. For example visits could be made to local marae, pre-school language nests and primary schools with innovative programmes. Pasifika community houses, after school programmes, sporting facilities and even shopping centres could be visited to enable observation of how teenagers 'hang out', and provide insight into pupils' worlds. There needs to be greater flexibility as to how the school day is defined, for instance a Saturday community event (Pasifika Festival) could replace Monday morning in school. Knowledge of the wider school

context has the potential to strengthen relationships between teachers and pupils (Hawk, Cowley, Hill and Sutherland 2002).

Our partnership model opened up communication and dialogue between the provider and the school. This was a process of discovery, respect, and accommodation centred on the uniqueness of PHS. We recommend that the partnership should be accommodated in a more formal manner through structural change. For example, systems could endorse a structured meeting, prior to the commencement of practicum, between the visiting lecturer and school practicum coordinator. This would enable effective contextual as well as cognitive planning for particular school contexts.

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