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Educational Contexts



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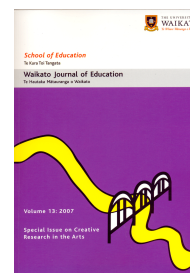
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Perceptions of the teaching practicum among Human Movement and Health Education pre-service teachers in Australia: The role of university coursework, university-school partnerships and e-learning

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Abstract

The field of professional experience presents opportunities as well as challenges in relation to the practicum and learning how to teach for pre-service teachers. This study sought to investigate University of Sydney third and fourth year Human Movement and Health Education pre-service teachers’ practicum experiences and learning. Ninety-six (n=96) women and men in the Human Movement and Health Education pre-service course completed an anonymous questionnaire after their most recent practicum experience. Pre-service teachers agreed that their practicum was enjoyable (97.4%); requirements for practicum were clearly communicated (93%) and that they were prepared by administrative staff (93%) and coursework (85%) for their practicum. Further, the findings revealed a statistically significant difference between third and fourth year pre-service teachers ($P < 0.01$) in regard to coursework preparation. Third year pre-service teachers believed they required additional professional development activities before their next practicum. The most enjoyable aspects were receiving a positive response to lessons from students (70.4%); receiving constructive support/having a positive relationship with their supervising teacher (22.0%); and having a sense of belonging to the teaching faculty, rather than feeling like a pre-service teacher (3.7%). There was 88.6% agreement for the initiation of new e-learning links during the practicum, including an online social support network site on which students could communicate and share lesson ideas. Pre-service teachers’ qualitative responses in the questionnaire suggest a redesign of the structure and sequence of the course, as well as professional experience units of study, and the need to place more emphasis on building strong professional relationships between pre-service teachers, supervising teachers and mentors. As such, a range of improvements have been



suggested to enhance pre-service teachers' enjoyment of learning in future practicum experiences, including some new e-learning practicum initiatives.

Key words

Secondary pre-service teacher education, practicum, perceptions of effectiveness, attitudes and beliefs, e-learning

Introduction

Within teacher education, the field of professional experience presents opportunities as well as challenges in relation to the practicum for pre-service teachers. A number of factors, including the economic environment, socio-political influences (e.g., the mandate of a minimum number of practicum days) and/or discursive norms or practices (e.g., relationships and rapport with supervising teachers and mentors), can either contribute to or detract from the learning experience and pre-service teachers' professional growth (Bloomfield, 2009; Pinder, 2008). The above competing influences and the problematic nature of pre-service teacher learning during the practicum experience have been widely documented (Brownlee, Purdie, & Boulton-Lewis, 2003; Fazio, Melville, & Bartley, 2010; Ferrier-King, 2009; Moss, 2008; Turnbull, 2005). This is certainly the case in Australia where a number of factors have shifted both the content focus and modes of delivery for teacher education.

In the past decade, there has been an increased focus on the forms and practices associated with the practicum within teacher education from Australian governments, both State and Federal and other institutional bodies (Department of Education, Science & Training [DEST], 2007; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; New South Wales Institute of Teachers [NSWIT], 2005; Ramsey, 2000). The mandating of increased numbers of practicum days within teacher education programmes and awards, combined with higher levels of enrolments into teacher education courses across institutions, has exerted growing pressure on teachers and schools to support practicum programmes (Bloomfield, 2009). There are growing indications that schools and teachers are becoming more reluctant to service the practicum needs of universities, due to current levels of economic reward. Alongside this, the expectations placed upon pre-service teachers (and therefore their university course and supervising teachers) have increased as practicum goals align with current state-based teaching standards, in a period where major pressures have been placed on time and resources too. This increased workload and lack of funding and reward for both sites and educators posits the economic environment as a major influence on developing positive university-school partnerships.

Further, practicum programmes provide the spaces in teacher education within which school-based learning, experiences and the integration of linking these components with on-campus learning are explored and founded. Educators at both sites are assumed to have the expertise to guide pre-service teachers in integrating specific bodies of knowledge, skills and practices that characterise each domain. However, this integration is affected by a number of local cultural and discursive factors including: 1) supervising teachers' knowledge and personal beliefs (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002); 2) pre-service teachers' ability to adapt to a school's norms and conventions, and to interpret the significance of the ethos (Hayes, 2001); 3) pre-service

teachers' preconceptions about teaching and their prior experiences (Britzman, 2003; Hiebert, Morris, Berk, & Jansen, 2007; Hobson, 2002; Moore, 2003); and 4) pre-service teachers' learning focus and whether it is directed towards curriculum and/or student learning (Edwards & Protheroe 2003).

With these influences in mind, practicum, pre-service teacher learning and professional growth are complex aspects of teacher education. Nevertheless, the practicum is potentially one of the most influential practices for pre-service teachers as they provide solid foundations for teaching and learning and offer opportunities to make essential connections between theory and practice (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). Recent research focusing on the practicum has explored pre-service teachers' learning and their ability to link theory and practice, rather than supervising teachers' roles in supporting learning (Cameron & Baker, 2004; Haigh, Pinder, & McDonald, 2006; Pinder, 2008). These particular studies have started to explore how and what primary pre-service teachers learn during practicum and the barriers to learning, and as yet have not explored Human Movement and Health Education pre-service teachers' practicum experiences and learning.

The aim of this study was to address this gap and contribute to the current research on pre-service teachers' experiences and learning throughout the practicum by gaining an insight into the experiences of third and fourth year pre-service teachers aspiring to be secondary Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) teachers in New South Wales, Australia. A sub-aim was to assess students' interest in, and support for, an online practicum e-learning and/or social support site.

Methodology

Participants

Participants consisted of 96 male and female pre-service teachers who had completed the third or fourth year teaching practicum of the Bachelor of Education (Human Movement and Health Education) course at the University of Sydney. The teaching practicum for both years was embedded in professional experience units of work, where formal preparation for the practicum was delivered. Third year pre-service teachers had returned from their second practicum, which was five weeks in length at the end of first semester and was their first exposure to teaching in a secondary school environment. Fourth year pre-service teachers had, at the same time, returned from their third five-week practicum, their second in a secondary school environment. The University of Sydney's Human Ethics Research Committee approved the research protocol and design for this study. Of the 143 students invited to participate, 96 consented (67% response rate), with 39 from third year (60% response rate) and 57 from fourth year (73% response rate).

Study design

Upon return from practicum, participants were invited by the researcher to anonymously complete a questionnaire within two weeks in their own time. They were to return it to a sealed box outside the main lecture theatre. Finally, participants were asked to provide ideas and suggestions regarding the development of e-learning

initiatives during the practicum and they were asked to indicate their support for an online social support site for their next practicum.

Measure

The questionnaire was designed as a four-point Likert scale with semantic anchors ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. Questionnaire items addressed the following seven categories: enjoyment (I enjoyed my most recent practicum experience); clarity of requirements (the requirements for practicum were clearly communicated to me and easily understood); coursework preparedness (I felt that I was well prepared for practicum by my HMHE coursework); administrative preparedness (I felt well prepared for practicum by the professional experience division of the Education Faculty); adequacy of content and skill development (I felt inadequately prepared and trained in several areas of teaching and this became apparent to me on my practicum); need for professional development (I could have benefited by some specific development before practicum on certain topics); and role of the tertiary supervisor/mentor (my tertiary supervisor/mentor was helpful).

Each of the seven categorical questions was followed by a space in which participants were invited to write further comments and suggestions. One item asked them to rate and report their suggestions for added professional development (suggest the following be added to the professional experience unit of study before they go out on practicum). Open-ended items asked participants to identify the “most enjoyable” and “least enjoyable” aspect of their most recent practicum experience as well as their opinions and ideas regarding any e-learning initiatives they may perceive as being helpful for their next practicum. A tally of the most frequent responses was compiled from participants’ written comments.

Statistical analysis

Questionnaire data were entered into a PASW Statistics 18 database to produce a frequency distribution. In order to compare the results of third and fourth year students, Chi square analyses were performed for each of the questionnaire items. Chi square 2 X 3 tables were produced where cell numbers were adequate and where cell numbers were inadequate, analyses combined the responses for “Disagree and Strongly Disagree”. A *P*-value of less than 0.05 was taken as statistically significant. A Bonferroni adjustment was included.

Results

Results for each year group and a comparison between third year and fourth year pre-service teachers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of third & fourth year pre-service teacher responses to the questionnaire

Evaluation Topic	3rd year student responses (N=39) % (N)				4th year student responses (N=57) % (N)				Chi square
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
I enjoyed my most recent practicum experience.	38.5 (15)	61.5 (24)	(0)	(0)	57.9 (33)	36.8 (21)	3.6 (2)	1.7 (1)	6.81*
The requirements for practicum were clearly communicated to me and easily understood.	30.8 (12)	61.5 (24)	7.7 (3)	(0)	52.6 (30)	40.4 (23)	7.0 (4)	(0)	4.67
I felt that I was well prepared for practicum by my HMHE coursework.	15.4 (6)	56.4 (22)	28.2 (11)	(0)	23.5 (12)	74.5 (38)	(0)	2.0 (1)	13.24**
I felt well prepared for practicum by the Professional Experience division of the Education Faculty.	13.2 (5)	63.2 (24)	21.0 (8)	2.6 (1)	12.5 (7)	60.7 (34)	21.4 (12)	5.4 (3)	0.32
I felt inadequately prepared in several areas of teaching and this became apparent to me on my practicum.	7.7 (3)	41.0 (16)	41.0 (16)	10.3 (4)	5.4 (3)	30.4 (17)	55.4 (31)	8.8 (5)	1.95
I could have benefited by some specific professional development before practicum on certain topics.	31.5 (12)	60.6 (23)	7.9 (3)	(0)	20.4 (11)	61.1 (33)	14.8 (8)	3.7 (2)	2.90
My tertiary supervisor/mentor was helpful.	41.2 (7)	41.2 (7)	11.8 (2)	5.8 (1)	41.3 (21)	33.3 (17)	17.6 (9)	7.8 (4)	0.56

Note: *P<0.05 **P<0.01

Whilst the majority of participants (100% in third year pre-service teachers, 94.7% in fourth year pre-service teachers) reported enjoyment of their most recent teaching practicum, a small number of fourth year participants (N=3, 3.6%) reported dissatisfaction ($P<0.05$). The most significant difference between year groups was the lack of coursework preparation that was reported among more than a quarter of third year pre-service teachers ($P<0.01$). These pre-service teachers believed they required additional professional development opportunities (86.8%). Suggested professional development opportunities included classroom and behaviour management strategies; assessment activities; special education approaches; questioning techniques; and more instruction of traditional sport pedagogies.

In general, the majority of pre-service teachers in both years agreed that their practicum experience was enjoyable (97.4%); requirements for practicum were clearly communicated and easily understood (93%); and that they were well prepared by administrative staff (93%); and by coursework (85%).

From the qualitative responses in the questionnaire, six key themes emerged around the notions of coursework preparation before the practicum experience; structure and sequence of the course; irrelevance of coursework; stress before and during the practicum; challenge, confidence and skill building; and professional relationships with the supervising teacher, other teachers and tertiary mentor. These are fully summarised in Table 2 and further discussed in the sub-sections below.

Table 2. Human movement and health education pre-service teachers.

Major themes	Typical student quotes
Confidence building	Grew in confidence. Learnt to think on my feet. It was more relevant, more responsibility. Loved it and learnt so much.
Skill development by “doing”	I learned a lot, learned mainly to let go and to disengage if something is troubling me in the classroom. It looked good on paper
Learning by being challenged	It tested me but I felt I benefited by being put outside my comfort zone. I did not feel confident at the beginning but towards the end I did. Challenging and engaging.
Discovering own teaching style	I think lesson preparation needs to be further developed. Lessons that looked good on paper were terrible in the classroom. It was hard but I learnt a lot about myself and my teaching style.
Irrelevance of theory	It taught me many valuable experiences which uni can’t teach me. A lot of what we learn at uni has NOTHING to do with our future careers More practical experience—I know it’s difficult to organize but I learnt so much more on prac than in the whole uni time.

<p>Inadequate preparation prior to the practicum</p>	<p>More syllabus study would be helpful. More time teaching children before prac. Even observations would be great. Less theory based practice and more prac. More school related topics. We need more practical lessons. Our university studies make us great at non-traditional sports, however on prac we needed sound knowledge of traditional sports. I felt inadequate in behaviour management. Dealing with students swearing at you. I was not mentally nor physically prepared, therefore it was quite distressing in the earlier days. I think more work needs to be done looking at specific classroom work/planning. I didn't feel prepared to teach large classes on my own. My peers prepared me more than uni courses. I only felt settled after Week 3.</p>
<p>Work/Life Balance</p> <p>Financial strain/Practicum interferes with paid employment</p> <p>Having a professional relationship with the supervising teacher is important</p>	<p>I think the uni forgets that as well as full-time prac we also have to work to live and play sport in team commitments. When prac is 5 weeks long, we all have to save for the whole semester prior to prac in order to be able to live/afford living expenses on prac.</p> <p>Could the govt/uni provide support? Asking employers for 5 weeks off work puts our casual positions in jeopardy. It is not possible for me to work to earn enough to pay rent, bills, groceries etc. over 5 weeks.</p> <p>Good PD/H/PE faculty. Everyone was very supportive. It was a great learning experience, however, it's not always fun being the "side-kick" of another teacher. I enjoyed it the more freedom I had.</p> <p>My prac supervisor did not check my lesson plans; therefore I was lazy and did not do them. Loved it, learnt a lot 'cause I had a great teacher as my supervisor. Staff were key to an enjoyable experience. But the way she addressed me lowered my self-esteem.</p>
<p>Having a professional relationship with the tertiary mentor is important</p>	<p>My tertiary supervisor was fantastic. His knowledge and skills were really useful in showing me many ways of teaching and interacting in the school. Yes, she made me feel comfortable and relaxed. Very helpful. Came and visited me three times. Laid back. Good constructive feedback.</p>

	<p>My supervisor seemed overwhelmed due to going back into a full-time load. He was too preoccupied with reports etc. to give me adequate support at times.</p> <p>My supervisor was not very understanding/helpful.</p> <p>Provided good feedback. Shame we only make contact during prac.</p> <p>I think a mentoring program would work well during the entire degree and more so in the preparation and weeks leading in to prac.</p> <p>Helpful, but it would have been more beneficial if he contacted me earlier.</p>
<p>Unable to see that teachers and tertiary mentors with a background in another major can adequately provide teaching expertise</p>	<p>It was difficult because my supervisor was not from a PDHPE background.</p> <p>He was however able to transfer his knowledge across to a PDHPE context and provided me with helpful feedback.</p> <p>I think she had never seen or taught a PE lesson in her whole life.</p> <p>My third year prac was supervised by an English teacher who could give me no feedback on my practical lesson.</p> <p>Not PE background, had no idea on lesson content appropriate for ages.</p> <p>I felt he was out of touch and couldn’t offer me any constructive criticism.</p>
<p>Confusion regarding the specific roles of the practicum student, supervising teacher, tertiary mentor and university practicum office staff</p>	<p>I understood them [the requirements] but my supervisor didn’t seem to.</p> <p>Uni had clear requirements. Prac teachers didn’t read the book so unclear at times at school.</p> <p>I found however that I needed to constantly ask about the school procedures making coursework less relevant.</p> <p>All they do is give us a handbook.</p> <p>My tertiary mentor was submissive to my supervising teacher’s demands.</p> <p>I feel that even though the prac. supervisors say they are there to support students I personally feel that my supervisor didn’t fully support my teaching experience.</p> <p>She didn’t provide adequate feedback to my teaching practices or provide me with productive strategies.</p>
<p>Physical and personal “stress” before and during the practicum make it difficult</p>	<p>Prac rolled through after a long uni semester and there was little time to rest and recuperate.</p> <p>There was only a small amount of changeover time between semesters as well.</p> <p>A few personal problems made it tough.</p> <p>I would have enjoyed this more if we didn’t have exams and assessment due in the weeks of our practicum.</p> <p>I enjoyed it once I was there but was dreading it leading up.</p> <p>High expectations good but stressful.</p> <p>Going into prac I was pretty stressed—I hated the first week.</p> <p>I was not mentally nor physically prepared, therefore it was quite distressing in the earlier days.</p> <p>Less pressure please, do not overwhelm with professional standards.</p>

Structure and sequence of the course content components	<p>We should have a first year PRAC!</p> <p>Align topics at uni with topics for teaching on prac.</p> <p>More focus on THEORY that will be taught, e.g., Sex ed Sem 1.</p> <p>Possibly have the sex and drug ed topic before prac, adolescent health issues before third year prac and more on behaviour management.</p>
School ethos in regard to the practicum and student teachers	<p>I felt welcome and comfortable, therefore my confidence grew.</p> <p>So much of my enjoyment levels depends on the school.</p> <p>Teachers and school were amazing—highly helpful and supportive.</p> <p>This was my favourite prac, I loved the school, the staff were supportive and welcoming and the students were the same.</p> <p>Fantastic school. Great staff that were extremely supportive and helpful.</p> <p>Made me have a great experience.</p> <p>It was well organized with a good school ethos.</p> <p>I personally felt this school I attended was a “fake” environment and didn’t challenge my full teaching potential.</p> <p>Somewhat disagree, found it boring and de-motivating as my teacher had no passion and didn’t want to be there.</p>
Understanding school politics	<p>Should there be a subject called “staffroom politics 101”.</p> <p>School politics.</p>

Preparation before the practicum experience

Third year pre-service teachers reported that they were inadequately prepared by coursework compared with fourth year pre-service teachers ($P < 0.01$). The qualitative responses mirrored these feelings, with responses identifying areas for improvement in coursework. These included greater opportunities for engagement with the syllabus and lesson planning; more interaction with schools and students, either through microteaching or observation of classes leading into practicum; and increased exposure to the physical and mental pressures of practicum. These were voiced through a range of responses:

More syllabus study would be helpful and I think more work needs to be done looking at specific classroom work/planning.

I was not mentally or physically prepared; therefore it was quite distressing in the earlier days. We need to be more aware of how taxing practicum can be.

Structure and sequence of the course

Pre-service teachers were also forthcoming with suggestions on how the structure and sequence of the course could be improved, moving beyond small changes in single units of study. The most frequent suggestion was to include more practicum experiences throughout the four-year degree.

We should have a first year practicum, and more opportunities for teaching small groups of students throughout the semester leading into the bigger practicums.

The other frequent response was for course convenors and unit coordinators to align topics throughout the semester with what pre-service teachers will be expected to teach and demonstrate in the upcoming practicum. A common suggestion included reorganising health units into first semester to allow time for pre-service teachers to acquire pertinent knowledge and pedagogical skills for teaching sexuality and drug education before teaching this subject matter in schools.

Possibly have the sex and drug education topics before practicum, as well as adolescent health issues before third year practicum.

Irrelevance of coursework

The perceived irrelevance of coursework, due to the above circumstances, reinforced that the gap between coursework and practice is still apparent for many pre-service teachers, despite course convenors' and unit coordinators' best efforts. Statements such as "practicum taught me many valuable experiences which university can't teach me" and "a lot of what we learn at university has nothing to do with our future careers" illustrate this view.

Stress before and during practicum

Pre-service teachers noted high stress levels before and during practicum. There were wide and varying explanations for this stress, and also different types of stress experienced (i.e. positive and negative stress). Some of the major negative stressors related to coursework and feeling ill-prepared and confused in regard to their role as a pre-service teacher, but also the roles of the other stakeholders, including supervising teachers, mentors and university practicum teaching staff. Pre-service teachers felt that there was limited communication between all stakeholders.

The university and our course had clear requirements. However, practicum teachers and my supervising teacher didn't read the Handbook, so expectations were unclear at times.

Another notable negative stress was the placement of practicum immediately after the semester with pre-service teachers having to juggle both studying for exams, as well as practicum preparation, planning and reflecting. Hence, pre-service teachers felt overloaded and stifled, which led to a lack of enjoyment for some participants in the first weeks of practicum.

I would have enjoyed practicum more if we didn't have exams and assessment due in the first weeks of practicum.

An interesting negative stress, not associated with coursework, was the financial strain that practicum placed on participants, as it encroached on other paid working commitments. This was really concerning for one pre-service teacher who made it quite clear that "it was not possible for me to work to earn enough to pay rent, bill, groceries (etc.) over the five week practicum period". Although an issue experienced by many pre-service teachers over the years, it seems that this may be more prevalent in recent

times, with pre-service teachers suggesting that “the government/university [should] provide financial support”.

Finally, the social isolation of the practicum was noted by many students, who suggested the development of future e-learning links in order to provide social support.

An online practicum forum would help us connect with each other while we are out on prac and it would provide us with support.

Challenge, confidence and skill building

Despite the aforementioned negative stressors associated with practicum and coursework, the majority of pre-service teachers experienced positive stressors and were encouraged by the challenges that practicum presented. As a result, all pre-service teachers were able to describe more than one benefit, with most reporting an increase in learning and in particular, enhanced levels of flexibility, confidence, knowledge and skill:

I grew in confidence and learnt to think on my feet.

Lessons that looked good on paper were terrible in the classroom. I learnt to mainly let go and to try something new if something wasn't working.

Professional relationships with the supervising teacher and tertiary mentor

The pre-service teachers who found the practicum enjoyable supported this view by emphasising the importance of creating and maintaining positive relationships with their supervising teacher and other teaching staff. These teachers provided a positive and supportive environment, giving pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue and to learn from more expert colleagues. Two pre-service teachers reinforced the importance of this relationship by stating that “staff were key to an enjoyable experience” and “I loved it, as I learnt a lot because I had a great teacher as my supervisor”. Likewise, pre-service teachers voiced similar thoughts when describing the role of the tertiary mentor (i.e., the supervisor from the university) in guiding and enhancing their learning and making the practicum more enjoyable.

My tertiary mentor was fantastic. His knowledge and skills were really useful in showing me many ways of teaching and interacting in the school.

However, a small number of participants were less than happy with their tertiary mentors and what they were able to provide them. This was mainly due to the tertiary mentor not being trained as a PDHPE teacher, but in another key learning area. Therefore their knowledge and skills were perceived as limited, especially in regard to providing constructive feedback in the physical education environment.

My tertiary mentor was an English teacher who could give me no feedback on my practical lessons.

When pre-service teachers were asked what were the most enjoyable aspects of the practicum, 22.0% stated receiving constructive support and feedback from the supervising teacher and having a positive relationship with them. This reinforces the importance of the professional relationship between the supervising teacher, tertiary

mentor and pre-service teachers. The only other aspect that was valued more highly in regard to enjoyment was when school students responded positively to lessons (70.4%).

Suggestions for e-learning applications at the next practicum

There was overall agreement (88.6%) for the development and addition of some new e-learning initiatives during the next practicum and this theme was in line with previous suggestions for the development of relationships that foster greater professional and interpersonal support. Suggestions for the development of a student support network during the next practicum overwhelmingly identified the creation of a WebCT site in which students could communicate and share lesson plans and teaching resources with their peers and lecturers. Students were not keen to use Twitter, a Discussion Board or Facebook as a support site, as their main goal was to find a social support network in which they could communicate and share lesson ideas.

Discussion

The current research study aimed to explore third and fourth year Human Movement and Health Education pre-service teachers' experiences and learning whilst on their most recent practicum. The findings suggest that although the majority of pre-service teachers enjoyed their most recent practicum, a statistically significant number of third year pre-service teachers, compared with fourth year pre-service teachers, felt that they were inadequately prepared by coursework, which was further supported by qualitative data.

The findings suggest that the vast majority of students reported a high degree of enjoyment of their most recent practicum, and that the major identification of "enjoyment" lay in the development of professional relationships with their students and their supervising teachers. It was interesting to note that the major themes to emerge from the research were all associated with the pre-service teacher developing confidence, skills, experience and being challenged, but their most "enjoyable" experience was in their relationships with their students and fellow teachers. To quote a third year pre-service teacher:

It was so cool to get through a new lesson where students were getting excited because they understood a concept ... and it was a really good feeling when they left the classroom and said Thanks Sir.

Unenjoyable aspects of the practicum were associated with a perceived lack of teaching skill and confidence in classroom behaviour management, as reported by the following student:

Disciplining students was the worst I didn't always know the correct way to do this ... getting sworn at ... getting a ball thrown at me ... getting students walking out of my class I simply had no skills to manage this behaviour...."

In addition, qualitative data identified the importance that pre-service teachers placed on positive professional relationships with the supervising teacher and tertiary supervisor/mentor as well as social support from their peers.

Practicum experiences are highly valued by pre-service teachers (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) and

generally this was also the case for the participants in this study. However, participants were in the old Human Movement and Health Education course not accredited by the new regulations set by the Australian governing professional body and governments (DEST, 2007; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; NSWIT, 2005; Ramsey, 2000), and therefore were not required to meet a minimum number of practicum hours. That meant these participants experienced their first practicum in their second year, with the first secondary school practicum experienced in the third year of their four-year course. Perhaps this may have contributed to the third year pre-service teachers' feelings of inadequacy and ill preparedness. This has been addressed more recently in the design of our new and accredited Bachelor of Education (Human Movement and Health Education) course, where pre-service teachers will meet the expected amount of practicum hours across the four years of their degree.

As highlighted by a small number of participants in this study, practicum experiences may not be positive, due to a lack of congruence or mismatch between what pre-service teachers learn in tertiary courses and what they experience in the "real world" of classrooms (Peters, 2008), and inappropriate challenges and support in pre-service teacher contexts (Tang, 2003). To overcome the discrepancy between tertiary courses and schools, researchers and academics have tried various ways to bridge the theory and practice gap and to help pre-service teachers to see the value of both (Fieman-Nemser, 2001). As such, structured professional experience units of study with an embedded series of professional experience placements that work towards the same outcomes, may be one viable option (Peters, 2008). This is being currently explored within the new Human Movement and Health Education course at the University of Sydney (Peralta & Burns, 2010).

To feel supported throughout the practicum experience, pre-service teachers cherish the professional relationships developed between themselves and the supervising teacher and mentor. For these participants, their practicum was structured around a hierarchical view of the supervisory relationship, with the pre-service teacher as the sole learner guided by the supervisor teacher as the expert. Lave and Wenger (1991) do not discount the importance to the novice of immersion within a learning community and engagement in productive relations with those members seen as masters, but the resultant power relations may be unproductive and may cause problems for some novices and masters. Hence, Lave and Wenger (1991) acknowledge a view of learning that is situated not so much in the individual, but arising through certain forms of social co-participation known as the "community of practice". If the practicum is conceptualised in terms of a community of practice, all participants including pre-service teachers, supervising teachers and mentors can be positioned as potential learners. Bloomfield (2009) discusses this shift towards a community of practice. Changes in the University of Sydney's primary programme being initiated to trial this new form of supervisory practice will be keenly observed by the researchers and academics within the Human Movement and Health Education programme.

Additionally, an interesting suggestion put forth by some of the pre-service teachers regarding further support for practicum experiences was having access to an online support network. The main purpose of the online support network was to interact with peers and share information, ideas and resources. This form of e-learning has been pioneered and recently piloted using Twitter among a group of pre-service teachers in

New Zealand (Wright, 2010). The researcher reported that the ability for pre-service teachers to read each others' tweets and respond personally was highly valued, reducing their sense of isolation and, at times, emotional overload. The New Zealand pre-service teachers also valued the ability of Twitter to archive ideas and thoughts chronologically as this provided opportunities for reflection upon pedagogy, curriculum/lesson planning, relationships (with other staff and students), emotions and classroom management (Wright, 2010). This form of e-learning is a new area of teaching and learning that will also be implemented and pilot tested in our faculty for the purpose of enhancing the pre-service teacher practicum experience and self-reflection over the next few years. A previous study (O'Dea & Rowley, 2010), conducted with Human Movement and Health Education pre-service teachers, examined their use of online discussion boards and reported that the pre-service teachers were not keen to utilise Twitter or Facebook, but would prefer to access a purposely designed WebCT site, as this is the form of e-learning they have had access to over the past few years. The intention is to develop these aspects of e-learning in coursework and on practicum to further enhance pre-service teachers' support and learning throughout the practicum experience.

This study illuminated Human Movement and Health Education pre-service teachers' perceptions of the practicum and the role university coursework and strong university-school partnerships played in making the practicum an enjoyable and worthwhile learning experience. It found that pre-service teachers still identified a gap between the messages conveyed in professional experience units delivered in the on-campus component of the course and the practice experienced in schools. Additionally, pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of positive professional relationships between themselves and supervising teachers and mentors, recommending that the design of integrated professional experience units, courses and communities of practice are of paramount importance for improving pre-service teachers learning of how to teach.

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