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The Factors that Facilitate and Impede Collaboration between Pre-Service Teachers During a Paired-Practicum in a School-Based Environment

Suzan Samimi-Duncan, Glen William Duncan and Julie Lancaster
The Factors that Facilitate and Impede Collaboration between Pre-Service Teachers During a Paired-Practicum in a School-Based Environment

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Abstract: Paired practicum has emerged as an alternative to single practicum placement for pre-service teacher development. Much is still not known about the fundamental nature of the collaborative relationship during paired practicum. In particular, the factors that facilitate and impede a successful paired practicum experience have not been comprehensively considered and organised. A case study was employed in which individual interviews were conducted with nine students enrolled in a tertiary Bachelor of Primary Education program who had completed a paired practicum. Thematic analysis was conducted on the interviews and associated documentation. From this analysis the various themes that reflected or influenced the nature of collaboration in paired practicum were organised into classifications. Each theme was categorised firstly into a sub-classification: practicum design, philosophy / belief, associate teacher’s attitude, pair confidence, pair support, and living and travelling together. Each of these sub-classifications was then arranged into three broad classifications: structural, attitudinal and relational. Results from the interviews identified that the nature of collaboration was strongly characterised by relational aspects of the classification framework. Collaboration in paired practicum created an environment of support and encouragement for a pre-service teacher where they felt confident to take risks in teaching and innovate. This environment was facilitated by the other pre-service teacher or in-service teacher acting in the role of peer. As predicted by social constructivist theory, the peer assisted in reducing the zone of proximal development. The actual nature of collaboration itself was influenced by various positive and negative factors that influenced the interactions that took place. Consistent with social cognition theory, students learned through observation and social interaction but this learning could be facilitated or impeded by these other factors. Most of the factors came from the structural and attitudinal aspects of the classification framework.

Keywords: Paired Practicum, Pre-Service Teachers, Collaboration, Framework

Introduction

Collaboration

The environment in which educators must work has become more complex due to changed economic, social and political conditions (Le Cornu, 2005). In order to meet the challenges associated with this changing environment, teachers are being asked to consider new ways to teach. Collaboration has been touted as one of the...
main ways that teachers can address a wide range of problems (Friend & Cook, 2007). It is defined as “a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 7). In an educational sense, collaboration means joint planning, decision-making and problem solving directed toward a common educational goal, can occur in dyads or groups and can be formal or informal (Cook & Friend, 1991, 1995; Friend, 2007; Friend & Cook, 2007; Friend & Reising, 1993; Stanovich, 1996).

Teachers are currently being challenged to work in new collaborative ways with both their students and with one another (Thousand et al., 2006). In the past teaching was considered an individual activity, it is now considered a collaborative one which involves interdependency and teamwork, more participatory decision-making processes and a commitment to shared goals about teaching and learning (Cook & Friend, 1991). By collaborating on planning and teaching, teachers are potentially better able to meet the needs of diverse students and fulfil their duties (Bowman & McCormick, 2000; Thousand et al., 2006).

This new environment in which educators now find themselves in also has placed pressures on school administrators. School administrators are being asked to lead differently by encourage the implementation of collaborative practices in their schools. They are required to introduce changes into their schools with the goal of breaking down individualistic school cultures and replacing them with more collaborative ones. However, the promotion of collaboration at an institutional level is dependent upon the existence of a culture of trust (Le Cornu, 2005). Without this culture of trust, the sharing of ideas, resources and advice between peers or between peers and leaders can’t eventuate.

Many teachers philosophically support the concept of collaboration in the form of team teaching or problem solving teams (Welch, 2000), however often they do not receive adequate training in such practices. One way that pre-service teachers can be exposed to collaborative practices very early in their careers is through university preparation programs such as practicum. If collaborative practices such as co-teaching are included in practicum then pre-service teachers can gain valuable experience. This formative experience can potentially inform their perceptions of collaboration for the rest of their teaching careers (O’shea, Williams, & Sattler, 1999). However, the nature of collaborative relationships that paired students develop between themselves is unclear. This study will provide insight into these relationships.

**Practicum**

Many teacher education courses both in Australia and worldwide contain a practical experience component referred to as practicum. Often students will conduct at least two practicum blocks during the course of their degree. During practicum, students usually spend a number of weeks at a school and work alongside an in-service teacher in a classroom. This activity gives the student rich real-life experience in the task of teaching and is an important aspect of their teaching education.

The traditional model of practicum places a single student in the classroom of a single teacher. This model has had some success over the years, but it has also had its weaknesses. Rather than using the opportunity to take the risks necessary for deep learning, students often concentrate on just surviving the experience and acting in a way to foster a positive evaluation from their in-service teacher (Sundli, 2007). Traditionally, teaching has been viewed as an individualistic profession and this model has helped to perpetuate this. This
has meant that teachers have been expected to learn alone, be responsible for developing a learning style that works for them and to generally work alone.

Several authors have noted an increased interest in the quality and emphasis of pre-service teacher practicum experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Bransford; 2005; Bain, Lancaster, & Zundans, 2009; Smith, 2004). One of the drivers for this interest is the growing acceptance that teaching might be a collaborative rather than an individual activity. A related co-development has been the understanding that to operate as a true profession, teachers must see themselves as part of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). In response to this shift in understanding about teaching, new models for practicum have been developed that foster collaborative practices, understandings about teaching and learning to teach.

One of these newly emerging models, strongly based on collaborative principles is paired practicum (Smith, 2004). Under the paired practicum model, two rather than one pre-service teacher are allocated to a single classroom with the in-service teacher. This pair then work as a team to plan and deliver lessons, provide feedback to each other, and coach and mentor each other. The paired practicum literature is still developing and various authors have drawn from the collaborative literatures on peer mentoring (Forbes, 2004), peer coaching (Showers & Joyce, 1996) and co-teaching to further insight (Friend & Reising, 1993). However, the nature of the collaborative relationship between pre-service teachers is still not fully understood. The concept of a paired practicum is a relatively new area of practice and research interest in the field of education. To date, only a relatively small number of articles have been published in the area. As such the theoretical frameworks and concepts, case examples, empirical testing and critiques are still only evolving.

This study extends previous studies into paired practicum by specifically examining those factors that contribute or detract from the experience of paired practicum (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Nokes, Bullough Jr, Egan, Birrell, & Merrell Hansen, 2008). Some relevant factors have been identified previously, however to date no model has been created to explain the structuring and relationship between these factors. In doing so, this study contributes to the understanding of the nature of collaboration between paired practicum pre-service teachers.

**Research Questions**

The aim of this study was to find out the pre-service teachers’ interpretation of the concept of collaboration and to investigate the nature of collaboration in a co-teaching classroom, where it is instructed by pre-service teachers at a school. The specific research questions that will be addressed in this report are:

- What is the nature of collaboration between pre-service teachers during a paired practicum in a school-based environment?

AND

- What factors (both positive and negative) influence the experience of paired practicum for pre-service teachers?
Literature

Paired Practicum Research

Specific research conducted into paired practicum to date has generally been qualitative. Some studies have considered the principles and practices necessary for successful paired practicum implementation (Le Cornu, 2005; Smith, 2002; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Other studies have concentrated on the positive outcomes and advantages attributed to paired practicum (Bullough et al., 2003; Kromrey & Wynn, 1999; Manouchehri, 2002; Smith, 2002; Sorensen, 2004). At least one study has identified various challenges associated with paired practicum (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Each of these studies will be further investigated.

Principles and Practices Necessary for Success

The most comprehensive study of the principles and practices necessary for success in paired practicum was conducted by Walsh & Elmslie (2005). In this study, one hundred pre-service teachers enrolled in early childhood teacher education programs at a large metropolitan Australian university were paired and placed in kindergartens and preschools with in-service teachers. For the process of pairing, pre-service teachers did not choose their partners but were paired according to their preference of school. Usually their preference for school was determined by its close geographical proximity to the pre-service teacher’s home. Walsh & Elmslie (2005) examined the perceptions and experiences of in-service and pre-service teachers involved in the paired practicum using semi-structured surveys. From the data, two important principles were identified: the importance of pre-service teacher compatibility and the need to anticipate and affirm pre-service teacher differences. In addition, eight practices were identified as factors contributing to the success of paired practicum including preparing for practicum, briefing and debriefing, starting positively, creating a supportive learning environment, assessing pre-service teachers fairly, thinking laterally about ways that pairs can work together, ensuring adequate time is provided for in-service teachers and considering the school or centre context.

The findings of Walsh & Elmslie (2005) are consistent with earlier work conducted by Smith (2002). In a three-year action research study, pre-service teachers were provided with peer-support in planning and carrying out of class teaching. The goal of the practical aspect of the study was to provide encouragement for pre-service teachers to develop their teaching skills. Its intention was to also provide better opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect on and evaluate the performance of their teaching efforts. The study highlighted two key factors considered to be necessary for the successful implementation of paired practicum. One of these factors was the importance of appropriate pairing strategies. The other factor highlighted was the need for provision of strong guidance and support for pre-service and in-service teachers in the form of role-descriptors. These findings are consistent with the principles and practices defined by Walsh & Elmslie (2005) who also view the process of pairing and support for paired practicum participants as important for success.

Whereas Walsh & Elmslie (2005) and Smith (2002) concentrated on the more structural aspects of the paired practicum arrangement, Le Cornu (2005) considered the particular skills that pre-service teachers needed in order to be successful. In this study of peer mentoring between pre-service teachers, it was proposed that certain skills needed to be acquired. Pre-
service teachers need to be able to display empathy and understanding. In doing so, they build trust by speaking and listening in ways that show they value themselves and others. It is also necessary for pre-service teachers to be taught assertive communication skills so that they can relate in partnership with each other. In doing so they can become more collaborative and adhere less to more traditional hierarchical relationships. They need to develop an understanding of the reciprocal nature of the learning process and an appreciation for reciprocal ways of working. Pre-service teachers also need to develop an appreciation of these skills that are needed for engaging in professional dialogue that is enabling, both for themselves and others.

In another study, Anderson and Radencich (2001) specifically considered the relative weighting and importance placed on feedback from all parties involved in paired practicum placements at primary schools. The parties involved included university supervisor, in-service teacher and pre-service teacher partner. Students recorded data on forms, dialog journals, subject evaluations and surveys. Pre-service teachers indicated that they wanted feedback from all these parties, however it was the in-service teacher’s feedback that they valued most (Anderson & Radencich, 2001). The type of feedback most keenly sought after was in relation to classroom management and pedagogy.

**Positive Outcomes and Advantages**

The most comprehensive synthesis and analysis of the positive outcomes and advantages attributed to paired practicum was conducted by Sorensen (2004). In this study, the literature on paired placements in Great Britain and internationally were reviewed. The study concluded that whilst there was still a need for further research into paired placements, evidence existed to support notions of particular positive outcomes. The positive outcomes identified by Sorensen (2004) generally relate to one of the four stakeholders in paired practicum identified earlier: pre-service teachers, teachers, school administrators and university staff.

Several of the positive outcomes identified by Sorensen (2004) particularly applied to pre-service teacher experiences. In particular, peer placements can provide important emotional and psychological support for pre-service teachers, which may make them less likely to leave during their training. The collaborative practicesthey participate in during placements can also help them meet higher level needs. Thus pre-service teachers working in pairs may, on average, reach higher standards.

Importantly, Smith (2002) found similar results to Sorensen (2004) and provided an explanation of these results that enhance understanding of social constructivist theory and social cognition theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1987). In Smith’s (2002) study, pre-service teachers responded favourably in terms of the value that the extra support that paired placement provided them. However, the pre-service teachers explained that the positive experience they enjoyed was partly because paired practicum provided them with the opportunity to learn vicariously by watching their partner teach. Interestingly, this learning from the observation of a partner was considered to be easier than learning from the observation of a more highly skilled teacher such as the in-service teacher.

In a study by Cohen and Nath (2006), results showed strong positive pre-service teacher attitudes toward paired practicum. In this study, feedback was gained from 62 pre-service teachers (both primary and high school), 17 in-service teachers and 6 university supervisors using open-ended surveys, Likert surveys and interviews (Cohen & Nath, 2006). Analysis
of the data revealed that both pre-service and in-service teachers considered the benefits to accrue from the program to be improved collaborative skills, affective benefits (easing of tension and enjoyment), sharing of ideas, support and confidence. Pre-service teachers indicated that they learned particular teaching skills from their partner. Examples of the types of skills learned included classroom management techniques and new innovative teaching strategies. Pre-service teachers also indicated that they felt that teaching time and relationship with in-service teacher had not been affected by the pair. They also indicated that they didn’t feel uncomfortable having a partner present for post class meetings with the in-service teacher. They also appreciated their partner’s feedback. When a pair didn’t like each other, this was found to be the biggest inhibitor to a successful paired practicum experience.

In a further study, by Manouchehri (2002), this important linkage between theory and practice was confirmed. In this study, the usefulness of peer interaction on the development of professional knowledge of prospective secondary mathematics teachers was evaluated. Two pre-service teachers were monitored as they conducted their paired practicum over an eleven week period. Results from the study suggested that the use of peer collaboration and collaborative reflection potentially facilitates pre-service teacher development. Due to the nature of the peer relationship, peers help each other with learning issues, teaching behaviours and subject content. As part of this process, their critical reflection skills are also improved.

The general positive outcomes experienced by pre-service teachers identified by Sorensen (2004) were also supported by Kromrey & Wynn (1999). In this study, two different teams of pre-service teachers were followed. Both teams of pre-service teachers were involved in peer coaching and paired placement during their practicum. Data were collected using observations, surveys, journals and peer-coaching forms. Results from the study indicated that paired practicum placements positively influenced pre-service teachers’ teaching experiences and professional growth.

The other positive outcomes identified by Sorensen (2004) related to teachers, university staff and the institutions that employ them. Paired pre-service teachers who are placed in a school may have a positive impact and influence on collaborative practice within the school during their training. In the future, these pre-service teachers who have been trained in paired arrangements may also be more likely to operate in a collaborative manner when they become teachers. This can help to develop collegial practices in schools. From a school administrator’s perspective, the adoption of collegial practices in schools may then help with the retention of teachers in the profession and school improvement. Where university staff and in-service teachers work together in training for work with pairs, more benefits accrue. Training with pairs of pre-service teachers can be more efficient and cost-effective.

Whereas the study by Sorensen (2004) and others concentrated on the positive outcomes and advantages for pre-service teachers, teachers, school administrators and academic staff, a study by Bullough et al., (2003) took a slightly different slant. In this study, two models of student teaching were compared: the traditional model of placing one pre-service teacher with an in-service teacher and a paired practicum model, where two pre-service teachers worked with one in-service teacher. Four individual pre-service teachers and three pre-service teacher pairs were randomly assigned to in-service teachers. The paired practicum model was found to have several important advantages. Like Sorensen (2004), paired practicum was found to have important outcomes for pre-service teachers associated with increased support. It also gave pre-service teachers the opportunity for an on-going conversation about teaching and experience in learning how to collaborate to improve practice. Bullough et al.
In an earlier study by Bullough et al. (2002), a paired practicum model was directly compared with that of a single-placement model. In this study, both pre-service and in-service teachers were interviewed and their teacher time logs and transcripts of planning sessions analysed. In both models, both pre-service and in-service teachers found value in their experience however this experience was qualitatively different between the two. Pre-service teachers undergoing paired practicum reported feeling better supported and felt more comfortable taking greater risks in the classroom. In-service teachers in paired practicum were found to be more flexible in planning with pre-service teachers and seemed to be more trusting.

**Challenges**

Due to the nature of the design of paired practicum, it is subject to several challenges involving competition, assessment, in-service teacher workload and opportunities to manage large groups of children alone (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Collaboration is based upon a number of values including mutual respect, trust and open communication (Welch, 1998). Competition between pre-service teacher pairs is generally not consistent with the values of collaboration. One of the challenges of paired practicum is that the pre-service and/or in-service teachers may view the paired relationship as a competitive rather than collaborative one. For example, rather than work collaboratively together, pre-service teachers may compete to display the best performance to the in-service teacher. In-service teachers also, rather than viewing the pairings as collaborative relationships may consider them to be a competitive ones and thus constantly compare pre-service teachers.

The problem of competition within pairings has close parallels to issues associated with assessment (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Assessment is a particularly problematic aspect of paired practicum because although pre-service teachers are required to work together in partnership, often they are assessed individually. This means that the in-service teacher must make judgments about the performance of each individual pre-service teacher, even though many of the actions and decisions may have derived from the partnership. This disjoint between practice and assessment can potentially create tension and conflict, particularly when it comes time for the in-service teacher to provide individual feedback. If the feedback is negative, potential exists to damage the pre-service teacher’s self-esteem, particularly if the feedback for the other pre-service teacher in the pair is positive.

Another challenge of paired practicum is that it may increase the workload (real or perceived) of the in-service teacher (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Hosting a pair of pre-service teachers can be more demanding than hosting an individual pre-service teacher. More time may be required for consultation with two pre-service teachers, and for reading and commenting on two pre-service teachers’ written work each day. The dynamic associated with supervision of a pre-service teacher pair is different from an individual so this too may be viewed as more burdensome or challenging. There are potentially negative consequences that can flow from greater workload including a decrease in the quality, amount and timeliness of feedback.

A final challenge of paired practicum is that it may not provide enough opportunity for pre-service teachers to practice managing large groups of students alone (Walsh & Elmslie,
Pre-service teachers in paired practicum spend much of their time together in the classroom. This means that there is not as much opportunity to be alone with a class and to learn what this experience is like. The problem of insufficient practice may not necessarily be unique to paired practicum however. In a study of the experiences of 41 pre-service teachers during single placements, subjects wrote and submitted a one to two page reflection of their experiences in the school at the end of the session semester (Boz & Boz, 2006). Analysis of these written responses indicated that most pre-service teachers had experienced problems during practicum and that these problems had been similar to earlier placements. Major criticisms of the placement were that pre-service teachers did not feel like they had the opportunity to take responsibility for teaching the class and they did not get enough opportunity to practice.

**Methods**

To address the research questions, a qualitative study was conducted (Cresswell, 1994, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, 2003b). The study was grounded in a postpositivist paradigm and a case study methodology was employed (Garman, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Stake, 1994; Yin, 2002). Individual interviews were conducted with nine students enrolled in a regional Australian university’s Bachelor of Primary Education program who had completed a paired practicum (Denscombe, 2003, 2007; Seidman, 2006). These nine students represented four pairs and a single student whose partner did not participate. Thematic analysis was conducted on the interviews and associated documentation using the NVivo software package (Miles & Huberman, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Weitzman, 2003). From this analysis the various themes that reflected or influenced the nature of collaboration in paired practicum were organised into classifications (Dey, 1993). Each theme was categorised firstly into a sub-classification: practicum design, philosophy / belief, associate teacher’s attitude, pair confidence, pair support, and living and travelling together. Each of these sub-classifications was then arranged into three broad classifications: structural, attitudinal and relational.

**Results**

**Research Model**

Analysis of the interviews identified that there were six themes which can be considered to have an association with collaboration. Some of these themes are closely related and can be clustered together in one of three classifications: Structural, Attitudinal and Relational. These classifications and their corresponding themes are depicted in Figure 1.
The Structural classification refers to those themes that are associated with the curriculum design, organisation, resourcing and processes associated with paired practicum. The interviews suggested that the following were structural issues:

- Lack of appropriate information, direction and subject structure
- Process of pairing
- Appropriate workshops and training on team teaching
- Pre-service teachers ratio to school teachers
- Aligning practicum subject with practicum experience

The Attitudinal classification incorporated themes associated with the beliefs, values, philosophy and perspectives of key stakeholders associated with paired practicum. The key stakeholders who were discussed in the interviews for this study were the pre-service teachers and the associate teachers. The interviews suggested that the following were attitudinal issues that emerged as sub-themes:
• Philosophy / Belief
  • Similar Perspectives with the Same Value
  • Aiming for Similar Goals
  • Similar Age with the Same Expectations
  • Trust Within the Pair
• Associate Teacher’s Attitude
  • Offered Encouragement
  • Open Mindedness and Flexibility
  • Sharing Ideas and Being Supportive
  • Constructive Feedback

The Relational classification refers to those themes that were based on a relationship in some way. Again the key relationships identified were between pre-service teachers and also that between the pair and associate teacher. The interviews suggested that the following were relational issues that emerged as sub-themes:

• Pair Support
  • Brainstorming / Bouncing Ideas
  • Emotional Comfort with a Partner in the Classroom
  • Partners as Resources
  • Evaluation and Feedback
  • Behaviour Management
  • Strengthening Self-Esteem
  • Developing Communication Skills
• Pair Confidence
  • Experiencing Same Classroom Condition with Someone Else
  • Security
  • Taking Risks
  • Providing Encouragement
• Living and Travelling Together
  • Opportunity for Planning Lessons and Reflection
  • Sharing the Workload

Discussion

What is the Nature of Collaboration between Pre-service Teachers during a Paired Practicum in a School-based Environment?

Collaboration is defined as “a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 7). When collaboration was working within a paired practicum, a number of characteristics were evident. Having two or more teachers working together can create an environment in which the teachers have greater confidence. In the classroom, the balance of power within the room is altered from that when there is only a single teacher (Bullough et al., 2002).
Within a paired practicum context, pre-service teachers relied upon and received from each other emotional and personal comfort and support (Bullough et al., 2002). This comfort and support was provided both within and outside of the classroom. Without this mutual support, empathy and reassurance, pre-service teachers would have had greater difficulty completing the practicum (Sorensen, 2004). Part of this process of support was the provision of encouragement to each other (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997). Figure 1 indicates this in the relational classification and is evidenced by the following excerpts from respondents:

R4: We were able to bounce ideas off each other. We were able to do lesson plans together. We were able to share our ideas…
R8: …you can bounce ideas off each other and help each other while knowing exactly what they’re going through.
R9: …you were able to really, really have another brain to bounce ideas off and to give you ideas who knew exactly what you were going through.
R5: …Just the idea that someone was there that I can talk to…with both of us being there and being comfortable, it just made it a lot more comfortable in the classroom to have someone else there that you knew and you were friends with…
R4: …but it was really good to have someone in the classroom…

Pre-service teachers encouraged each other to elaborate on their thinking and to justify their perspectives (Manouchehri, 2002).

The ultimate result of the comfort, support and encouragement that pre-service teachers felt was a sense of security in their teaching. From this sense of security they were more willing to take risks and be innovative (Nokes et al., 2008).

R2: …I’m willing to take that risk now or otherwise I think if I hadn’t have done paired prac I wouldn’t have felt this way…my partner made everything fun and her confidence in herself made me think oh hang on a second its prac it is suppose to be fun. I am supposed to be enjoying this. Yeah lets go for it.

This risk taking was particularly in the instructional arena because having two pre-service teachers in a classroom enabled the taking of risks at this practical level. Also, pre-service teachers would have been much more apprehensive if these activities had been conducted in a solo environment because the support provided would not have been there (Smith, 2002). The opportunity to take risks allowed pre-service teachers to develop richer, more interesting and varied lessons and provided an environment where their sense of collaboration could grow (Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Nokes et al., 2008).

The willingness to take risks and be innovative in teaching could not have happened if paired practicum had not created an environment that was conducive to the generation of ideas. Other characteristics of collaboration in a paired practicum environment enabled this to happen. Successful collaboration occurred when pre-service teachers shared ideas and supported each other’s learning through discussion involving problems and issues (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). It also occurred when pre-service teachers became more reflective as a result of these activities.

Pre-service teachers viewed their partners as resources. They helped each other to find instructional materials, print, photocopy, laminate lesson materials and seek technical assistance
for tools such as videos and smart boards (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). In doing so, each pre-service teacher learned from their partner’s knowledge and skills in the design and development of learning activities (Sorensen, 2004).

R1: Having a partner in the classroom not only in supporting but it was a range for resource cause I was then able to see how she was coming up with lesson and be creative about it and applied it in the classroom and I’m just oh my God that is so clever and so creative

A particular technique that pre-service teachers used to generate ideas was to bounce ideas off each other through brainstorming. Brainstorming is a collaborative activity that takes advantage of the knowledge and skills of multiple teachers to develop the purpose of a lesson, activities and learning outcomes (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Sorensen, 2004). Through brainstorming pre-service teachers were able to gain insights into creating lessons, developing instructional strategies and generating possible solutions to classroom problems (Hasbrouck & Christen, 1997).

Collaborative reflection helps pre-service teachers to develop their capacity to assimilate new perspectives into their thinking and practice (Manouchehri, 2002). It also encourages them to continually improve and learn through developing their ability to reflect on their teaching (Yost, 1997). Collaborative reflection stimulates reciprocal interactions (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006), therefore it not only facilitates the development of an individual pre-service teacher’s skills but also the partner in a paired practicum relationship (Manouchehri, 2002). Reflection is therefore a critical skill that enables pre-service teachers to engage in dialogue that is necessary to actively participate in a professional community of practice (Le Cornu, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Critical reflection can be challenging and uncomfortable because it means that a pre-service teacher’s ideas and beliefs are open to critique by another (Le Cornu, 2005). Paired practicum is very suitable for this process because it provides a partner with whom to practice and with whom there are often sufficient levels of trust (Le Cornu, 2005).

R6: I think like I mentioned before, the trust. We both trusted each other, and I suppose that was because we did feel like we had similar goals

The characteristics of collaboration discussed are all dependent on a sense of trust between pairs. A culture of trust is needed for collaboration to work and the reciprocation of trust needs to be built between pre-service teachers and in-service teachers (Le Cornu, 2005). Paired practicum affords a sense of belonging, feeling acknowledged and validated (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). It creates a trusting bond and encourages a cohesiveness and sense of support. In order to build trust, pre-service teachers need to be able to demonstrate empathy and understanding and to be able to speak and listen in ways that demonstrate that they value themselves and others (Le Cornu, 2005).

The nature of collaboration within paired practicum is influenced by a number of factors, both positive and negative. The arrangement made between pre-service teachers on how to co-teach together also has implications for the collaborative experience between pre-service teachers. Similarly, the type of relationship developed between pre-service teachers and the in-service teachers also has implications on the experience.
What Factors (Both Positive and Negative) Influence the Experience of Paired Practicum for Pre-service Teachers?

There are a variety of positive and negative factors that impact upon a pre-service teacher’s perceptions of the success of the experience. Most of these factors either related to the structural / design aspect of the practicum in terms of the way the practicum was designed, or the attitudinal aspects of its participants.

Structural / Design of Practicum

The results suggest that pre-service teachers need to be provided with clear guidance beforehand about the various aspects of the paired practicum experience. In particular, they need to be provided with information and direction in relation to the planning and teaching of lessons. A pre-service teacher’s dynamic with their practicum partner as well as in-service teacher is a complex one. Pre-service teachers need better guidance on how to navigate these relationships. Practical advice on how to co-teach with a peer would contribute to improving these relationships as well as potentially contribute to better student learning outcomes. Problems with student behaviour and confusion caused by inconsistency of discipline, teacher expectations and teaching styles could be alleviated. This is evidenced in Figure 1 under the instructional design classification and supported by the following participant reflection.

R9: in the classroom it felt quite claustrophobic at times…you know there was three perspectives of what the classroom rules were and what was an acceptable level of, an acceptable line of where the students could go and so I think it was difficult for the students in that respect of having at one stage three teachers or even four teachers by the time they went out for maths to because they had changes for maths classes and literacy classes so that is three or four teachers in. I think in that time and I think that was quite disruptive to their behaviour because they didn’t know what to expect from each teacher and what was expected of them.

The provision of necessary information to pre-service teachers can be provided in various ways including the subject outline, information packs, workshops, tutorials and lectures. In one study, pre-service teachers were oriented to their paired practicum via a workshop day (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). At this workshop, pre-service teachers were provided with background to teamwork and working with peers. Tutorials were conducted for pre-service teachers to get to know each other and to begin observing and planning together.

R7: I guess maybe making sure that what’s happening in the lectures of the prac subject is actually closely relevant and supportive of the prac experience itself. I have had experiences of the prac lesson or the prac subject itself not really answering any questions, or it doesn’t feel as though it is preparing me very well for the experience of going into the school. And sort of focussing on things that are definitely important in teaching, but perhaps could be dealt with in other subjects.

The results also suggest that particular attention needs to be placed on the assessment of pre-service teachers undergoing paired practicum. Assessment needs to be pair-based rather than
individual. Assessment needs to be structured this way in order to protect the self esteem of
the pre-service teacher. This is consistent with another study which found that assessment
was the aspect of paired practicum perceived to be most problematic (Walsh & Elmslie,
2005). A conflict exists when the pairing process encourages teamwork yet students are as-
sessed individually on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis.

R8: Well, it was quite difficult with assessment in that way, because you’re continually
comparing yourself with the other student, thinking well, gee I wish I could do that bit
as well as she is…because I wasn’t as good at the lesson delivery at that point, I keep
thinking well, hang on a minute, why can’t I be doing it like that…I think I found it
hard, because I always felt that I wasn’t doing as well…

R9: There wasn’t so much in the assessment of our teaching at least there wasn’t so
much the feeling that it was how were teaching together or how we were supporting
each other or how we were um yeah or how were co-operating together there didn’t
seem to be any particular link in that assessment area… it was like being on the mental
framework was being on a prac by ourselves and the other person just happened to be
in the room together

Care needs to be placed on the design of paired practicum placements to ensure that pre-
service teachers receive sufficient face-to-face experience. Paired practicum has the potential
to reduce the number of hours that a pre-service teacher is directly in front of a class. Although
one of the aims of paired practicum is to develop collaborative teaching skills in pre-service
teachers, these teachers have limited face-to-face experience. It is essential that what time
they have in front of class is optimised. Teaching episodes also need to be arranged in con-
tiguous blocks so that pre-service teachers can focus sufficient attention to their teaching.

Results suggest that the process of pairing is relatively ad hoc. In the first instance student
pairs self select based on an existing relationship or a perceived ability to work together.
Practical considerations such as the location of available schools, owners and availability
of transport and willingness to travel also influence the decision-making mix. Subject co-
ordinators step in to put students together when they are unable to do so themselves.

R9: …they left it mostly up to us um they suggested someone that you knew but not
necessarily a friend.

R2: …we didn’t know each other and we had met each other in that year and I was
thinking that might’ve been a bit of problem when we will be all going to work together
for 4 weeks so closely.

R3: We sort of just got okay, pick a partner, away you go.

R2: We were given about a week to find our partner…

Such a relative ad hoc and informal process of pairing may influence the outcome of paired
practicum relationships, perhaps in ways that pre-service teacher are unable to perceive. No
pre-service teachers commented on the impact of the process of pairing on their paired
practicum experience. The paired practicum experience potentially is affected by the pairing
process because of the partner one is paired with (Bullough et al., 2003). Some pre-service
teachers might make poor candidates for a partnership. The interactions between pairs can
be fostered or hampered by particular personality traits (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). For ex-
ample, one pre-service teacher may be open and responsive to suggestions and criticism whereas another may be timid and defensive (Bullough et al., 2003).

There exists arguments both for and against pairing pre-service teachers based on similarities in personality traits and skills. There is strong support for the notion that compatibility between students supports collaborative partnerships (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). Having something in common is conducive to collaboration between pre-service teachers. Common interests, backgrounds and commitment to teaching are important dimensions to this compatibility (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). However, it is not clear whether differences in personality traits and skills affect compatibility. There is also evidence to suggest that pairings of students with different strengths can be beneficial. If students have varying personality styles, beliefs and communication skills, many positive learning experiences can occur as a result of these differences (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005).

In considering the factors that are important when pairing students, the introduction of pairing needs to be carried out carefully to ensure that all participants have time to adjust. Pre-service teachers need the opportunity to become more familiar with each other before beginning practicum (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). If given more opportunity to get to know each other before the commencement of practicum, pre-service teachers are able to glean a better understanding of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. This in itself contributes towards discerning and promoting compatibility.

There was strong evidence of the need for pre-service teachers to receive appropriate training on team teaching. In this training pre-service teachers needed to learn classroom management techniques, how to support their partner, how to plan lessons together, the appropriate distribution of the teaching load, smoothness of transition in delivery, content and lesson plans and both theories and practice of collaborative teaching. There is a need for pre-service teachers to practice collaborative skills learned before beginning at their school and once there to have assessments such as joint assignments which enable them to learn together.

R8: I think that maybe even if in a lecture perhaps, the lecturer could team teach a lecture, just to actually show it actually happening in a context that is not just theoretical. This is what team teaching is, here you go, do it. Maybe an actual practical demonstration of it, and yeah, or maybe watching some kind of video of teachers who have done that a fair bit, who are experienced in doing it.

One very effective means of developing collaborative skills is through the use of workshops scheduled over a day or throughout a university session (Le Cornu, 2005; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). During workshops both interpersonal and critical reflection skills can be explicitly taught and practiced. Workshops provide the opportunity for pre-service teachers to be given a background in teamwork and how to work with peers, as well as a means to get to know each other and an opportunity to begin observing and planning together (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). They are also an opportunity for practicum pairs to begin to understand how they may support each other, brainstorm collective ideas and learn how to give constructive feedback.

One approach involves pre-service teachers spending twenty minutes of each of the workshops developing skills with a critical partner (Le Cornu, 2005). Throughout the subject they are encouraged to maintain a journal and this journal forms the basis of discussion.
Each person uses the initial workshop time to elaborate on their journal entries, pose and discuss questions, clarify issues, expand on their earlier opinions and discuss potential improvements. In conducting these discussions, pre-service teachers learn how to engage with each other as intellectual partners. After the initial twenty minute discussions, the individual pairs formed into a large group for further discussion so that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to discuss their ideas in a larger context.

Other factors that were perceived to impact upon the success of paired practicum were the ratio of the number of pre-service teachers to in-service teachers (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997) as well as the extent to which the practicum subject was aligned with practicum experience (Yost, 1997). The lower the number of pre-service teachers to in-service teachers, the better this was perceived to be. Higher ratios tended to influence the culture of the school as well as the quantity and quality of interactions which took place between pre-service teachers and in-service teachers.

Attitudinal Aspects of Paired Practicum

The similarity of a pre-service teacher pair’s attitudes, philosophy and beliefs was a factor that influenced their perceived success of the experience. It was not necessary for pre-service teachers to have complete alignment of perspective and values, however some alignment was necessary for the relationship to work successfully. For example, pre-service teachers as individuals could employ their own philosophy and methods in managing a class however, when teaching together differences in classroom management could add or detract from the partnership (Jang, 2006). If the clash in philosophy and beliefs about teaching was too much, the relationship was strained and the development of both parties limited (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1997). Pre-service teacher pairs with similar beliefs tended to interact well together because they had common avenues to raise issues and validate ideas (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). Having pairs with a similar age contributed to the similarity of expectations of the two however it was no guarantee that the partnership would be successful (Thousand et al., 2006).

R2: …having someone else with the same value as you knows where you are coming from, having been to uni. With them…
R6: …my partner and I were quite good friends before we went there together, so there weren’t really differences in relations and working together professionally.
R7: …similar mindframe, similar world view. Gives you a bit more confidence to be in the class and to participate.

The attitudes of both pre-service and in-service teachers to sharing the workload was another factor that influenced the perceived success of paired practicum.

R5: …our associate would sort of sit down with us, like at the end of the day, and say, well, this lesson was really good, and this is why and how we would change it, so that sort of helped when we had it, like when we had a similar lesson. We knew where to fix it…
R4: She was able to share ideas and provide support…she was able to listen and help when we needed to help each other. She was good at helping and communicating…
Conclusion and Future Directions

The model provided in Figure 1 allows an analysis of paired practicum situations where stakeholders can identify factors that facilitate or impede collaboration between pre-service teachers in a school based environment.

Stakeholders from universities sites can do much to prevent many of the pitfalls associated with the structural design classifications. If issues of providing appropriate information and provision of appropriate workshops on how to actually team teach are addressed the negative attitudes noted in the attitudinal classification of Figure 1 will be avoided.

A closer alignment of assessment expectations that avoid competition would also be of benefit to improve attitudes. These attitudes were partly formulated by the practicum design, communication about that design and assessments. Although the rhetoric of paired practicum is about collaboration, assessment has historically been based at the individual level which creates competition rather than collaboration. The purpose of collaboration within paired practicum is to encourage shared planning, and the pooling of ideas, resources, skills and interests for the planning-teaching-assessment cycle which from a pre-service teacher’s perspective is difficult if individual assessments are set (Smith, 2002). Assessment focus should be shifted so that it focuses on collaboration that occurs between the stakeholders. University staff could perhaps actually teach collaboration skills and not just assume they will happen once students are placed in a paired practicum situation.

Future directions might involve further research on paired practicum once these issues are addressed in a more thoughtful and purposeful manner.

References


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Suzan is a qualified primary school teacher and has gained a Masters of Educational Research from Charles Sturt University, Australia. Suzan is currently an Adjunct Lecturer at Charles Sturt University and a private tutor in the Illawarra region of Australia. Suzan is passionate about research in the field of education, management and spirituality and its possibilities. Suzan has worked for 11 years for a diverse range of organisations, including Royal North Shore Hospital, Carmel Consulting Pty Ltd and several not-for-profit organisations. In various roles, Suzan was responsible for delivering and caring for cancer patients, business administration and mentoring new parents to gain a better understanding of their children’s gems within; their virtues. Suzan’s varied background in health, management, mentoring and above all motherhood has provided the perfect foundation for research in education. Suzan’s own experience during practicum inspired her to research further in this area.

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