

Towards Collaborative Professional Learning in the First Year Early Childhood Teacher Education Practicum: Issues in Negotiating the Multiple Interests of Stakeholder Feedback

Abstract

This paper analyses data from two sources of stakeholder feedback – first year pre-service teachers and supervising teachers/centre directors – about the issues involved in creating more collaborative approaches to the first year early childhood teacher education practicum at an Australian regional university. The collection of this feedback was part of a broader participatory action research project directed at maximising both the effectiveness of the pre-service teachers' knowledge acquisition and meaning-making and the sustainability of the partnership underpinning the practicum.

The paper provides new insights into a hitherto under-researched area, that of early childhood pre-service teachers' professional learning experiences in child care contexts. It uses, as a basis, the work of Cardini (2006). The main findings are that there are multiple viewpoints and competing interests, resulting in asymmetries, dissonance and the potential for conflict.

Introduction

It is a truism in the teacher education literature that the practicum depends for its efficacy and utility on close and authentic collaboration among multiple stakeholders (Haigh & Ward, 2003; Krieg & Sharp, 2003; Ravid & Handler, 2001; Turner & Sharp, 2006). Yet, as that same literature acknowledges, relations among those

stakeholders are complex and contested and as likely to be individualistic, even competitive, as they are to be collaborative.

This complexity and contestation in the practicum coincide with ongoing debate about the most appropriate form and location of that practicum within teacher education programs (sequenced units of study that on completion lead to teacher registration). The authors of this paper contend that one crucial navigational tool in negotiating an effective and efficient pathway through the tensions and potential trials of teacher education practicum partnerships – and in the process through the debates about the functions and locations of the practicum – is the development of collective and shared understandings of the multiple and situated interests of the respective stakeholders in those partnerships. Likewise it is important to maximise the coherence and cohesiveness of the relationships among those stakeholders by means of effective communication and the attainment of common understandings. Both these sets of understandings are vital if stakeholders are to attain awareness of one another's perspectives and thereby to construct and sustain coherent and productive relationships. This development is exemplified in an analysis of data arising from two sources of stakeholder feedback about the first year early childhood teacher education practicum at an Australian regional university. The analysis demonstrates that there were significant continuities and dissonances across and within the two groups of participants (first year pre-service teachers and supervising teachers/centre directors) that can be traced to underlying points of intersection and divergence in the explicitly and implicitly acknowledged interests of the participants.

The paper consists of three sections:

- A conceptual framework centred on educational practicum partnerships and stakeholder interests
- The background to the practicum under review here and the aims and research design underpinning the study
- An analysis of selected findings from the study.

The focus of the argument is on highlighting and attending to the multiple perspectives and interests framing the teacher education practicum if it is to achieve its potential as the site of collaborative professional learning on the part of all stakeholder groups.

Conceptual framework

Teacher education scholarship is replete with accounts of practicum and professional experience programs, and many of those accounts assume both the necessity for and the existence of strong partnerships among the various contributors to those programs (see for example Borthwick, Stirling, Mauman & Cook, 2003; Soliman, 2001; Zeichner, 2002). While we do not necessarily dissent from this assumption, we assert all the same that such partnerships consist of, and depend on, multiple explicit and implicit interests that are almost inevitably in competition with one another to some extent; as Beck and Kosnik (2002) noted about practicum partnerships, “Each group has its distinctive interests and biases” (p. 82). We contend moreover that even the most successful partnerships are likely to be temporary and tentative coalescences of mutual or shared interests and to be subject to the threat of dissolution if those coalescences become contradictions.

Our thinking here is informed by Cardini's (2006) study of educational partnerships in the United Kingdom. Her principal argument has particular resonance with the concerns of this paper:

The notion of partnership constructs a vision of public policy that stresses efficiency, devolution and participation and in which everyone seems to benefit. However, when the actual practice of partnerships is explored, a different picture emerges. Rather than inclusive, symmetrical and democratic social practices, current partnerships are revealed to be facilitating and legitimating central policy decision-making as well as the private sector involvement in the delivery of public policies. (p. 393)

The underlying focus on partnerships as varied forms of power articulates strongly with the data analysis presented below of the perspectives of participants in one such partnership: "...to challenge current social organization by promoting more progressive relationships, the theoretical definition of partnership has to recognize the issue of power and establish working relationships in which struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues" (p. 412).

Here it is helpful to note Cardini's (2006) elaboration of educational partnerships as containing complexities not necessarily conveyed by rhetorical appeals to harmonious interactions and identical interests. Hence her depiction of "some of the mismatches between the political definitions of partnerships and their practice" (p. 397) and her contention that "the benign nature of partnerships claimed by theoretical definitions has to be set over and against the contradictory and, at times, even paradoxical context in which they are encouraged and developed" (p. 397). As we discuss below, there is

compelling evidence in the data of such a “contradictory and, at times, even paradoxical context” based on different sets of interests and aspirations, as well as of “struggle and dissent...[being] discussible and transformable issues” (p. 412), as noted earlier.

However, and by contrast, Cardini’s (2006) work is also useful in framing this analysis through her identification of features of educational partnerships that do not apply in this context. This divergence centres on her identification of “three fundamental mismatches between theoretical and empirical definitions of partnerships” (p. 398):

I will argue that although collaboration is presented as a main characteristic in theoretical definitions of partnerships, partnerships are spaces where cooperation is very hard to achieve; that although theoretical definitions present partnerships as a cluster of symmetrical and complementary sector partners, in practice partnerships tend to show asymmetrical and unbalanced relationships between different members; and finally, that although the theoretical concept of partnership is directly lined to the idea of social and community participation, in practice partnerships seem to be the instrument to implement top down central policies. (p. 398)

If we apply Cardini’s (2006) insistence that “...the theoretical definition of partnership has to recognize the issue of power and establish working relationships in which struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues” (p. 412) to claims – including our own in this paper – about the partnerships attending teacher education practicums, what emerges is the timely reminder that professional (and personal)

learning is not an automatic or easy outcome of such partnerships, and that that learning is more likely to eventuate if the separate and shared interests of stakeholders are acknowledged, explicated and valued. Understanding that those interests are sometimes conflicting, contested and even controversial helps to make the practicum partnerships and the associated collaborative learning more, not less, likely to be effective and equitable.

Background and research design

The practicum under review here, in which “...struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues” (Cardini, 2006, p. 412), is a significantly revised version of a professional experience course for first year undergraduate early childhood teacher education students at an Australian regional university where those pre-service teachers undertake 15 days of professional experience in a childcare service throughout the first year of their program. Extensive feedback from stakeholders in the course gathered in the second half of 2005 led to the reconceptualisation and trialling of a pilot study designed to enhance the effectiveness of the course’s delivery and to develop stronger partnerships among the stakeholders. The feedback suggested that, while many aspects of the professional experience were being successfully incorporated into the learning of the pre-service teachers in subsequent years, several pre-service teachers reported a divergence between the contemporary theories of early childhood education espoused by the university and the practice as experienced in some centres. Accordingly the pilot study was intended to provide pre-service teachers with practical placements that not only provided a reflection on best practice but also inspired those pre-service teachers with a vision of the early childhood profession.

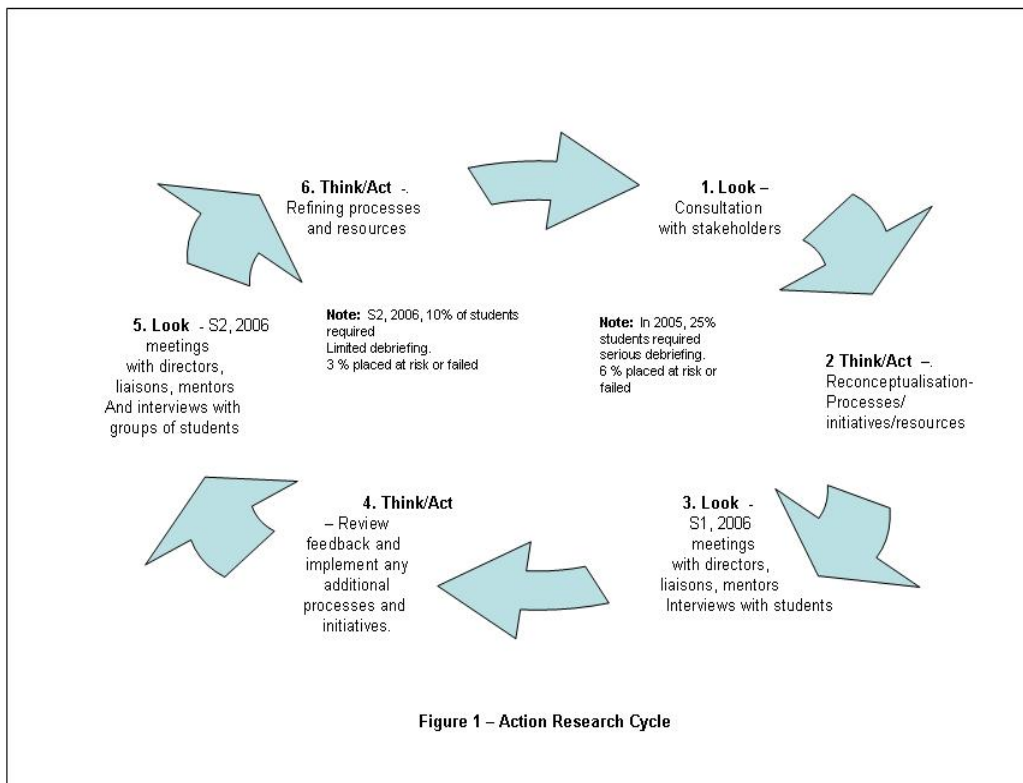


Figure 1 below portrays the action research cycle that was implemented to incorporate the redesigned course:

Figure 1: The Action Research Cycle Framing the Course Resign

The action research cycle and analysis depicted in Figure 1 followed a model developed by Stringer (1999) that involved three basic phases: look, think and act. Towards the completion of the first cycle (Look, Think, Act), the program coordinator and other stakeholders shared their initial feedback and findings. This led to reviewing and adjusting the level of support, materials and strategies. The second cycle (Look, Think, Act) proceeded, with an integral component of this process being the analysis of data and the program coordinator’s reflexivity which she used to evaluate the pilot study’s effectiveness and appropriateness to make recommendations for future directions as well as areas that might require refinement.

The six phases of this cycle were as follows:

A. **Look** – Consultation and reflections were conducted with 100 pre-service early childhood students during their first year of professional experience (Semester 2, 2005) as well as feedback from and semi-structured interviews with host childcare mentors (supervising teachers), directors and liaison staff members.

B. **Think/Act** – Negative feedback (approximately 25% of pre-service teachers required serious debriefing and 6% were identified as being at risk or failed) from the first year practicum in the childcare context led to critical reflection and the need to reconceptualise, which led in turn to the development of a series of new professional experience processes, initiatives and resources.

C. Look

- During Semester 1, 2006 semi-formal meetings and discussion groups were conducted with the directors and staff members of childcare centres as well as with USQ students as part of their attachment.
- End of Semester 1, 2006 – non-intrusive interviews were conducted with pre-service teachers as part of debriefing about and evaluation of professional experience.

D. **Think/Act** – Feedback was reviewed and additional processes and initiatives were implemented.

E. Look

- During Semester 2, 2006 semi-formal meetings and discussion groups were conducted with the directors and staff members of childcare centres as well as with USQ students as part of their attachment.

- End of Semester 2, 2006 – non-intrusive interviews were conducted with pre-service teachers as part of debriefing about and evaluation of professional experience.

F. **Think/Act** – Discussion and reflection led to refining processes, support materials and resources. Note: only 10% of students required debriefing (most of these students were in centres where management had changed and new directors had been appointed who were not part of the initial process and discussion and had not viewed support materials. Furthermore, only 1% of students failed and only 3% were placed at risk.

The redeveloped course was trialled in 2006, and a formal research project designed to evaluate the course's effectiveness was conducted at the end of 2006. The project's aim was to investigate a variety of possibilities for improving the pre-service teachers' professional experience. More specifically, it was anticipated that the data and feedback from the study would inform and provide focused direction in developing a more collaborative and mutually empowering approach to devising and enacting that professional experience and one where pedagogy and content addressed at university would be made visible in the childcare context.

The project enacted the principles of participatory action research (Borda, 2001; Noffke & Somekh, 2005) and involved extensive data gathering with appropriate ethical clearance and informed consent based on two sources of information:

- Individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 55 pre-service teachers

- Individual, qualitative semi-structured interviews with 9 centre directors and staff members.

Interview questions within both groups of respondents were piloted with a small group of participants before wider implementation and canvassed a wide range of potentially relevant topics. Sample questions included “What did you want to get out of the professional experience?”, “What did you find most enjoyable about the professional experience?”, “What did you feel that you could contribute and how did the centre benefit from that contribution?”, “Was it a successful/positive professional experience for you? Why or why not?” and “Please describe one incident when the professional experience was particularly effective or ineffective”. The focus was squarely on eliciting participants’ experiences, perceptions and feelings in relation to the professional experience. Both the action research cycle outlined above and these interview questions were directed at addressing the aforementioned project’s aim of improving the pre-service teachers’ professional experience and of developing a more collaborative and mutually empowering approach to that development. The difference in numbers between the two groups was not significant in the qualitative analysis of their voices; instead attention was paid to the similar and different viewpoints expressed within and across the groups.

In keeping with the conceptual framework outlined above, the analysis of these two data sources was framed and informed by Rowan’s (2001) transformative approach to textual and thematic analysis (see also AUTHORS, 2005, p. 45; Walker-Gibbs, 2004). That approach attends to the gaps and silences of what is absent and excluded from texts as well as the explicit and implicit elements of what is present and included in

those texts. The transformative dimension of the method is centred on the aspiration of creating counternarratives to the marginalising metanarratives that create such exclusion and thereby of constructing more inclusive and enabling alternatives to current practices.

More particularly, the application of transformative textual and thematic analysis in this project entailed the following specific steps:

- Searching for both convergences ('patterns') and divergences ('outliers') in the expressed values and worldviews within and between the two data sources
- Interpreting those convergences and divergences in relation to the pilot study's intended goal of maximising mutually beneficial partnerships as well as to Cardini's (2006) conceptualisation of educational partnerships as contested and potentially controversial
- Examining closely selected examples of convergences and divergences in order to distil and interrogate perceived commonalities and conflicts among stakeholder interests
- Reflecting on those commonalities and conflicts as a means of elaborating broader implications for using stakeholder feedback to design, implement, manage and evaluate first year early childhood teacher education practicums that genuinely and sustainably promote collaborative professional learning for pre-service teachers, centre staff members, and university academic and practicum liaison staff members alike.

Findings

The data corpus was extensive and encouraged the application of multiple interpretative lenses. Here the recurring themes that have been selected for analysis from the data are clustered around stakeholders' separate and shared understandings with regard to four key issues, chosen on the basis of encapsulating prominent and/or commonly occurring ideas and discussion points and exhibiting both the convergences and the divergences noted above (with other themes from the data being held over for other publications):

- the pilot study practicum's intended and actual outcomes
- individuals' contributions to attaining the practicum's outcomes
- the pre-requisites of worthwhile practicum experiences
- identifying and resolving disparities between stakeholder perceptions (which has particular resonance with Cardini's [2006] conceptual framework outlined earlier).

Given the aim, outlined above, of both the action research cycle and the research project of helping to enhance the quality of the pre-service teachers' professional experience and of making the development of that experience collaborative and mutually empowering for various stakeholders, these four issues constitute a timely litmus test of whether that aim had been attained. While lack of space precludes cross-referencing with the action research cycle outcomes portrayed above, this commonality of focus strengthened the interplay between the cycle and the project. The representative statements from the interviews cited below have been restricted to one statement per interviewee (with the exception of two statements ascribed to one centre staff member), in order to maximise both the range of voices and the representatives of the findings being presented; codes have been assigned to the

quoted statements, with “PST” denoting a pre-service teacher and “CS” indicating a childcare centre staff member.

The pilot study practicum’s intended and actual outcomes

As was noted above, considerable efforts were devoted when designing and implementing the pilot study practicum to enhancing communication among stakeholders through such devices as face-to-face meetings and distributing a resource CD containing practicum information and exemplars of practice (presented primarily in the form of PowerPoint and audio presentations). It was therefore pleasing that a majority of both pre-service teachers and centre staff members indicated that they had an appropriate working knowledge of the practicum’s intended outcomes. This knowledge was endorsed as being relevant and suitable to first year pre-service professional experience for contemporary early childhood education. Both sets of respondents therefore had a reasonably well-developed base for reflecting on the extent to which, and the ways in which, the practicum had attained its intended outcomes.

Examples of the pre-service teachers’ comments, both positive and negative, in communicating these reflections included the following:

- Hands on experience of practical things like making glue, mixing paint colours, how to discipline. (PST 23)
- Observing mentors’ different approaches to things – the way they might engage and interact with children. (PST 48)

- When I am at uni I just know about children in theory, but when I'm out on prac I definitely saw what children did. I saw what I had been reading in books in application during professional experience. (PST 15)
- I appreciated the fact that my mentor asked us to do things that she believed I could do. She challenged us and asked us to grow by us showing initiative. (PST 21)
- I wanted a bit more hands on teaching methods and feedback on whether I would actually be a good teacher in relation to how I interact with the children, but it's funny – you didn't really get a lot of feedback of that sort of thing. (PST 37)

The centre staff members made the following comments about the practicum's outcomes:

- The main thing for us is to get the students to have a real understanding of a childcare centre, and what our goals and [the] philosophy of our centre are and appreciate. For students to come away...[with] some contextual knowledge. (CS 4)
- To have an understanding of the needs of the staff perspective that are placed on parents and governments and all community parties. (CS 9)
- The three students I had – only one of them of the three got something out of it, because the other two came in thinking they knew it all. They just weren't willing to learn and to take constructive criticism....[Hands on] experience, following policy and procedures – I would expect exactly the same from them as a normal staff member. (CS 7)

These two sets of comments about the pilot study practicum's intended and actual outcomes reveal much of relevance to separate and shared understandings and interests within and between the two groups. Although different specific words were used, there was a heightened commonality between the groups about the importance of such outcomes as “[h]ands on experience” and “contextual knowledge” and therefore of the practicum as the vehicle for developing “a real understanding of a childcare centre”. From this perspective, both groups valued ‘real life’ experience and application as program outcomes, and the comments suggested that those outcomes were achieved in practice.

The two sets of comments also demonstrated an understanding that there were role-specific outcomes as well as more generic practicum outcomes that should be and generally were attained. This was reflected in a pre-service teacher's appreciation that “...my mentor asked us to do things that she believed I could do. She challenged us and asked us to grow by us showing initiative” (PST 21). This comment encapsulated a particular view of the pre-service teacher–mentor relationship that centred on a dynamic and reciprocal, rather than a fixed and hierarchical, view of the roles making up that relationship: positive outcomes depended on each role being enacted professionally and responsibly. Similarly the centre staff member's citation of the requirement for pre-service teachers “[t]o have an understanding of the needs of the staff perspective that are placed on parents and governments and all community parties” (CS 9) invoked the importance of empathy and the capacity of individuals, whether pre-service teachers or staff members, to move outside their own roles and to feel and communicate an imaginative and respectful sympathy with the pressures impacting on the roles of others.

At times an instance of a negative experience overshadowed the discussion of the practicum's intended and actual outcomes. For the pre-service teachers, these interactions centred on a desire for “a bit more hands on teaching methods and feedback on whether I would actually be a good teacher...” and a belief that “you didn't really get a lot of feedback of that sort of thing” (PST 37). For the centre staff members, these interactions revolved around a perceived mismatch between the practicum's intended outcomes and some pre-service teachers' apparent lack of willingness “to learn and to take constructive criticism” and an evident feeling that “they knew it all” (CS 7). While it is difficult at the level of selected quotations to differentiate between interpersonal conflicts and substantive program issues, it is clear that these cited comments reflect different and in practice conflicting views of the practicum's outcomes, based on contradictory expectations of the roles and relationships of pre-service teachers and mentors.

More broadly, these contradictory expectations, as well as the commonality in such expectations noted above, evoke some of the key elements of Cardini's (2006) conceptualisation of educational partnerships as contested and potentially controversial. After all, intended and actual outcomes are crucial parts of designing and delivering effective, efficient and equitable practicums and of ensuring ongoing learning for all involved – students, pre-service teachers, centre and university staff members alike. The data in this subsection demonstrate that many outcomes were achieved and that both pre-service teachers and centre staff members were largely pleased with the other group's attainment of those outcomes.

Individuals' contributions to attaining the practicum's outcomes

As well as identifying the pilot study's intended and actual outcomes, the research sought participants' views about what and how individuals should and did contribute to the attainment of those outcomes. In response, some of the pre-service teacher interviewees identified the following contributions by individual pre-service teachers and centre staff members to attaining the practicum's outcomes:

- [I] Helped with cleaning, volunteer work (I stayed behind quite a few afternoons and helped out when they were struggling with finding extra staff). (PST 8)
- By my mentor reading reflection tasks, bookwork, etc. She took onboard my work and ideas from uni in order to keep herself up to date and in line with 2006 teaching methods. (PST 34)
- As I am [an] international student, the mentor was really interested in involving the children in other cultures and I was able to show Japanese culture – e.g., traditional Japanese toys, singing songs in Japanese, food. (PST 51)
- Just the relationship with the children and parents seem to be enhanced. Because we were sitting back, we were able to really notice what the children were doing. The main staff were so busy with the different tasks that we actually saw things from another perspective. (PST 12)
- Role modelling of our effective partnerships and our mentor actually commented on how well we worked together, and commenting on how well we worked ourselves as well as with her. It is all part and parcel of working in a team and working with each other can only benefit the children in the long run. (PST 5)

The centre staff members' comments included the following observed contributions to attaining the practicum's outcomes:

- I benefited heaps from having the students, by having initiative and having an extra staff member on board to give us a hand. (CS 5)
- All the staff found it really refreshing to have some 'new blood'; the staff appreciated the students' new ideas and outlook. The nice sharing times. (CS 1)
- Communication is needed a lot more – more consideration of when they are on prac, the understanding of when staff are busy and asking for help at the appropriate time. Students' ability to communicate what they need and their plans, etc., and what they are at so that everyone [can work together]. (CS 6)

As with the discussion above of the intended and actual outcomes of the pilot study practicum, there is evidence of considerable convergence between the two groups of participants in their perceptions of the importance of the other group's contribution to the success of the practicum as well as of that contribution having been substantial and successful on this occasion. This was encapsulated in a pre-service teacher's statement that her supervising teacher "took onboard my work and ideas from uni in order to keep up to date in line with 2006 teaching methods" (PST 34) and in a different pre-service teacher from Japan affirming that "the mentor was really interested in involving the student in other cultures and I was able to show Japanese culture..." (PST 51). Likewise one of the supervising teachers asserted that "All the staff found it really refreshing to have some 'new blood'; the staff appreciated the students' new ideas and outlook" (CS 1). All these comments are predicated on the

two groups having equally important and valued and interdependent contributions to make to the success of the practicum, based on active involvement and full-scale engagement to meet the interests of each group.

At the same time, a few comments evoked a subsidiary discourse that suggested 'equality' applying more equally to some partnership members than to others, thereby reminding us of the political character of any such partnership. For example, one pre-service teacher stated, "[I] helped with cleaning, volunteer work (I stayed behind quite a few afternoons and helped out when they were struggling with finding extra staff)" (PST 8), while another indicated that "The main staff were so busy with the different tasks that we actually saw things from another perspective" (PST 12). Similarly, a supervising teacher claimed that "I benefited heaps from having the students, by having initiative and having an extra staff member on board to give us a hand" (CS 5). All three comments reinforced how busy childcare centres are and how the pre-service teachers became immersed in that ongoing activity. On the other hand, there is potential for pre-service teachers to be exploited and to be assigned menial tasks to the exclusion of professional learning. Drawing on Cardini (2006), this suggests that prospective and negative dominance by one partnership member over others can be prevented by close and open communication among partners and by members sometimes acting as advocates for others. From this perspective, the comment cited above by a supervising teacher about communication being "needed a lot more" becomes less an implicit complaint than a call for all participants to recognise and respect what each has to contribute to the attainment of practicum outcomes. Furthermore, this is one instance of Rowan's (2001) transformative analysis, whereby this supervising teacher's utterance can be seen as a potential counternarrative to the

marginalising metanarrative that is sometimes associated with teacher education practicums and that lies at the heart of Cardini's (2006) critique of educational partnerships.

The pre-requisites of worthwhile practicum experiences

In addition to eliciting the two participant groups' perceptions of the pilot study practicum's intended and actual outcomes and group members' contributions to attaining those outcomes, the research collected data about the two groups' identification of the pre-requisites of worthwhile practicum experiences. According to selected pre-service teacher respondents:

- I valued all the support I got from the centre but also if I ever was contemplating that this is a career that I wanted then prac reinforced these career thoughts. (PST 43)
- I've grown from this experience by becoming more aware of what's going on with people in this context. Growing and being a reflective practitioner. I can see myself working with families, and this was reinforced during my prac. (PST 18)
- Being able to connect with the children and just being able to put all the theory into practice. Since this year I see a child do something and I relate that to something I have heard or read in lectures, etc. It's really about making that connection. (PST 27)
- The mentor was very open to what we wanted to do. She talked to us on a professional level....She expressed even things on theorists with us, etc. (PST 55)

- To me the experience in some ways was negative – the ill feelings that ended up being between the mentor – trying to meet her expectations – trying to understand how to plan for an ‘emergent curriculum’ when I haven’t learnt about that yet. (PST 25)
- We also had a few issues going on in the room with a new director, new relief staff – and we sort of got pulled into the middle of it. (PST 9)
- Confusion – as [for] example I picked up a little child who was new to the room to comfort them, and got in trouble because they didn’t want me to pick him up – they were trying to teach him to self-soothe. (PST 31)
- I found that initially we were not as comfortable as we thought we would be, because we had high expectations of ourselves because of our age and our confidence. We were a bit overpowered when we first went in. We then stepped back a little bit and gained their trust. We were then able to express ourselves and our ideas. (PST 14)

The centre staff members’ comments related to pre-requisites of worthwhile practicum experiences focused on the orientation phase:

- Orientation was particularly effective; the girls knew what was expected since [the beginning]. The students said it was such a thorough orientation that they knew what was expected. Close to two hours – toured the centre, show the laundry, kids’ club and staff handbook – that gave the girls an opportunity to ask questions for clarification. (CS 3)

Again the comments were largely favourable and indicated that the practicum had been positive from the perspective of both groups of participants. Following Cardini

(2006), we assert that that successful outcome was due in large part to the practicum's effectiveness in fulfilling the diverse and sometimes competing interests of those participants. For example, the pre-service teachers' remarks reflected an often implicit valuing of specific processes associated with their own professional learning that they consider pre-requisites of a flourishing practicum experience, ranging from affirmation of having selected the appropriate career path and opportunities for being a reflective practitioner to developing connectedness with children and engaging in professional conversations. Likewise the supervising teacher's admiration for the orientation phase of the practicum reflected her valuing of clarity of role expectations in order to reduce misunderstandings as a key pre-requisite of an effective practicum. Both these sets of comments derived in turn from specific and often role-based interests: it was in the supervising teacher's interest for pre-service teachers to know "what was expected since [the beginning]" (CS 3), just as it was in the pre-service teachers' interests to be able to use the practicum experience to put theory into practice, to try out new ideas and to see how suited they really were to early childhood education as a career.

The centrality of interests was also evident as an explanation of some pre-service teachers' less positive reflections on the practicum. As with a previous subsection, it is difficult to differentiate between interpersonal conflicts and substantive program issues. What strikes us in these comments is that the pre-service teachers concerned identified implicitly pre-requisites of effective practicums on the basis that those pre-requisites were not being fulfilled in specific ways. The third comment implies a desire for more explicit communication of desired role behaviour, while the first two comments evoke a sense of frustration of not being able to influence interactions

perceived to be negative, in the first case centred on the pre-service teacher, in the second on full-time staff members.

Identifying and resolving disparities between stakeholder perceptions

Finally, the research also asked the two groups of participants to comment on the existence of, and suggestions for how to remedy, disparities between stakeholder perceptions of the pilot study practicum. Pre-service teachers commented on some apparent disparity in expectations between the two groups:

- The mentors didn't realise the amount of work that we needed to do, but they were willing to support me and asked me lots of questions. I said everything was on the CD. (PST 46)
- The mentor predetermining my abilities – i.e., because I am a first year student she didn't think I could handle a full on group time session. Therefore all during my prac I wasn't permitted to do group time. (PST 22)
- When we do a task or requirement for prac the mentor should observe and then comment on it. Sometimes mentors either don't value the importance of this requirement or don't have time. (PST 36)

Likewise the staff members' comments included evidence of disparities between their expectations and those of some pre-service teachers:

- There were two occasions where uni had expectations but we didn't have an understanding. (CS 8)
- On the last day one of my kids got sick and I wasn't able to come in – reflective tasks on the last day were unclear as to what was expected. Paperwork time was hard to stay on top of. (CS 2)

- When the students thought they could just sit on their bottoms and do nothing....I don't think these particular students wanted to get as much out of it as we did. The students really need to go in with the right attitude. It doesn't matter what sort of centre the students go into, they can always learn something. (CS 7)

Several areas of potential disparity, based on sometimes contradictory interests and different levels of power in the practicum partnership, were evident in these comments. One area was lack of communication, summarised in the pre-service teacher's observation that "The mentors didn't realise the amount of work that we needed to do....I said everything was on the CD" (PST 46) and in the supervising teacher's remark that "...reflective tasks on the last day were unclear as to what was expected" (CS 2). Another area was competing expectations, as in the pre-service teacher's lament that "...because I am a first year student" her supervising teacher "didn't think I could handle a full on group time session" (PST 22) and in the supervising teacher's reflexive reference to the "two occasions where uni had expectations but we didn't have an understanding" (CS 8). A third area was the frustration derived from a perception that the other group's identified responsibilities were not being fulfilled, putting in jeopardy the success of the joint and interdependent enterprise. Thus a pre-service teacher expressed disappointment when her supervising teacher failed to observe and provide feedback on a task that she had completed (PST 36), while a supervising teacher identified a perceived motivation gap between her colleagues and herself on the one hand and a group of pre-service teachers on the other: "The students really need to go in with the right attitude" (CS 7).

Discussion

Reflecting on the significance of this account of the four themes emerging from the data *vis-à-vis* the conceptual framework outlined above, it is clear that disparities between stakeholder perceptions are inevitable in any practicum partnership, partly because those perceptions are based on multiple and sometimes contradictory interests and aspirations. Several of the comments cited in the previous section attest to the pilot study practicum's effectiveness in bringing those perceptions into closer alignment and thereby in helping to achieve those interests and fulfil those aspirations. At the same time, some comments indicate the continuing need to expect disagreements and disparities and the importance of highlighting and engaging with them productively when they come along. There is thus a close alignment between these findings and Cardini's (2006) identification of some of the practical constraints on developing educational partnerships, in particular that "...partnerships are spaces where cooperation is very hard to achieve; [and] that...,in practice partnerships tend to show asymmetrical and unbalanced relationships between different members..." (p. 398). These difficulties are exacerbated when debate continues about the quality and sustainability of the Australian childcare system (Rush, 2006) as well as about the level of Australian government funding of teacher education (Dyson, 2005), including professional experience.

Yet despite those difficulties the approach discussed in this paper yielded some significant positive outcomes. This point underscores the crucial leadership role that universities must continue to play in developing and sustaining professional

experience initiatives that augment the professionalism of teaching (see also Groundwater-Smith, 2000; Zeichner, 2002, 2006).

More broadly, five key strategies emerge from the findings presented above in relation to early childhood teacher education professional experience, stakeholder feedback and educational partnerships. These strategies are likely to be useful to teacher educators seeking to promote high quality professional experience for their students:

- Choose practicum placements carefully, ensuring that they support best practice in professional experience.
- Demonstrate the ‘win/win’ mentality and the strength based paradigm of a reconceptualised approach to professional experience.
- Ensure that from the outset all the key stakeholders are consulted and that as far as possible there is a shared vision and a desire for change. This includes setting high standards and expectations and being resourced to aim for this.
- Provide multiple forms of this shared vision, strategies and content to stakeholders, include in-service presentations, informal meetings, recorded PowerPoint presentations, handbooks and handouts – and revisit these regularly.
- Try to change the power dynamic so that all stakeholders feel empowered to engage with and embrace the vision, goals and decision-making processes in their own way.

Conclusion

Cardini's (2006) critique of the rhetoric versus the realities of educational partnerships is a timely reminder that those "contexts and expectations" have a political character and are linked simultaneously with individual interests and aspirations and with broader structural forces that locate the stakeholder feedback interrogated here within specific contemporary educational discourses related to teacher education practicums and early childhood education.

The data selected from the pre-service teachers and the supervising teachers who participated in the research project reported above demonstrated the complex interplay of multiple perspectives and interests. Cardini's (2006) insistence that "struggle and dissent are discussible and transformable issues" (p. 412) provided a robust conceptual lens for highlighting both commonalities and convergences within and between the experiences of the two groups of participants. Seen as an integral part of a process of continuous improvement and a key element of participatory action research, the stakeholder feedback provided by both groups can contribute powerfully and sustainably to an ongoing journey of collaborative professional learning on the part of all stakeholder groups.

More widely, the paper has shown that the relationship between partnership and learning is situated, complex and often contested. Partnerships can be the sites of marginalisation and oppression; they can also be the vehicles of empowerment and transformation. As Cardini (2006) noted, "It is clear that future public policies must draw upon participatory and cooperative practices as well as increasing coordination between different spheres. Partnerships could play a very significant role in encouraging such practices" (p. 412). Yet as she also remarked, "...to challenge

current social organization by promoting more progressive relationships, the theoretical definition of partnership has to recognize the issue of power...” (p. 412). This account of one teacher education pilot study program for first year early childhood education students at an Australian regional university has exhibited both sides of this significant contemporary educational dualism.

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