



International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Edu

Mentoring pathways to enhancing the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers

Christine Grima-Farrell

Article information:

To cite this document:

Christine Grima-Farrell , (2015),"Mentoring pathways to enhancing the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers", International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Vol. 4 Iss 4 pp. 255 - 268

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-07-2015-0020>

Downloaded on: 10 November 2016, At: 02:08 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 22 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 151 times since 2015*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2015),"Educative mentoring: a way forward", International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Vol. 4 Iss 4 pp. 240-254 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-03-2015-0006>

(2015),"Mentoring and coaching in education practitioners' professional learning: Realising research impact", International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Vol. 4 Iss 4 pp. 293-302 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-09-2015-0027>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Mentoring pathways to enhancing the personal and professional development of pre-service teachers

Development
of pre-service
teachers

255

Received 7 July 2015
Revised 3 August 2015
28 August 2015
26 September 2015
9 October 2015
Accepted 9 October 2015

Christine Grima-Farrell
Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the critical features and outcomes of an Australian collaborative university- and school-based immersion project for mentoring final year pre-service primary teachers in the area of special education as they embed theory and practice in inclusive classrooms for a full year, to respond to diverse student needs.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a three-year qualitative study design, data were gathered through pre surveys and post surveys, two one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and reflexive journal entries. Analysis using triangulation of data sources and inter-rater reliability was employed to reach consensus on the key themes.

Findings – Findings suggest that mentors proved critical to reducing pre-service teacher anxieties and to enhancing their personal and professional knowledge, confidence and skills as they differentiated instruction and assessment techniques to cater for students with a diverse range of abilities.

Research limitations/implications – This research suggests that maintaining the balance of theory and practice through genuine extended school engagement experiences provided opportunities for collaborative connections on multiple levels across the school. This mentoring pathway enhanced and reinforced pre-service teachers' professional capacity, confidence and employability potential. Limitations such as small sample size and lack of secondary school representation must be noted.

Originality/value – This work identified the importance of the unique features of a mentoring programme within a university-school partnership, including the benefits of a full-year immersion experience, financial reward, responsibility, empowerment and enhanced employability status of final year pre-service teachers as they transition to classroom teachers. This paper provides useful insights for researchers, practitioners and teacher education policy developers.

Keywords Mentoring in education, Inclusive education, Pre-service teacher education, Mentoring, Special education, Professional formation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the last four decades teacher education programmes have changed in their approach to preparing prospective teachers for modern-day classrooms. The transition of novice teachers to confident classroom teachers requires a proactive and supported approach that empowers them with the personal and professional skills, knowledge and resilience to engage successfully with a diverse range of students. Although inclusive education policy differs between countries, commitment to international agreements such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and various UN conventions exists. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was pivotal in creating a global vision to affirm every child's right to education. Twenty-one years after the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), collaborative partnerships that promote teachers as change agents in inclusive education have been shown to be beneficial in providing equitable and mutually rewarding opportunities for school students, as well as their pre-service



teachers and the mentors of pre-service teachers (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 2013; Grima-Farrell *et al.*, 2014).

Calls to support and empower pre-service teachers with the skills and knowledge of how to use research-based practices to enhance inclusive classrooms exist (ARACY, 2013; Foreman and Arthur-Kelly, 2014; Grima-Farrell *et al.*, 2011). Directives such as the Disability Standards for Education (2005), No Child Left Behind Act (2001), Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) have encouraged access to the general curriculum for all students, including those with disabilities. Preparing pre-service teachers to respond to the individual needs of all students within busy and complex classrooms is demanding and has had a significant impact on teacher preparation programmes internationally (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Forlin, 2010; Grima-Farrell *et al.*, 2011). Collaborative school and university partnerships are becoming more prevalent in Australia given their capacity to address such challenges as the inadequate linkages between teacher preparation programmes and classroom realities (Long *et al.*, 2014). This paper reports on an Australian collaborative school and university partnership entitled The Special Education Immersion Project (the Immersion Project), implemented over a three-year period from 2012 to 2014 with three different cohorts of participants. The Immersion Project provided final year pre-service teachers (also referred to as participants throughout this paper) with opportunities to work alongside teacher mentors and university staff, in inclusive mainstream settings, for a full school year.

Special education immersion project overview

The collaborative university and school partnership discussed in this paper was established to support the personal and professional formation of primary school teachers in the area of special and inclusive education. It strives to prepare pre-service teachers to cater for student diversity in mainstream classrooms by integrating theory and practice through an extended mentoring pathway that involved an eight-hour commitment per week for a full school year. The partnership was specifically designed to provide an avenue for final year pre-service teachers to experience the benefits and challenges of creating and sustaining inclusive classrooms. It differs from the common three to ten-week block teaching practicum practices in Australia as it enables pre-service teachers to work in schools while still attending university for the full school year. Participants lived the highs and lows of classroom life while being supported by education practitioners (school-based teacher mentors) and researchers (university staff) simultaneously. In essence, this customised project enabled pre-service teachers to experience the essence of inclusive education legislation while gaining deep practice-based knowledge, skills and confidence as they worked with mentors to transition from student to early career classroom teacher.

The university team consisted of senior academic staff and faculty members who co-taught on core diversity and inclusive education units. The school system stakeholders included teachers, principals, and members of the school and system leadership team. Staff members from the university and school system served as project coordinators and acted as the two key contacts for pre-service teachers, principals and other stakeholders for the duration of the project.

The common goal of providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to strengthen their skills and knowledge, while being supported by school-based teachers and university staff simultaneously, required a long-term commitment from all stakeholders. Therefore, the recruitment of dedicated participants and mentors with effective

pedagogy and time management skills was sought via expression of interest. Panel members from the school and university sectors interviewed and selected pre-service teachers. They also selected school-based mentors to work with the same pre-service teacher for the full year, then sought to match their strengths to the school needs.

Participants

Ten pre-service teacher participants were selected and allocated to one of five primary schools during the first year of the project (2012). A further ten pre-service teacher participants were selected and allocated to ten primary schools through the project's second year of implementation (2013). In 2014, five pre-service teacher participants met the same selection criteria and were assigned to five different primary schools. The school leaders and teacher mentors who volunteered to be involved in the project were required to host the same selected pre-service teacher for the full academic year. Variables such as transport, location of home and school, and personal attributes were considered when allocating pre-service teachers to schools and mentors.

Participants were contracted to work in schools during the morning literacy and numeracy session, four days per week, two hours per day (eight hours per week) over 38 weeks (the full academic year). These contractual arrangements were the same for all three years of the project implementation. As participants enrolled in their degree as full-time students, timetables for lectures, tutorials and exams were structured to accommodate the project commitments. University commitments took place during the afternoon sessions and on Wednesdays, as participants were not expected to be at school that day. The school system paid participants as contracted employees, at a rate slightly higher than teachers' aides or paraprofessionals, through an Australian Government initiative entitled More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSWD). This initiative delivered over \$200 million to Australian schools to ensure teachers were better able to support students with disabilities. MSSWD funded the Immersion Project over a three-year period.

Mentors

Mentors volunteered to join the Immersion Project, which aimed to enhance the learning and growth of pre-service teachers in inclusive education. The mentors' role included working in partnership with the university and school coordinators, collaborating with school leadership and teaching staff to ensure pre-service teachers were immersed in a range of school experiences that included working with students of different ages and abilities, in one-to-one, small group and whole-class groupings. Mentors met participants at a compulsory two-day induction programme, which was conducted at the commencement of each year. These induction days were planned and coordinated by the university project coordinator, in collaboration with the school system project coordinator, and provided an opportunity for all project stakeholders to meet to discuss timetables, roles, expectations and other practical considerations. Each year the induction day offered an encouraging, relaxed and constructive forum for stakeholders to work through any anxieties and concerns prior to the commencement of any school-based placements.

A total of 20 mentors participated in this project over the three-year period. During 2012, ten participants and five mentors were allocated to five different schools with one mentor per school during the first year of implementation. During the second and third year of implementation, the structure of the project was amended given the increased

demand from schools, and participants were assigned to schools individually. Throughout 2013, the project included ten participants and ten mentors; five participants and five mentors were involved in 2014. One school-based teacher mentor per school was selected to support participants as they strived to manage the complex balance of teaching and learning relationships, skills and knowledge over the duration of the project. Maintaining this balance is recognised as a challenge for many professionals, yet teaching is a career where full-time responsibilities and expectations commence as soon as they are appointed teaching positions (Stevens *et al.*, 2007). During the academic year, mentors were expected to professionally guide participants by providing them with timely planned and impromptu feedback and demonstration of a range of strategies that were responsive to the diverse needs of students. The mentor's role was to provide scaffolded support and opportunities for participants to advance personally, pedagogically and professionally as they were inducted into the profession alongside willing and committed educators. It was expected that a scaffolded and gradual release of responsibility by mentors would enhance participant confidence and effectiveness, and safeguard their future retention in the profession.

Context and project aims

Implementing inclusive education directives and responding to the diverse needs of all students is a major concern amongst the many challenges faced by beginning teachers in Australia (McKay *et al.*, 2014). A growing number of early career teachers (ECTs) are leaving the profession each year as a result of such challenges and changing educational landscapes. According to the 2014 Alliance for Excellent Education report, roughly half a million American teachers move to a different school or leave the profession each year. That represents a conservative turnover rate of about 20 per cent compared to 9 per cent in 2009. The Australian Council for Educational Research (Weldon, 2015) analysis of attrition rates of pre-service teachers is not dissimilar, with almost 25 per cent of these leaving university during the first year of their degree, and 20 per cent of those who completed their education degrees in 2014 not going on to become teachers (Weldon, 2015). Hobson *et al.* (2012) highlight the importance of interpersonal constructs that are necessary for the successful induction into teaching, and much has been written about the benefits of educating all teachers to use research-based practices to cater for students with a range of abilities (ARACY, 2013; Foreman and Arthur-Kelly, 2014; Grima-Farrell *et al.*, 2011). Researchers have also compared variations in the intensity of professional development programmes and the models used to deliver research-based education to teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

However, despite the advances in this area there remains a significant gap between our accumulated knowledge of effective educational practices and the extent to which they are implemented. Supporting pre-service and ECTs to teach using evidence-based approaches is a process, not an event, and is critical to improving the quality of and confidence in their professional and personal capabilities (Grima-Farrell, 2012a, b). Aligning teacher education programmes with inclusive education systems for a full school year represents a pathway that unites theory and practice domains to enhance the overall quality of new teachers and school systems. The Immersion Project is an example of an approach that aims to provide pre-service teachers with consistent access to school practitioner mentors and university staff, over an extended period.

Through the project, pre-service teachers experience and are influenced by multiple sources of research and practice as they prepare for the full-time responsibilities of the profession. The Immersion Project builds on theoretical and practice knowledge so that

educators and researchers can effectively work together to prepare pre-service teachers to confidently and effectively enhance individual student outcomes in inclusive school contexts. This project builds on previous “research to practice” knowledge (ARACY, 2013; Grima-Farrell *et al.*, 2011) and represents a significant structural and cultural change to teacher education that integrates theory and practice in a mutually reinforcing approach to responding to the needs of students with and without disabilities.

Methodology

A qualitative multi-site case study method (Stake, 2000) and an interpretative approach were used to examine participant and mentor reflections on their Immersion Project experiences. Data were gathered through pre participation surveys and post participation surveys, two one-to-one 30-minute semi-structured interviews (mid-year and end of the year), and participant reflexive journal entries. The content of the personal reflections did not impact upon course results. Interview protocol included questions pertaining to participants’ involvement, their understanding of the role of an inclusive educator, the highs and lows of the experience, and suggestions for programme improvements. These data collection opportunities were replicated across each cohort for the three consecutive years of implementation. They investigated specific details pertaining to individuals, their settings and roles within each setting, and their perspectives on how this inclusive education learning experience influenced practice.

Data collected from multiple sources are considered to be more robust and compelling than the investigation of a single data source (Yin, 2003), strengthening the articulation of why the experiences occurred as they did. The replicated data collection approaches were implemented with ten participants and five mentors in 2012, as the ten participants were allocated across five different schools with one mentor per school during the first year of implementation. During the second and third year of implementation, the structure of the project was amended given the increased demand from schools, and participants were assigned to schools individually. Throughout 2013, the project included ten participants and ten mentors; five participants and five mentors were involved in 2014. All 25 participant responses and 20 mentor responses were recorded and transcribed. Collectively, the data collection opportunities combined to gain information on the specific factors that had an impact on the collaborative university and school-based immersion experience. Analysis using triangulation of data sources and inter-rater reliability were employed to reach consensus on the key themes (introduced in the Results). All results were analysed within individual participant cases and compared across the total project cohort.

Results

It is beyond the scope of this paper to report in detail on the research findings from all stakeholder perspectives. As such, the results will focus predominantly though not exclusively on the pre-service teacher responses. Findings from the Immersion Project revealed that authentic whole-school professional experiences with extended opportunities to work simultaneously with students, school mentors and university staff, significantly enhanced participant resilience, confidence and the ability to respond to diverse student needs. Schools provided contexts for participants to implement, evaluate and refine approaches taught at university in an authentic way, alongside school staff. Participants reflected on how the Immersion Project afforded them the opportunity to experience whole-school life, with its highlights and challenges, prior to graduation.

It enhanced their understanding of the many theoretical and practical elements of child development, contextual competing demands and inclusive education philosophy. Participants acknowledged that the project schools provided settings that depicted the social phenomena across teaching and learning issues that affected children with and without disabilities. They recognised that they were able to trial a teaching strategy or technique introduced at university with their students the next day. They reported on the benefits of discussing the successes, failures or adaptations to these strategies with school mentors and university staff, in an effective, relaxed and timely manner. School mentors also reported on the benefits of working with the pre-service teachers, school system and university coordinators, and attending professional development opportunities with participants. Mentors reflected on their own learning and how the experience caused them to justify their actions. This encouraged a depth of insight into their own pedagogy and they articulated that their knowledge was enhanced through witnessing the new approaches and assistive technologies being implemented by the pre-service teachers.

Analysis of participant reflections and other data collected highlighted key elements of the project that were representative of the total cohort. The importance of open and accessible mentor and pre-service teacher relationships to personal growth and professional development was prioritised. Support from mentors and commitment from pre-service teachers were reported to be critical to building confidence and capacity for reducing theory and practice binaries. Notions of support from mentors also emerged as participants reflected on the insights gained in managing their initial anxieties and the highs and lows of real, inclusive school contexts that responded to the needs of a wide range of learners.

Findings validated teacher education as a collaborative pathway for schools and universities to integrate theory and practice knowledge with skills in facilitating teaching and learning for all students. The strong positive impact of the same school and university staff working closely with participants over the full school year was acknowledged as being critical to the success of the Immersion Project. The relationships with school mentors and the university coordinator were fundamental to all three identified and interconnecting themes reported to be pivotal to the success of this teacher education initiative. These themes were mutually beneficial and reinforcing for all stakeholders as they strived to enhance inclusive school cultures. The themes included: the responsiveness and versatility of teacher education programmes; collaboration, support and communication amongst peers, school and university stakeholders; and responsibility and positive relationships. Each theme is discussed below, prior to the presentation of the challenges' section.

The responsiveness and versatility of teacher education programmes

All pre-service teacher participants suggested that teacher education efforts were most beneficial when they directly responded to pre-service teacher needs through an approach that is clear, practical and responsive. All pre-service teacher participants shared thoughts on the benefits of the school and university-based partnership programme, and its contribution to the sustainment and effectiveness of their individual practices. Comments about the benefits of the programme structure and the accessibility of mentors were shared. The statements below highlight how the anxieties of new career teachers were reduced:

Looking back at my first day of this experience, I was extremely worried that I wasn't going to be able to cater for the needs of the children. I was worried that I had not learnt enough to cater for

the diverse needs of the students. I relied quite a lot on my mentor in the beginning of the term, as I wasn't sure if the strategies I attempted to implement were correct or beneficial to the student. My mentor was amazing in guiding me in the right direction and providing me with advice and ways in which I could adapt my strategies to better suit the needs of the child (Cate, 2014).

I initially felt I wasn't equipped to cater for all the different learning needs of students. My expectations really changed after the first assignment and meeting with my university mentor, as it motivated me to not just go with the flow but to be a proactive teacher. My expectations of myself were raised as I wanted to push myself to learn as much as I could and to have an impact on the development of my students' learning (Rosa, 2013).

Participants described the usefulness of the collaborative partnership in a number of ways. The resonating consistent notion shared by participants was that the aims of both the university and its partner schools were the same. Both intended to address the needs of a diverse student population while enhancing the capacity, confidence and employability of pre-service teachers. This congruence of purpose went beyond the structure of the teacher education programme, and the following mentor description describes additional benefits:

Participating in the project was of enormous benefit to the students and me. It's good for me having her help and it's good for me to actually mentor someone because it helps me focus on what I'm doing and to be able to explain it. So we chat each Friday, and it's good for me just to articulate what I'm doing and the rationale behind what I do. Just having to explain to her and talk to her helps me to be clear. So as a mentor that's good for me (Don, mentor, 2013).

Participants commented on their ability to communicate with each other, the university coordinator and their school mentor, beyond planned meetings. The benefits of real accessibility through telephone access, electronic media exchanges and through casual impromptu conversations were identified. This open communication was described as being mutually beneficial to all stakeholders, including the participants, school students and school-based staff. It was significant, as what was learnt at university could be put into practice at schools and trialled the next day.

Elizabeth and Sam's response reflected the comments of all research participants:

We were able to directly access university staff, who provided us with additional ideas and specific knowledge which could be implemented the very next day. We could then access feedback from both school and uni staff while it was still fresh and relevant (Elizabeth, 2012).

Being placed in schools allowed us to place the high university standards into our teaching. This helped us become more valued by school staff and then we could go back to uni and ask uni staff any questions all within the same week (Sam, 2012).

School staff often commented upon the rapport built between the participants and their students. They also identified their own growth as being a result of participants sharing with school staff the new ideas and techniques learnt at university. Participants also reported the satisfaction they experienced being able to present on project elements at national and international conferences (Australian Association of Special Education, Australia, 2014; ULearn, New Zealand, 2012 and 2013). Although this was not a project expectation, the versatility of the project and responsive commitment of stakeholders allowed participants to grow in confidence and capabilities and benefit from unplanned opportunities:

After attending the AASE National Conference, I have come to realise my role is a critical one that requires well planned and structured programs and thoughtfully considered resources that will support the learner and their learning (Melanie, 2014).

Collaboration, support and communication amongst peers, school, and university partnership stakeholders

Participants consistently referred to their university and school partnership experience in comments pertaining to collaboration, support and communication. They described how their experience was enhanced as their school- and university-based mentors worked together to maintain links between theory/research (researchers' perspectives as identified in the literature and presented by the university facilitator) and practice (classroom teachers' perspectives).

All participants again referred to the benefits of being able to access the university coordinator, teacher mentors and each other, as concerns and questions arose. The ability to contact each other via e-mail, phone or Facebook to seek assistance or resources beyond set meeting times was described by the total participant cohort as an invaluable support. Participants also described that consistent communication with peers in the project was vital to the success of their experience as they could share stories, trials, strategies, project details, challenges and strengths of their individual experiences. Sam's comments reflected the sentiment of others as she explained:

Working collaboratively started at uni with project members. We started by sharing our goals, visions and understanding of inclusive practice. From there we experienced consistent ongoing support and communication from school executives, mentors and teachers (Sam, 2012).

A school mentor also articulates the benefits of the collaborative partnership:

As a special needs teacher I have enjoyed the collaboration and working partnership we have developed. We are now constantly bouncing ideas off each other as to how we can meet the immediate needs of our students. I look back over the year and often ask myself, "What would we have done without this program?" I personally feel I have assisted her to reach her goals in this project. She is now more resourced and experienced in effectively providing for students with diverse needs (Tres, 2013).

Participants reported on the comprehensiveness of the project, and its effectiveness. There were comments that the support provided by the university coordinator, combined with the support of school-based mentors to generated consistent, relevant and timely feedback. This merger of support was described as being crucial to the success of the experience. Statements were repeated that the university staff and content of the unit studied provided participants with the basic skills and knowledge required to communicate effectively key learning expectations with school staff. All participants were united in reporting that the project strengthened their confidence, perspective and ability to respond to identified student needs:

From this experience I learnt an extraordinary number of things about teaching and myself. I finally understand the stress and pressure placed on classroom teachers to ensure they have catered for children with particular learning needs. I now find myself adapting strategies and techniques used throughout this journey when I am working. I believe from this experience I have learnt that I am a capable teacher who is able to adapt and change traditional practices and strategies in a modern, engaging and interesting way. I believe I have the capacity to help those around me and have learnt an unbelievable number of things from my mentors. I have learnt that the learning journey never ends and regardless of my age, I will continue to learn things from both teachers and students (Melanie, 2014).

You always need to work in collaboration with fellow educators and specialists to make an effective difference to students' learning and development. I am now stronger than I was. I am more inclusive and accepting of all students and to make a difference you have to be dedicated and work hard (Rosa, 2013).

Strengths of the partnership identified by all participants pertained to the benefits of the length of their experience and the way collaboration was promoted and exercised over the full academic year. Retreats and school-based professional development experiences focused on enhancing inclusive cultures were identified as being beneficial to improving research to practice and practice to research initiatives. Participants also shared comments about the importance of a common language amongst school and university partners that was understood by all. This use of explicit language that aligned with the underlying theme of inclusion was reported to increase the understanding of key project features, and enhanced clarity and accessibility amongst stakeholders. The congruence of participant interaction and the meaning making of inclusive practice was said to be enhanced through the use of clear communication, feedback and shared goals among the participants, university and school staff.

Participants reflected on comments made by school staff that displayed their appreciation at being able to work as a team to enhance student gains. Notions of self-efficacy were identified as participants reported that their principals and mentors had valued their knowledge on strategies, including assistive technologies. They described their pride when parents were informed that skilled professionals from the university were working collaboratively with them to provide intervention to students.

Responsibility and positive relationships

The sustainment of research-based projects in school settings is enhanced when communication and responsive feedback from many stakeholders (from all levels) is ongoing and substantive (Grima-Farrell, 2012a, b). Participants consistently identified the need for shared accountability, responsibility and a positive attitude to and from stakeholders. The benefits of positive approaches, expectation, attitudes and shared responsibility were highlighted in the following comments:

I love the responsibility from the project. It increased depth of understanding. Our mentors have faith and trust in us, which is very comforting (Nancy, 2012).

I found that one of the biggest things I'll take out of this experience is to ensure that as a teacher, I may be the only positive relationship that my students may have. If I ensure that I am always of a caring and approachable nature, I may be able to improve the outcomes of my students in ways which are highly advantageous and positive (Sam, 2012).

These past three terms have been an absolute joy, it has been dynamic, challenging and ever so rewarding [...] I have evolved not only as a teacher but as a person. I have learnt to be a more patient person and to empathise with the needs of not only my students but with every stakeholder in the school environment (Nick, 2012).

I believe this project is a highly valuable, multilayered, and rewarding which not only provided wonderful insight into teaching students with diverse learning needs but also the entire teaching profession. I believe, like everything in life you get out whatever you put in (Lori, 2013).

All participants articulated the need for and benefits of various forms of support and positive relationships. Other key strengths of the project were related to the participants having direct long-term links with students and their ability to address

their needs. Comments about the pre-service teachers increased status were also linked to them becoming an integral part of the school life and the recognition and appreciation of their efforts by school-based staff. Ensuring that all participants have good relationships and feel a sense of belonging is crucial to the development of inclusive classroom practice (European Agency for Development in Special Education, 2010). Such feelings of belonging were evident in the following participant's comment:

I went from being a prac [practicum] student who really wasn't regarded very highly, to someone who was having meetings with executives and whose opinion actually mattered (Enya, 2012).

Increasing the responsibility given to participants enhanced positive relationships and their sense of empowerment. They acknowledged that they became increasingly aware of the need for differentiation in schools and that their efforts and resourcefulness were recognised by school staff. All participants unanimously presented the positive impact of the Immersion Project on their transition from pre-service teacher to ECT:

My mentor teacher provided me with a wonderful insight into the role of a teacher. Her consistent guidance, support and reassurance has allowed me to gain a clearer understanding of the effective strategies, approaches and methods used to teach students with additional needs. I have been included in school meetings and this has involved discussing different students and their concerns. This has provided insight into the development of individual adaptation plans and how to report on students who have different needs. I have learnt that I am now an effective communicator, who thrives in team environments. I love learning from others and contributing my own experiences and opinions (Lori, 2013).

Being part of the school team for the full year has taught me many useful tips and strategies that I will take with me in my future career. My mentor has taught me many valuable lessons. I have taken real pride in being a part of the successes that the students have achieved. Knowing that I have made a difference in the life of these children is an unbelievable feeling (Mel, 2014).

Challenges

Along with the strengths of the project identified, a number of challenges were described. These referred to concerns about time limitations, management of commitments, structure and the need for flexibility. Participants were initially scheduled to be in schools for two hours, four days per week during the morning block. They identified some restrictions as a result of this time frame and expressed the need for flexibility to address these concerns:

Through this experience I have learned that I do not need to be so pedantic about sticking exactly to what I have planned, as the student/s will play a huge role in the direction that the lesson takes. It has also been incredibly hard work to juggle university classes, working, assignments, family life and a social life this year, but I would not change a thing (Anna, 2012).

I feel overwhelmed sometimes when teaching as I only get to see a snapshot of what these students are learning and find it hard to imagine how I would organise the program for such a diverse group of students. But I find it very rewarding working with these students and helping them with their learning (Yuri, 2012).

The changing of plans and timetabling and lack of space can be challenging, but it is real in most schools I guess (Rosa, 2013).

Often the challenges that were identified by participants were coupled with a positive comment (as evident in the previous quotations). However, the greatest concerns

shared by participants were student-centered and framed around time structures. Sam's reflective comment considers the strengths and challenges experienced, and reflects the sentiment of most participants:

This is one of the most important lessons I will take from my experiences in this program. To always remember to have positive and real expectations of all my students. The moment I give up on a student is the moment I should give up my profession (Sam, 2012).

The analysis of responses revealed that participants experienced a range of highs and lows associated with authentic classroom experiences as they engaged with mentors in schools during the final year of their degree. The three interrelated dominant themes emerged to support long-term teacher education initiatives as a way of overcoming the theory to practice binary to support school students with and without disabilities, and their future teachers.

The Project highlighted the benefits of a sustained professional experience for pre-service teachers, school and university staff, and school students. The comprehensively planned and collaborative partnership approach revealed that learning, alongside supportive mentors (formally and informally) within inclusive school contexts whilst maintaining open communication with the same university-based facilitator, generated mutually beneficial outcomes. Although balancing school and university expectations for the full year presented challenges, the strengths of the project outweighed these challenges for participants. The role of the university-based coordinator proved pivotal in maintaining vital connections between the stakeholders, and in the prevention of any issues becoming causes of anxiety or concern for school staff and pre-service teachers as they strived to respond to diverse student needs. Through maintaining transparent, timely and ongoing communication with all stakeholders, whilst ensuring that the project remained focused on addressing the needs of individual students in inclusive school-based settings, the congruence of purpose and positive professional relationships contributed to enhancing the knowledge and skills of school students and the 25 participants.

Discussion

The Special Education Immersion Project was a school and university partnership that provided a mentoring pathway, which encouraged reflection and growth as participants strived to address the needs of all students (with and without disabilities) through responsive research-based practices. It provided scaffolded, authentic opportunities for pre-service teachers that were also beneficial for school staff, students and the school community. Mentors proved to be critical to reducing initial participant anxieties and to enhancing the personal and professional knowledge, confidence and skills of pre-service teachers. They were fundamental to ensuring that time spent in schools comprised a high-quality experience, and that pre-service teachers had formal opportunities to observe, discuss, trial and reflect upon theory and practice, particularly when learning how to differentiate the curriculum, instruction and assessment techniques to cater for students with a diverse range of abilities.

The analysis of the data highlighted the benefits and challenges identified by participants and mentors as they engaged in authentic pedagogical experiences that were embedded both in research and practice philosophy. This comprehensive approach identified the importance of unique features of the project. These features included the provision of time in schools, financial reward, sense of empowerment and enhanced employability status. Participating in school experiences that span the full academic year,

with the same school mentor, whilst being paid, contributed significantly to pre-service teachers feeling valued and sufficiently prepared to address the needs of individual students in mixed groupings. Participants' reflections on their increased understanding of competing classroom and school demands and the subtle yet significant benefits of being introduced as a paid member of staff rather than a practicum student, were evident. These project features enhanced their sense of responsibility and their status across the school community.

Maintaining the balance of theory and practice through genuine extended school engagement experiences, provided opportunities for collaborative connections on multiple levels across the school. This collaborative and supported pathway enhanced a greater depth of pre-service teacher understanding that reinforced their professional capacity and confidence. These features contributed to the success of the project and led to all participants being offered teaching positions. However, limitations such as the small sample of participants, the lack of secondary school representation, and project implementation only occurring in one education system must be noted. Concerns over additional funding to continue the project may also inhibit its progression.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is a whole-school responsibility and all educators share the obligation of ensuring that all students achieve educational outcomes appropriate to their individual learning needs. Quality teaching is fundamental to inclusion and student learning. Thus, quality teacher education is critical to the development of committed and capable teaching professionals who can implement validated research-based practices to enhance effective student engagement and growth (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; ARACY, 2013). The Special Education Immersion Project responded to concerns that teacher education programmes need to better prepare pre-service teachers to be able to apply the knowledge they acquire at university to address diverse student needs in classrooms. The project attended to school-based aspects of pre-service teacher education and illustrates the importance of mentors in relation to the key themes that contribute to theory becoming practice in inclusive schools. Through this collaborative project, participants spent considerable time in real classroom settings and applied the theoretical knowledge gained during their teacher education course. Participants experienced real growth and challenges whilst being supported by school mentors and the university coordinator for the full academic year. This enhanced their own development and that of the school students with whom they worked.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank and acknowledge the dedicated team at ACU that consisted of members of the leadership team and the faculty members Dr Robyn Bentley-Williams, Associate Professor Janette Long and Dr Cath Laws. The author would also like to acknowledge and thank the team at CEO Sydney, which included teachers, principals and members of the leadership team, particularly Michele Cutrupi who was the Diocesan project coordinator from 2012 to 2014, and the undergraduate participants who worked beyond expectations to achieve outstanding gains. This project was successful due to the dedicated participants and professionals who worked to unite the strengths of theoretical knowledge and practice to arm early career teachers with the benefits of both the research and practice agendas in inclusive education contexts.

References

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2014), "Australian professional standards for teachers", available at: www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au (accessed 15 January 2014).
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2013), "Inclusive education for students with disability: a review of the best evidence in relation to theory and practice", available at: www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/246/filename/Inclusive_education_for_students_with_disability_-_A_review_of_the_best_evidence_in_relation_to_theory_and_practice.pdf (accessed 11 November 2013).
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2005), "Prepping our teachers for teaching as a profession", *Education Digest*, Vol. 77 No. 4, pp. 22-27.
- European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010), *Teacher Education for Inclusion International Literature Review*, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, Odense.
- Foreman, P. and Arthur-Kelly, M. (2014), *Inclusion in Action*, 4th ed., Cengage Learning, South Melbourne.
- Forlin, C. (2010), "Developing and implementing quality inclusive education in Hong Kong: implications for teacher education", *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 177-184.
- Grima-Farrell, C. (2012a), "Bridging the research to practice gap to respond to student and teacher needs in catholic school settings: a collaborative school and university approach", *Journal of Catholic School Studies*, Vol. 84 No. 2, pp. 66-75.
- Grima-Farrell, C. (2012b), "Identifying factors that bridge the research-to-practice gap in inclusive education: an analysis of six case studies", PhD thesis, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.
- Grima-Farrell, C., Long, J., Bentley-Williams, R. and Laws, C. (2014), "A school system and university approach to reducing the research to practice gap in teacher education: a collaborative special education immersion project", *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 39 No. 5, pp. 88-98. doi: 10.14221/ajte.2014v39n5.2.
- Grima-Farrell, C.R., Bain, A. and McDonagh, S.H. (2011), "Bridging the research-to-practice gap: a review of the literature focusing on inclusive education", *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 117-136, available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1375/ajse.35.2.117> doi: 10.1375/ajse.35.2.117
- Hobson, L., Harris, D., Buckner-Manley, K. and Smith, P. (2012), "The importance of mentoring novice and pre-service teachers: findings from a HBCU student teaching program", *Educational Foundations*, Vol. 26, pp. 67-80.
- Long, J., Bentley-Williams, R., Grima-Farrell, C. and Laws, C. (2014), "Responding to educational needs: a school system and university partnership", *The International Journal of Diversity in Education*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 31-43.
- McKay, L.M., Carrington, S. and Iyer, R. (2014), "Becoming an inclusive educator: applying Deleuze & Guattari to teacher education", *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 178-196.
- Stake, R. (2000), "Case studies", in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 435-454.
- Stevens, C., Parker, P. and Burroughs, D. (2007), "Dealing with beginning teachers' retention", research paper, CommuniCorp, available at: www.creativemastery.com.au/&DealingWithBeginningTeachersRetention.doc (accessed 25 February 2012).
- UNESCO (1994), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, Paris.

-
- Weldon, P.R. (2015), "The teacher workforce in Australia: supply, demand and data issues", *Policy Insights*, Vol. 2, ACER, Melbourne.
- Yin, R.K. (2003), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd ed., Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Further reading

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2012), "Australian professional standards for teachers", available at: www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/Standards/AllStandards (accessed 28 March 2013).
- Commonwealth of Australia (2005), "Disability standards for education", Canberra, available at: www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/Documents/Disability_Standards_for_Education_2005_pdf.pdf (accessed 24 May 2009).
- Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (2000), *The Impact of Educational Research: Research Evaluation Programme*, Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.
- Shaddock, A.J., Neill, J., van Limbeek, C. and Hoffman-Raap, L. (2007), "What adaptations do classroom teachers make for students with disability in their classrooms and why/why not?" report to the Australian Government Department of Education, Science & Training, Canberra.

Corresponding author

Christine Grima-Farrell can be contacted at: christine.grima-farrell@acu.edu.au

This article has been cited by:

1. Christine Grima-Farrell Research to Practice and Inclusion 3-14. [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Christine Grima-Farrell The RTP Literature: Mind the Gap! 15-66. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Mahsa Izadinia Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia . 2016. Preservice teachers' professional identity development and the role of mentor teachers. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* 5:2, 127-143. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]