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Assessment of the Practicum in Teacher Education. Advocating for the student teacher and questioning the gatekeepers?

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on research that suggests a new view of assessment of the practicum in teacher education. By transcending the stereotypes of “failing” student teachers who do not achieve traditional benchmarks, this new lens highlights the complexity, diversity and inequality of experiences through listening to the voices of the student teachers and their mentors. By valuing context and focusing on progress and development rather than absolute attainment, teacher educators are challenged to reflect on their own role as mentors and educators through guiding principles of practicum learning. These guiding principles of practicum learning are the result of significant observation in the practicum classroom followed by critical analysis of data provided as narrative. A more humane, trusting and respectful attitude towards assessment is suggested.

Key words: Student teacher, preservice teacher, practicum, professional experience, gatekeeper, teacher education, critical theory, practicum assessment

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Introduction

At a recent Nordic Educational Research Congress a Swedish-Australian Network presented a symposium entitled “Examining Praxis and Practicum in Teacher Education” in an attempt to extend the focus of student teacher\(^2\) assessment beyond the models currently popular. Based on previous studies of student achievement reported in the edited volume “Examining Praxis: Assessment and Knowledge Construction in Teacher Education” (Mattsson, Johansson & Sanström, 2008) and the argument of the authors for alternative and complementary ways of assessing student teachers beyond the small thesis, the portfolio and the case based model, the group aimed to better understand professional practice knowledge by positioning it within deeper notions of praxis. The concepts of “sayings, doings and relatings” in practice (Kemmis and Smith, 2008) and “situated understandings” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) were seen as our point of departure.

Since the turn of the century it has become clear that a new turn in ethnographic studies in education has been made possible by a range of qualitative methodologies that value insider knowledge (Lampert, 2000) and humane respect for diversity (Page, 2000, 2001). These methods are transformative and contextual (Metz, 2000) and transparently provide cannons through which qualitative analysis can be judged (Garman in Smyth, Hattam & Shacklock, 1997, p. 31; Piantanida & Garman, 1999). Although Garman’s tests of verity, integrity, rigour, utility, vitality, aesthetics, ethics and verisimilitude have been well used, others have suggested their own criteria for evaluating the quality of practitioner research. Altrichter, Posch & Somekh (1993) suggest that “the research should be compatible with the demands of the situation being researched” (p. 77) and Anderson and Herr (1999) discuss validity as the quality and appropriateness of the qualitative research method. The complexity

\(^2\) Although it is my preference to use ‘preservice’ teacher I have noted, particularly in Europe and Scandinavia, the use of student teacher. Preschool teacher, teacher candidate and pre-service teacher are also used.
and multiple perspectives uncovered when bringing a range of assumptions to the surface, exploring what they mean, confronting how it came to be this way and suggesting how things can be done differently in the future, merge the qualitative research turn with critical or “resistance” theory. Such theories of possibility where previously unheard views emerge, inform misunderstandings and misconceptions in our understanding. Loughran (2006) suggests there is an “enormous array of skills, knowledge, competencies, conceptualisations and practices” (p. 18) that reflect the complexity and messiness of the theories and practice of teaching and learning. Schön (1983) refers to this as the “indeterminate swampy zone” and Labaree (2003: 14) also agrees that such research is complex and messy.

Although there has also been much written about teacher education during the last decade, much of it is based on literature reviews, policy development, government inquiries and understandings of those responsible for the tertiary programs to prepare preservice teachers. While traditional quantitative methodology and “scientific principles” (Schon, 1983, 1987) provide more predictable, controlled, step-by-step “solutions” or “answers” to our research and teaching questions, it is our belief that qualitative research methodology is more likely to generate understanding in this complex and unpredictable world of classrooms (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As Ekiz (2006) suggests, teachers (and student teachers) “have to deal with unpredictable courses of action which generally emerge from the immediacy of classrooms (p. 70) while on a similar vein Labaree (2000) suggests

If teaching is indeed a practice as difficult as I portrayed… then there is no form of professional practice that is more demanding except perhaps teacher education. We ask teacher education programs to provide ordinary college students with the imponderable so that they can teach the irrepressible in a manner that pleases the irreconcilable, and all without knowing clearly either the purposes or the consequences of their actions (p. 231)

Furthermore if we are going to view teaching as an ethical, political, social and cultural enterprise (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1991, 1992) our aim is to ensure that each of the researchers who contribute to our project have completed rigorous and credible ethnographic research
that examines praxis and practicum in teacher education. The symposium presentation was an opportunity for some of the key researchers in the group to introduce their research for open discussion.

Within an atmosphere of rich discussion crossing cultural divides I introduced my study where guiding “principles of practicum learning” (appendix 1) informed my comparative research in six schools and six municipalities in the Stockholm (Sweden) area. These guiding principles were developed through critical analysis of narratives created from observations in Australian and Canadian classrooms. This particular study investigates the similarities and difference is the ecology and dynamics of the practicum classroom and the evaluation or assessment of the student teacher in different educational systems. The attendees at the symposium were primarily from Nordic countries and spanned a range of experiences in academia. Some were relatively inexperienced teacher educators who had recently moved from teaching positions in schools into smaller regional universities. Others were very experienced teacher educators and professors from major universities. Most were somewhere in between, generally academics with an interest in teacher education and particularly the “practicum-turn” that had been mentioned in our abstract.

As I listened to the range of views around the practicum, and in particular the assessment of the student teachers, I became very aware of the differences in opinions and how they related to the positioning of the teacher educators and their experience within the rich discourses of initial teacher preparation. Clearly each of us can be deeply inculcated into the dominant cultures and profoundly imbued with taken for granted values and hegemonic politics of those cultures. It appears to me that in the move from practitioner to “academic” we are frequently overwhelmed by access to new ideas and perspectives, suddenly confident that we have “the answer”. From my positioning in the critical paradigm I am aware that there is seldom “an” answer- there are multiple solutions that will arise from interrogating
our questions in new and different ways. As I listened to the discussion I reflected on my own journey as an academic and the changes in my own beliefs and knowledge as I researched more deeply the theories and traditions that underpin university teaching and learning, particularly the learning of those who wish to teach.

As so often happens when assessment of student teachers is discussed the concept of “failing” is introduced by those who see themselves as the “gate keepers”, as the protectors of the profession. Typically these are the least experienced yet very passionate teacher educators who view themselves as very successful teachers and tend to compare the neophyte teachers with their rather indistinct memory of their own experiences. But can we see ourselves as others see us? I recognised, again, myself a decade earlier, confident in my knowledge about what was best for the profession!

As I was at the front of the room I was able to view the body language and expressions of the group. Several were making notes but obviously biding their time, allowing those who saw themselves as the saviours of the profession an opportunity to express themselves; though obviously they had heard the pragmatic solutions before. Eventually the more experienced teacher educators and researchers began to temper the “solution” style discussions with their more informed ideas about teacher education and introduced the theories that underpinned their understandings. The work of Shōn (1983, 1987) (practitioner research) Kemmis & McTaggart (1990) (action research), identity and agency studies (Foucault, 1982; Labaree, 2003) and socio-cultural and political traditions (Bourdieu, 1991; Gireoux, 1991) were introduced. Views around voiced research (Burgess, 1988; Smyth & Hattam, 2004), pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), productive and generative learning (Harpaz & Leftstein, 2000; Lingard, Hayes & Mills, 2003; Newman & Associates, 1996) were discussed and the focus returned to preservice teacher learning and the sense of “becoming” a teacher (Korthagen, 2004). At this stage the tone turned to one of support,
guidance and mentoring, not “gatekeeper”, and finally the comment “would you want this person teaching your children or grandchildren?” was suggested as the defining statement around student teacher assessment.

Having heard this statement before and not feeling that it was the definitive statement for evaluating the ability of student teachers to “become” teachers, I was disappointed that within the Scandinavian social-democratic polities the same Anglo-American view was presented. I responded by suggesting that we could actually go one step further and view these neophyte teachers whom we were to evaluate, as we would humanely and respectfully interact with our own child. I suggested we were more likely to identify the “essence” of the teacher and teacher’s work by asking questions like “Is this student teacher committed to professional learning?”, “Does he/she possess the skills, knowledges, attitudes and disposition to continue to learn?”, “Does he/she reflect the dispositions or character that could develop the productive and generative pedagogies necessary for inclusive teaching in the twenty-first century?” and “Does he/she have the potential to interact through productive classroom relationships and provide challenging yet nurturing experiences?”. To “fail” or decide the future for the student teachers without being absolutely confident that we have fulfilled our own responsibility to them, would be to fall short as their mentors. Unless they have had every opportunity to provide the evidence and meet the outcomes, despite their differences in experiences, learning styles, life’s challenges, placement vagrancies and biography, then I suggested that I did not believe that we can even consider “failing” them? A focus on their progress rather than the attainment of arbitrary or context dependent outcomes might provide a better lens for the assessment of student teachers. Who is to say that they might not find their niche in a school or setting quite different from the one they have “chanced” to have been placed for their practicum? As Loughran reminds us

...it may well be that arguments surrounding the nature of teachers’ professional knowledge are more a reflection of the difficulties associated with
uncovering and articulating it in such a way as to fully appreciate that which it genuinely comprises (p. 15).

As is so often the case, this rich conversation was ended due to the pressure of time. However I was thanked after the session for the “refreshing” maturity my views brought to the discussion, providing a deeper understanding of the practicum than ever before. This motivated me to reflect on how I had developed this belief and whether I had the empirical research data to support it.

On returning to Australia I presented my research once more at a workshop for mentor teachers. Again I was overwhelmed by the feedback pertaining to the information I provided and how I advocated for the student teacher. “Refreshingly different approach”, “clearly a considered and well researched analysis”, “a wealth of information opening up ideas of perspective”, “fresh information on the development of teacher identity and how one develops their understanding of being a teacher” are examples of the comments during feedback and on response sheets.

The research from where these ideas developed

As mentioned, my research has been conducted in practicum classrooms in Australia, Canada and Sweden. I have visited classrooms from Kindergarten right through to the final year of schooling. Normally I visit each setting for about five days, maintain a low profile, write field notes and talk with staff, principals, pre-service teachers, mentor teachers and other school personnel informally. Research in schools is fraught with difficulty and for moral and ethical reasons I make it clear from the start that particular situations, issues and experiences will not be revealed. To ensure this, I have developed a qualitative research design that is multi layered; based initially on my field notes I write fictional narrative, and then critically
analyse the responses to the narrative (see figure 1). The outcome of this multi-layered analysis is two fold. Firstly the “stories of the practicum” after being “checked” by student teachers, teachers and teacher educators (the reader/respondents) are made available as a resource for teacher education (Rorrison, 2008a). Secondly the analysis of the responses to the stories is critiqued through the critical cycle (figure 2) and “recommendations” or guiding “principles of practicum learning” (appendix 1) were developed to support a model of practicum learning that informs those involved. These “principles of practicum learning” have been introduced in a range of situations (publications, workshops, conference presentations and in my teaching at the university). The final stage looks at how these recommendations can impact on the practicum experience of the preservice teachers and their mentors to influence the learning in the practicum and the identity of the neophyte as a teacher (current research). Through analysing this impact through the same critical cycle we actually create a “critical spiral” (see figure 3) to further inform teacher education.

The first phase of this research was nearly 200 hours of observation in middle school and secondary school classrooms and the “checked” and modified stories have been published and used in teacher education (Rorrison, 2008a). Six stories of about 10,000 words were created- so they provide deep characterisation of the student teachers and mentors, critical detail of the context and significant background knowledge of the journey of the student teachers involved. The second booklet of stories was written after around 150 hours of observations in Kindergarten to Grade 6 classrooms. These narratives are slightly less complex (about 5,000 words each) and focus more on the actual classroom experiences of the student teacher providing less background information on their lives. This was as a response
to the comments on the first booklet where some of the reader/respondents felt there was too much detail. Interestingly there were almost as many responses (1609) by the 21 reader/respondents (an average of 77 comments), while the longer stories in the first booklet resulted in 2872 responses from 35 reader/respondents (an average of 82 comments). Sixty per cent of the longer, more dense secondary and middle school stories booklets were returned completed, while a lower 49 per cent of the early childhood and primary stories were returned with comments, suggesting that the length and density of the stories may not have affected the willingness of the reader/respondents to comment after all.

The purpose of my research was to provide a “sense of the practicum” from the student teachers’ perspective, introducing through the stories a diverse range of abilities, life experiences and dispositions of student teachers and mentors, as well as the wide range of setting and interactions that represent “the practicum”. There are many other “possible” stories and much data was collected but never used. Indeed, there are as many stories as placements- in fact, double that many, as the perspective of the student teacher is seldom that of the mentor. None of the stories introduces mental illness, drug addiction, bullying, physical abuse or the death of a loved one during the practicum, though all of these have been uncovered during the research. The stories present an attempt to introduce a cross section of experiences that will resonate with most student teachers, mentor teachers and teacher educators.

In this research I do write into existence my perspective of the lived experience of the student teachers in the first layer of the research process but in phase two and three student teachers (as well as their mentors and teacher educators) are encouraged to be co-writers of the narrative. Firstly they are asked to comment on the authenticity of the stories- do they
resonate? It is not the purpose for my stories in this study to be persuasive but instead to have “verisimilitude”; are they recognisable as conceivable experience? I also hope they are compelling and enjoyable as well as rich and lush. I am aware that student teachers and their mentors are time poor so their method of responding is as undemanding as possible. While the stories that are written present multiple positionings, each reader can grapple with what they believe and who they are within the spaces created for reflection and discussion.

Throughout the stories there is quality classroom pedagogy to learn from. There were many comment on the booklets akin to “great idea”, “I have learned something here”, “I’m going to try this with my class”, as well as “oh! No”, “disaster waiting to happen”, “something to avoid”. There are also many reflections and much commentary from the student teachers through the narrator, allowing us a rich view of the sorts of reflections and challenges the student teachers deal with on a daily basis. These also elicit many comments from the reader/respondents; “I never thought of it like this”, “what a brilliant mentor”, “what can we do at uni to prevent this happening”. It is, however, the understandings uncovered through the critical analysis of the 4,481 responses to the stories by 56 reader/respondents that have led to my current positioning and the new view of student teacher assessment I reported earlier in this paper.

Below I have presented a brief synopsis of the twelve stories to provide some insight into the narrative that was so well received by student teachers, teachers and teacher educators. Some of the stories continue through two practica, some barely touch on one. There is an attempt to develop the characters and the context yet there is so much more that could be written. I left space for readers to add their perspectives. I even invite them to write their own stories, recommend plots for missing stories, and suggest further chapters or alternate endings. I encouraged those who read the stories to “circle, underline and mark the text in any way, as well as comment, annotate, re-write, argue, dispute, criticize or affirm my
perspective of the practicum” in an open letter and explanation as a foreword to the booklets of stories. I explain that my research highlights how powerful our personal perceptions are and how different they can be to the perspectives of others, despite experiencing the “same” situation” (Rorrison, 2004, p. 2; Rorrison, 2008, p. 2).

The first story is about T who a male in his early twenties who entered university straight from school. He came from a poor country family who moved from place to place in his early years and he attended many different schools. T’s passion had been sport for as far back as he can remember. His first practicum in both the Health and Physical Education (HPE) and Science faculties of a large outer metropolitan school included both supportive and “laisser faire” mentoring, but it was other aspects of school culture and politics that had the most influence on his practicum experience.

R is a middle aged female whose learning areas were Business Education, Graphic Design and Maths. She experiences difficulties adapting to the move from the work place to the university and then her practicum placement was changed at the last minute. This caused her insecurities to re-emerge and she decided to withdraw from her practicum but continues with course units.

As a middle aged male from somewhere in the Indio-Pacific region “Dr B” hopes to teach English and English as a Second Language (ESL) as he did before he arrived in Australia. Unfortunately B doesn’t really have the background knowledge in the English learning area and has no understanding of English literature; his qualifications and experience are entirely in the areas of ESL and literacy. He appealed to the authorities and this led to his placement in the course. B’s mentors are hand picked and have recently participated in “mentor preparation workshops” but B tries to hold down a full time job and participate in his practicum at the same time. Eventually he realises he needs more time to fully understand the
school culture and engage with his study. He withdraws from the practicum but not the course.

After spending many years in Europe, Q returns to Australia with the view of becoming a teacher. She is qualified to move into both Science and Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). During her practica she is able to observe and work with some fine teachers but due to her mentor’s family emergency she is left to fend for herself during her first practicum.

An evocative example of our “Y” generation D rebelled against everything middle class and enjoyed days of smoking pot and drinking home brew when she was supposed to be at an exclusive girls’ school. Surprisingly, she won a place at university but it wasn’t until her professional education units that she was forced to confront who she was and what she was doing with her life. A remote practicum in the Northern Territory helps her decide that teaching may after all be a worthwhile vocation.

The final middle/secondary school story is about V, a young man who finds himself in an Arts/Education degree in a university campus away from the city where he grew up. He had no intention of being a teacher but was amazed by the rapport and respect he felt for the students in his classes. Despite an error of judgement and a relationship with a young lady who later turned up in one of his classes, and through the guidance and support he received from dedicated staff at a country school and his university supervisor, V completes his education degree and is offered a position in a school.

The second booklet covers the Kindergarten to Grade 6 classroom. There was some feedback about the order of the stories in this booklet, suggesting that perhaps the more complex story of M should have been later, but I will present them here in the order that they were in the research booklet.
M had always wanted to work with children but had found her disability prevented her from enrolling in teacher education when she left school. Things had been very different then and not only had her wheelchair been larger and less manoeuvrable, schools had really not accommodated a range of differences in the way that they do now. So instead, she had been convinced to complete a science degree and had worked in various laboratory positions before moving into health promotion. Despite enjoying her work, most of it had been working with adults, so when she turned forty she decided it was time to make a career change and do what she really wanted to do. Going back to university had not been difficult as she had really never stopped studying, there was always something new to learn and her various positions had afforded her the opportunity to attend numerous short courses and conferences. She was hoping to move into working with children with disabilities after a few years working in the mainstream classroom, believing that this grounding would set her up well to make a difference for children with special needs.

M’s first practicum was an unmitigated success, both mentor and mentee learning a great deal. It was clear, however, when they finally sat down to discuss the practicum learning outcomes, that the success had been more the result of good luck than good management. They lamented on their lack of time to really structure this first practicum or prioritise reflection and feedback sessions but endeavoured to developed processes and practices for the next few years. Fortunately the professional experience program was designed so that preservice teachers attended the same school for every practicum and M maintained her contact with the school through her community engagement between placements.

G had not experienced a “western style” primary education, having spent her early years in a developing country. She was overwhelmed by her first classroom experience, confronted by “breakfast club”, “fashion conscious outfits from fifth grade students”,...
“individual programs”, “self-initiated learning” and a focus on ICT and high stimulus classroom design. She was also immediately in awe of her mentors pedagogy, energy and knowledge of the learning needs of each individual student. “Questions are the nourishment for teaching”, she was told and observed her mentor eliciting rich discussions and inquiry based learning.

Unfortunately, due to a medical emergency, G’s mentor was replaced by a casual teacher during the second week and G was more or less forgotten while this new teacher got to know the class and the children adapted to her very different teaching style. When it came G’s time to conduct a lesson it was neither well conceived nor checked by her mentor and is was apparent from the start that the children were unwilling to adapt once again to new expectations. One particular student who had a range of developmental issues could not be convinced to settle at her desk and while endeavouring to create positive and productive behaviour G allowed the rest of the class to lose focus and indeed display behaviours that G had never observed in the classroom before. The chaos that ensued, and that could only be settled by the Vice Principal who was called to the room, sapped G’s confidence. It was only through a visit from her University supervisor, a carefully constructed developmental plan, and considerable support from the school leadership personnel that G did not withdraw from the course.

C was a thorough and dedicated preservice teacher but failed to develop a supportive relationship with her mentor. No matter what she did she was unable to gain any positive feedback despite conducting successful and innovative lessons that clearly resulted in student learning. Fortunately she was able to develop a successful “mentoring” relationship with the school creative arts teacher, who not only demonstrated pedagogy that resonates with her own theories of teaching and learning, but re-instated her confidence in her own ability and her teaching identity.
E returned to university after the birth of his first child. He had grown up in a remote indigenous community and moved to the city as a young man to attend university but had been lonely and distracted by the opportunities for sports, work and recreation. His first practicum in the education course had been a “paired practicum” and he and his partner had been well supported by the early childhood teacher. They had also complimented each other, G had been confident with the children, especially in artwork and movement skills while his partner had been thorough and strategic with the lesson plans and other paperwork. However G’s second practicum uncovered some of his old insecurities. His mentor was almost at retirement age and appeared, at first, remote, out of touch and possibly even racist though in time E began to recognise his mentors’ strengths with the single sex boys’ class and truly respect his deep knowledge and understanding about teaching. Through his mentors subtle yet “just in time” mentoring style E began to realise that mentoring can be provided in many different ways depending on the personality of the mentor yet a quality learning relationship is dependent on the willingness of both individuals to try to understand the other.

J’s story is complex and was the most difficult to write. She is far from home, struggling financially and has just established a valued relationship with a same-sex partner. J only has a bicycle for transport but is fiercely independent, riding 15 km each way through peak hour traffic to get to school. Due to her enthusiasm and genuine desire to make a contribution to the school community J accepted additional roles in the after-school care unit but was finding the long hours and the demands of her university assignments, as well as her lesson planning, were beginning to affect her health. She had been unprepared for the stresses of continuous interpersonal relationships and interactions in the Kindergarten but after gentle intervention by her mentors was convinced to accept an offer of transport from another staff member, allowing her time to prepare her lessons more carefully and engage with the quality classroom learning experiences created by her mentor.
Y was immature, over-protected and indulged by her parents when she began her first practicum. Having not thought beyond driving her new car to school and what she was going to wear on her first day, she was quite unprepared for the demands of the grade two classroom or her associate teacher. Unlike the previous five stories in this booklet where the mentor teachers were experienced quality teachers, Y’s mentor’s timetable was unstructured, her classroom management inconsistent and her planning and pedagogy uninspiring. With little guidance or feedback from her mentor, Y was “thrown in at the deep-end”, and overwhelmed by the demands of the university where she attended three days each week and the practicum placement that took up the other two days each week. She was to observe and help out where she could each Thursday and take over the entire program each Friday, building on the lessons of the previous day.

While Y’s peers were reporting admiration for their mentors, much guidance, support and feedback, Y felt used and unsupported. She learned very little other than a few survival techniques and was jealous of her peers, feeling that it was quite unfair that their experiences varied so much. Lacking self efficacy and the ability to advocate or explain her concerns to her supervisor, she capitulated when asked to repeat a previous lesson when her supervisor visited to observe her teaching, feeling guilty that the children had been warned that they would miss Physical Education and Creative Arts for a week unless they behaved well when the supervisor was there. Y’s experience highlights the need for careful selection of mentors and contrasts the experience when mentors have been well prepared through mentor workshops.

**Discussion**

The voice of student teachers is increasingly being considered in the research and literature yet these utterances (and silences) can be easily misrepresented through political expediency. Institutional pressures towards “efficiency”, “standards”, “league tables” and
“marketplace” values can work against contexts where critical conversations or authentic and informed voices are heard. Great care must be taken when working in relationships of power that inappropriate gathering of material does not influence what gets said and consequently what is written and what is believed (Cook-Sather, 2002; Edwards, 2003; Hattam, 1998).

The evidence from critical analysis of the data suggests that it is important to listen un-judgementally, interestedly and responsively and not “ask the old questions anymore [but] change the subjects of the conversation completely” (Flax, 1990, p. 193). After all, what we remember, what we speak into existence and what we hear, are intimately tied to who we are. Words begin in the mind of the writer (speaker) but get their meaning in the conversation. Bakhtin (1981) reminds us that

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—over populated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process (p. 293-4).

What is particularly empowering when those groups with least power are encouraged to speak for themselves is a view of the practicum that challenges our assumptions about student teacher learning. By offering an opportunity for voices to be heard without the filtering of the “expert” author, a lived experience is uncovered that contradicts the viability of a one size fits all assessment regime. By listening purposefully to the messages presented by the themes that emerge from the readers’ responses in this study, a sense of humanity, difference and inequitable practicum experiences challenges our current views of the practicum. It is not unusual in qualitative research that an “epiphany”, ethical crisis or conceptual challenge arises during data analysis (Goodson, 2007). As a response to finding ways to represent what is possible when we begin to ask different questions in different ways, this qualitative inquiry has presented some intriguing outcomes. The richness of understanding afforded to us
through the critical spiral (see figure 3), and the findings provided as guiding “practicum learning principles” (appendix 1), offer a view of the practicum that challenges traditional concepts of assessment.

While I recognise the partiality of my knowledge and do not suggest that the question of assessment for student teachers is settled for all time, I believe that through the ethnographic research design, coupled with the critical questions, new ideas have been created to be debated further by those involved in initial teacher education. By focussing on student teacher progress and development, and how we as their mentors and educators provide for this development, a more equitable and humane view of practicum assessment is possible. By being respectful of their “sayings, doings and relatings” in practice (Kemmis and Smith, 2008) and “situated understandings”, a richer and deeper view of their progress and attainment might be uncovered. The value added to our understanding by a deeper knowledge of context is consistent with current views of learning communities (Butcher, Howard, Labone, Bailey, Groundwater Smith, McFadden, 2003; Hattam, McInerney, Lawson & Smyth, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991) while supportive, improvement focussed evaluation is more respectful of the efforts and commitment of the student teachers. Recent research in Greece (Kaldi, 2009), using a more traditional quantitative method also highlights the importance of mentoring to the identity formation of the teacher, while a study in Belgium (Schepens, Aelterman & Vlerick, 2009) stresses the importance of context.

Conclusion

Returning to the guiding “principles of practicum learning” that emerged as the recommendations from research into the practicum and analysing them now in relation to the question of assessment, new understandings emerge. The first “practicum learning principle” calls for a clearer conceptualisation of the theories and pedagogies that guide teachers. It also
recommends that these should be carefully scaffolded for the student teacher. The second develops this further through shared understanding between the schools and the teacher education courses. Clearly this can establish a more transparent guide for student teachers, related to the development of their teaching identity and progression of their teaching practice. “Practicum learning principle” three recommends a more flexible view of the prospective teacher, allowing space for their different learning needs and rates of development while “practicum learning principle” four highlights the need to account for the contextual differences in the practicum. The role of the mentors in both the schools and the universities and colleges of teacher education is the focus of guiding principle five, again highlighting the importance of humane and supportive mentoring rather than discourses of “failure” through unrealistic and inequitable expectations. The final two “practicum learning principles” provide support for the development of “a conceptual framework to articulate understandings of practicum learning” and the power of narrative and voice for achieving this aim across international contexts. My colleagues in the Swedish-Australian Network have a range of projects to interrogate these issues further. We are convinced that the “practicum turn”, where practicum is viewed not as a testing ground but as a learning experience, will be of great benefit to future teachers providing it is carefully designed and the learning not left to chance.
Appendix 1 Guiding Principles

Practicum Learning Principle 1: Productive and transformative pedagogies linked to transparent and robust theories of learning should be clearly constructed, and the related teaching experiences carefully scaffolded, for preservice teacher learning during the practicum.

Practicum Learning Principle 2: Collaborative relationships between schools and university schools of education should be underpinned by a shared understanding of how theory and practice intersect to inform preservice teachers about engaging students in quality learning that will prepare them for a future of change, challenge and lifelong learning.

Practicum Learning Principle 3: The different learning needs of preservice teachers must be recognised and they should be given the space at university and in the schools to learn about teachers’ work in ways that are empowering and transformative for their practice.

Practicum Learning Principle 4: Worthwhile outcomes must be established and clearly articulated for any observation and teaching experience during the practicum. The diverse cultural, socio-political and learning contexts of practicum settings should be transparent, valued and shared in collegiate ways as part of learning about teaching.

Practicum Learning Principle 5: It is the responsibility of teacher educators, as committed and informed teachers, to support classroom teachers to mentor the preservice teacher learning while maintaining a receptive and involved interest. Timely guidance and support will foster successful learning relationships while conversations with peers will aid reflection and transformation of the sense of ‘self’ as a teacher within a learning community.

Practicum Learning Principle 6: Conversations about the practicum learning experience can prepare preservice teachers to look with a fresh lens on contentious and previously silenced issues. Narrative grounded in ‘truly conceivable experience’ can provide examples of quality mentoring and pedagogy as a valuable teacher education resource.

Practicum Learning Principle 7: Increased collaboration between universities at a national and international level is necessary if we are to develop a conceptual framework to articulate the important understandings of practicum learning.
References


Rorrison, D. (2008b). *Booklet of Stories- Kindergarten to Grade 6*


