

A PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL –



UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP IN PRIMARY MUSIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

An enduring theme within initial teacher education is how to best combine the theory of teaching with the practice. In Australia, this theme is receiving renewed attention as the result of a recent comprehensive review of teacher education. Whilst in the United Kingdom there is wide-spread use of school based teacher education and in the United States professional development schools have been formed, in Australia, such partnerships between schools and universities are not as developed. There is still substantial scope for real improvement in the construction of collaborative partnerships to provide greater opportunity to put theory into practice and make the theory more relevant and meaningful. This paper describes a school based learning program in music education – an area that beginning generalist classroom primary teachers appear to receive minimal if any opportunity for practice within school based professional experiences. It discusses the outcomes and benefits derived from the school – university program for all partners.

Introduction

There is anecdotal and documented evidence about the uncertainty many beginning teachers feel about their preparedness for the reality of school and classroom life. This lack of readiness is even more pronounced for certain key learning areas such as the creative arts, especially as it relates to the teaching of classroom music. There are of course several interrelated reasons for this, not least of which is the amount of time devoted to music education within undergraduate primary teacher education programs. One such program (which is by no means an extraordinary example), has experienced a substantive reduction in face-to-face contact time over three years from approximately 92 to 26 total contact hours. This has been shown to contribute negatively to beginning teachers' level of confidence and/or knowledge to teach music. When the latter is exacerbated by a lack of resources for and low priority given to music within some primary school curricula the results can be very negative indeed (for example refer to Temmerman 1997; Jeanneret 1994; Gifford 1993; and Mills 1989).

An informal survey conducted over a period of four years (1994-1997) with a total of 655 final year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) students, revealed that up to 90 per cent of beginning teachers graduate having never taught music in a school classroom or having observed it being taught by a classroom teacher. The program outlined below is a genuine attempt to ensure that student teachers are provided with an opportunity to practice music program planning, presentation, evaluation and classroom management skills. It aims to contextualise students' professional learning by connecting theory presented during their university creative arts course with classroom practice. An important anticipated outcome is that these beginning teachers will be more inclined to include music in their classroom curriculum.

Context

In the United Kingdom there has been a considerable shift to school based teacher education. Significant proportions of teacher education programs are now conducted in schools. In the United States, professional development schools have been established along the same lines as teaching hospitals in medicine, as an alternative exemplary professional partnership model. In Australia, the concept of professional development schools has not been adopted

in any concerted way, nor has school/site based management of teacher education. There is, however, a renewed commitment to improving regular school – university links to break down the theory – practice dichotomy still evident in many undergraduate teacher education programs.

In Australia over the past 20 years, there have been many reviews, inquiries and reports on a range of issues associated with the quality of teaching and teacher education. At the national level these can be traced back to the comprehensive (Auchmuty) *Report of the National Inquiry into Teacher Education* (1980). More recently they include for example, the Senate inquiry into the status of the teaching profession known as *A Class Act* (1998), and *Quality Matters: Revitalising Teaching, Critical Times, Critical Choices* which was chaired by Gregor Ramsey and released at the end of 2000.

One theme has featured consistently in all these reports, namely the centrality of providing quality, authentic school based professional experiences within initial (undergraduate) teacher education. It has also been the area subject to most severe criticism. Professional school based experiences (also invariably referred to as field studies, student teaching, practice teaching and practicum), are seen to provide practical effect to the theoretical components of teacher education programs. Within the reports, the nature of the criticisms is threefold. First, insufficient time is seen to be given to school based components within most teacher education programs; second, the first practice teaching opportunity is positioned too late within many programs; and third, experiences are in many cases artificial and irrelevant. (These criticisms are dealt with in some detail in *A Class Act* 1998). Ramsey also questioned the extent, type and quality of school based professional experiences within teacher education. Like previous reports, he also subscribed to the principal that the preparation of beginning teachers is a joint responsibility between teacher educators and schools (along with teacher employers), and as a result schools and universities should engage in more collaborative activities in the quest to provide better quality teacher education. Ramsey refers to the need to 're-energise teacher education', which entails 'reconnecting the school and university' and developing closer partnerships between the two. Ramsey asserts that it is because 'teacher education and schools are insufficiently connected', that there is a lack of link between abstract education theory and the practical school context to which it applies.

The same recurrent theme of insularity emerges from the recent research on beginning teachers - much of which of course informed the aforementioned reviews. In simple terms the principal tenet within the research findings is that neophyte teachers are under prepared for the reality of everyday classroom life because initial teacher education is too far removed from school practice. Proposals emanating from the research also call for teacher educators and teachers in schools to work more collaboratively to provide practical, relevant experiences, that are better connected to the realities of schools and classrooms (Burrows 1994, Deer et al. 1995, Koetsire & Wubbels 1995, Coopers & McIntyre 1996).

There are emerging in Australia, an increasing number of examples of collaborative partnerships between schools and universities that are attempting to strengthen the link between abstract pedagogical theory and the practical school context. In 1999, one University Faculty of Education in New South Wales, embarked upon an alternate initial teacher education program with a principal aim of connecting university instruction as closely as possible with the school based environment. The alternate program has three major characteristics. It is designed around problem-based learning which engages students collaboratively in addressing real life 'problem' scenarios; University and school based staff

work closely with the student teachers as a 'community of learners'; and students are immersed in school life on a regular basis supported by a mentor teacher. The program aims to shift the mode of delivery from the traditional university lecture –tutorial to a problem based learning within school site mode and so link more comprehensively university and school based learning. To this end students spend three days at university and two days on site in a professional setting as teacher associates. Each associate works closely with a mentor (classroom) teacher who provides support and advice, shares knowledge and leads by example. The program is now in its third year with a total of 65 students across the three years of the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) and eight participating schools.

This paper describes and comments on one specific activity teacher associates in the second year of the alternate program engage in as part of the school based learning component namely, planning, implementing and evaluating a classroom music program.

Nature of the Program

The compulsory creative arts course appears in the second year of the degree. The 24 students enrolled in the problem based learning model spend the first five weeks of the course in class with the mainstream students. It was deemed important that they engaged in experiences whereby they developed some preliminary understandings of the language of the arts and were involved in practical skills such as singing, moving, creating and making art works. One of the main assessment tasks within the subject for all students (including mainstream) is to team plan, implement and evaluate an arts program for a primary classroom. The focus of the program can be either music or visual arts, although students with a background in either art form are encouraged to prepare a program in the other.

During the second part of the course, which runs for eight weeks, students attend their host school two days per week. While at the school, students are informally awarded teacher associate status and immerse themselves in school and classroom life. Planning, implementing and evaluating the music program comprised just one component of the experiences students were involved in.

The mentor and associate teachers jointly determined the nature and content of each music program. The university coordinator also encouraged associates to gather information about children's prior experiences in music, gauge what available resources exist as well as any possible constraints to their teaching –such as space. Most conducted a survey with the children to ascertain more completely their level of music knowledge, special interest areas, likes and dislikes and 'talents' such as playing an instrument.

Eight major expectations were communicated to the associates by the university coordinator. It was expected that each team would: prepare a program which engaged the children in a creative music making experience, (it was entirely up to the team in conjunction with their mentor teacher to determine whether this was achieved via creative composition, dance/movement or interpretative performance of a song or piece of music); engage in cooperative planning; liaise regularly with the mentor teacher about the content and progress of the program; prepare any needed materials and assume total responsibility for resources and equipment used; ensure all team members contributed equally to the implementation phase; maintain a reflective journal; submit a final written presentation of the taught program with group and individual reflections; and prepare the children for a performance 'showcasing' their work/progress over the program (this invariably proved to be the most anxious activity students engaged in). The latter included preparing invitations to send home for the public presentation of the children's efforts.

Each team prepared a draft program, which was submitted to and discussed with the university coordinator.

Outcomes and Benefits of the School based Learning Experience

'Success' in the design and delivery of any collaborative initiative, is ultimately dependent upon good communication amongst all partners. Where there was variability in team members' overall commitment to the program and lack of support from any of the partners, the benefits and outcomes were perceived to be less successful. All teaching teams invariably referred to the importance of everyone sharing a sense of ownership in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the program, along with the need to effectively communicate intentions and expectations, and willingness to make changes if deemed necessary. All teams in their written observations remarked on the importance of these conditions being present to promote effective learning experiences. The following is a typical example.

It was great sharing the workload and developing a program together. It really created a feeling of co-ownership and a sense of joint responsibility for its success. None of us had a really strong musical background but we all had particular strengths like 'M' being able to play the guitar and 'J' being really good at dance. One thing we all had to be was flexible. This came out in every aspect of our teaching, being willing to negotiate within our team to achieve our goals, being willing to be criticized, to make compromises at some point and change whatever wasn't working. I think we were willing to do this because we knew our fellow associates supported us in so many ways and encouraged us when having to deal with trouble makers in the class, with singing the songs, helping teach about beat and rhythm, model the movements and when arranging the performance. I won't say it was easy because I found it very challenging but the most important thing was communicating clearly with each other and our mentor teachers about our intentions.

A number of logistical and pedagogical aspects considered 'special' to teaching music were identified. The former included the importance of acknowledging space needs for movement and instrument playing and, taking into account the 'noise' factor associated with singing, movement, playing and creative music making lessons. It also included dealing with competing group 'sounds' of singing, instrument playing, and children moving within the one area. Specific pedagogical issues focused on the need to draw upon a repertoire of teaching/learning strategies to: encourage non participant children to become involved in certain activities; accommodate the diversity of music knowledge and experience amongst children; and account for the difference between boys and girls in their reactions to and engagement with certain music activities. Where one or more of these elements were not adequately catered for in the planning stage, they were perceived to hamper successful implementation of the program.

At the heart of this collaborative school based music program is improved learning experiences for all participants. For the school it is another means whereby music learning is promoted and professional staff development opportunities are provided. There are still many teachers who perceive themselves as lacking the necessary skills and knowledge (and hence confidence) to provide optimum classroom music learning experiences. Over the course of the music program, the mentor teachers had the opportunity to talk with the associate teachers and the university coordinator about current resources, ideas, different approaches and developments in music education, thus providing them with professional renewal. The mentors commented positively about the enthusiasm of the associate teachers,

and the real benefit to children working with 'young teachers full of new ideas'. All mentor teachers also considered the collaboration to be an important mechanism whereby they could come to understand and appreciate more fully current university program content and practices. The latter augurs well for continued involvement in future such collaborations.

For the university, school based learning enriches and makes the creative arts course more relevant to students. It provides student teachers with a valuable, relevant, real school context for teaching music, which in many cases otherwise, would not be available. It is also an opportunity for student teachers to experiment, be innovative and take risks. The associate teachers appeared to be more willing to be 'risk takers' because of the collegiality associated with working in a supportive team situation along with their mentor. This provided, as one student eloquently commented,

... intellectual and emotional support to try out new things... sometimes my ideas were challenged but in an encouraging and friendly way. Our mentor teachers always willingly made time available for us and listened enthusiastically. We all brainstormed together, made suggestions about what might work better etc but always in a positive way. The whole experience felt like a real collaboration between the teachers, the children and us.

Several associates commented specifically about the respect they were given by their mentor teacher. They spoke about the benefits of being treated 'like a professional colleague rather than a student' and attributed this in large part to being perceived by the mentor to be as expert if not more expert in the subject matter than the teacher. Associates also invariably referred to the real sense of purpose to their teaching because of their input into the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of the music program. The end of program performance, whilst invariably described as 'nerve wracking' or 'scary', also provided a tangible outcome not only for their efforts but for all participants. The associate teachers over their eight weeks in the school had the benefit of being able to develop a relationship with the children and develop awareness of school policies, procedures and organization. They all emphasized the value of being able to, in the words of one associate:

... work alongside and observe my mentor motivate the children, deal with their individual differences, handle their problems and use different discipline methods with them. It was so valuable being able to observe other teachers also, look at their unit plans and compare different approaches to teaching, how they worked with their class and how they handled problems.

In other words, mentors provided invaluable leadership and direction about teaching in the broadest sense.

Concluding Remarks

Without doubt, collaborative partnerships between universities and schools such as the one described in this paper, provide quality school based professional experiences for student teachers, and enhance the effectiveness of teacher education. Participating student teachers remarked on the value of the 'authenticity' of the experience, provided in a supportive environment where greater freedom was afforded them than in other practicum. School personnel commented positively on the opportunity the collaboration provided for cross-fertilization of ideas and all participants have noted improved understanding of the operation and goals of the partners.

Two other significant issues were relayed in the feedback received to date about the program. The first by student teachers who suggested value in being able to observe a

variety of examples of 'state of the art' classroom music practice by different classroom teachers, something they generally found to be in short supply in professional school based practices they engaged in during their pre-service teacher education. The second came from both associate and mentor teachers who recommended that parts of the course currently conducted within the first five weeks of the course at the university could in fact be delivered at the school. This would integrate more completely course work content with school practice and also provide on-going professional development for participating teachers. Given the 'successes' attributed to the partnership project, these proposals are receiving serious consideration. Finally, whilst all associate teachers commented on an enhanced sense of confidence to teach classroom music, it remains to be seen if this school based learning experience will impact on the priority they give music within their primary classroom curricula –by all accounts, it certainly has the potential to do so.

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