

AN INNOVATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

Until 1990, apart from a few graduate diploma courses in such things as Guidance Counselling and Special Education, the University of Auckland's (UOA) Department of Education's (now the School of Education) emphasis had been on education as a "liberal arts" discipline, contributing to Bachelor and Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees, rather than in terms of the professional preparation/development of teachers. In 1990, the inception of a four-year Bachelor of Education degree offered jointly with the Auckland College of Education (ACE) and the establishment of a Masters of Education degree, began a shift in emphasis. By 1996 we were offering a Doctorate in Education (EdD), the MEd incorporated eight specialty programmes designed to meet specific professional needs, specialist Diploma courses catering for professional education had increased to nine, and as well as the general BEd for primary teacher trainees, specialist BEds in Music and Science were available.

The innovatory programmes discussed in this paper were not generated just from within this general shift of emphasis to professional education, however. By 1995 a serious (nation-wide but most significantly in Auckland) shortage of teachers, particularly at the primary level, was becoming obvious. The government response was to seek ways 'to reduce barriers to teacher supply' (Jesson 1996). Proposals centred on increasing the numbers of teachers being trained by funding providers other than Colleges of Education; and to quicken the process of providing new teachers by funding compressed courses in primary teacher education. In November, 1995, the Minister of Education described the strategies developed as able 'to remove any barriers to new providers' and encouraging 'innovation and diversity in teacher education provision' (ibid) in order to rapidly increase the pool of teachers. So funding for teacher education places increased and new providers, for example polytechnics, were

encouraged to bid for teacher education funding for compressed primary and secondary courses. Also towards the end of 1995, the ACE informed the UOA of its intention to progressively withdraw its students from our joint BEd after 1996. This announcement, and the consequent loss of a significant proportion of our undergraduate student numbers and the Equivalent Full-Time Student (EFTS) funding that follows them, had serious implications for the School of Education.

In deciding on the "innovative" courses offered this year the School of Education was not only concerned to replace some of the EFTS lost as a consequence of the ACE's decision, however. It was also mindful of the UOA strategic planning position for the University to make the most of its premiere status among New Zealand universities by moving in the direction of becoming more of a graduate university, by increasing graduate/post-graduate courses and students.

We were aware of the fact that we were, to an extent, playing into the hands of a government whose policies many of us were highly critical of; who under the influence of economic rationalism present education as a technocratic process, a branch of economic policy rather than a mix of social, cultural and economic policy; whose own restructurings had (perhaps deliberately) created a teacher shortage crisis which enabled them to promote potentially cheaper teacher education courses that could eventually lead to the deprofessionalisation of teachers. We were familiar with developments elsewhere (USA, UK, Australia) which aimed at reducing the costs of teacher training through competition between institutions, reductions in the length and/or intensity of courses and moves towards school-based "apprentice" type programmes, and the critiques of those developments.

But we were also aware of the possibilities for teacher education in New Zealand and especially in Auckland. While generally sympathetic to schools and teachers (especially given the attacks of politicians, media etc), we knew enough about what was happening in schools to recognise that many groups of students, most notably Maori and

Pacific Island students, were not experiencing the best possible teaching and learning environments. We were concerned to offer teacher education programmes that would enhance the quality and uphold the social and cultural aspects of teaching and learning. Our programmes also reflect the belief that the best means of defending and promoting the profession of teaching, in a context which is highly critical of schools and teachers, is to work in partnership with schools and teachers.

What follows is a brief descriptive account of the "special features" that characterise the two graduate diploma courses (primary and secondary) offered, each of which compresses a three-semester programme into one calendar year based on the school year - from late January until mid-December. For the purposes of this paper, the fourth special feature - social support - is described in terms of that offered the Pasifika students undertaking the courses .

The Schools Consortium

The Schools Consortium is a partnership between the UOA and selected schools with a common interest in initial teacher education, which recognises the unique contribution of each institution to shared responsibility for student teachers. It aims to educate teachers who understand current educational issues and the theoretical basis of effective teaching, and can apply this understanding in practical ways

Prior to the establishment of the consortium, 400 schools were invited to send a representative to a meeting at which the intended programmes were explained and 200 schools expressed interest in them. The criteria by which the 29 schools eventually selected to participate in the consortium were chosen included a range of geographic and socio-economic locations, a variety of types of school (eg state, integrated, private), the quality of their programmes and the availability of a staff member who was willing and able to act as mentor.

Trained Mentors

The UOA model of teacher education highlights the crucial role of mentors in sharing the task of educating student teachers and implementing the university/school partnership. The mentor:

- co-ordinates the school-based practicum component and supports the associate teachers involved;

- liaises with university paper co-ordinators and the course director and supports school-based research involving the University;

- is a professional “buddy” and support person for the student teachers and assesses the student teachers’ professional practice.

Mentors are assumed to already be “expert teachers”. However, to become an accredited mentor for the UOA teacher education programme, successful completion of two Masters or Diploma of Teacher Education papers is required. Three themes run through the two papers:

- a pedagogy theme which enables mentors to assist students to be explicit about the theoretical basis of their approaches to teaching;

- an assessment theme in which mentors and University staff jointly develop a common set of criteria by which to assess student teachers; and

- the theme of the mentoring process itself which provides mentors with the skills to both support students and challenge them, and to reflect on their own mentoring practice.

The content of the core papers is closely inter-related in ways which demonstrate the dual role of the mentor as both supporter of student

development and assessor of that development. Their focus on theories of both effective teaching and effective mentoring is aimed at resolving the potential conflict in this dual role.

Hands-on Training: The Practicum

Described as 'the core' of the diploma courses, what distinguishes the practicum of the University of Auckland programmes from those traditionally offered through the Colleges of Education (in addition to the role of the school-based mentor) is the extent of time spent in the schools. For those undertaking the primary diploma, three days a week are spent in schools throughout the four-term year with a separate placement each term; the first three placements cover a range of schools and class levels and the fourth is according to the student's choice of school-type and class level. Secondary diploma students spend four days a week in school for the first three terms, covering a range of schools over three placements. The aims of the practicum are listed as follows:

- To integrate theory and practice, putting theory into practice and illuminating practice with theory

- To provide opportunities for student teachers to develop skills in reflective practice

- To provide classroom, school and community contexts for student teacher learning

- To involve schools in a partnership approach to the development of the next generation of teachers

- To provide a range of models of good teaching practice

- For student teachers to have the opportunity to acquire classroom competency

Social Support : Pasifika Students

The main assumption upon which this model of teacher education rests is that teachers are more than transmitters of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. This model seeks to overcome the traditional theory/practice split by recognising two things : that teaching practice is itself a theory-driven enterprise; and that quality teacher education involves a continual dialogue between the theory that is implicit in teachers' practice, and those more formal theories that provide resources for the understanding and critique of that practice. The claim to quality of this model of teacher education rests on the important premise that the continual dialogue between theory and practice can ultimately shape and transform both. The success and effectiveness of this process relies heavily on the relationships that students develop in the first instance with their mentors, and to a lesser extent their school-based associate teachers and university-based lecturers.

The mentor/student relationship is crucial. Mentors are expected to act as guides, philosophers, and friends. In the role of "guide" a mentor is required to place her/his professional wisdom, experience, understanding and technique at the disposal of the teacher trainee. As a "philosopher", the mentor, in a mutually enlightening way, enables the trainees to reflect increasingly on their practice and extend their knowledge of teaching. Finally, as "friend", the mentor is to take on the role of sympathetic critic who, while fully supportive and sympathetic to the nature of the demands on the trainees, represents and ensures the maintenance of professional standards and expectations.

In practice, a significant factor that can affect some trainees' effective participation in all aspects of our programme is that of ethnic and cultural difference. This has had the potential for "arresting" the continual dialogue between theory and practice upon which this model of teacher education rests. Metge and Kinloch (1984) described the potential outcomes of communication within a cross-cultural context as 'talking past each other' ... and given the ethnic

composition of our students (a combination of pakeha , Pacific Islands, Chinese, Indo-Fijian, Indian, Maori and so on) in a situation where mentors, associate teachers and university lecturers are predominantly pakeha, this has indeed been a real “risk”.

While mentors and associate teachers are anxious to help and support students, they anticipate that students will articulate their needs and concerns and have been concerned at the apparently reticent, subdued attitudes of several students which has made engaging in critical dialogue difficult. An example of one such student was a young Samoan woman with a Masters degree and previous teaching experience. From her perspective, her palagi mentor was a teaching expert , an experienced authority to be respected. For this student, that respect translated itself into passive, submissive obedience. She waited for instructions – her mentor waited for questions. She feared appearing inadequate and was therefore reluctant to take “risks” (thereby avoiding creativity and innovation in her teaching), her mentor wanted a degree of “trial and error” in order to have something of substance to “dialogue” about. Developing the roles of guide, philosopher and friend was jeopardised for a period of time because close, personalised interactions were hindered by certain culturally-based differences in expectations.

In anticipation of some of these challenges, and with a certain degree of foresight, our programme has in place an additional mentor for Pasifika students, a School of Education faculty member who is herself Pasifika. This is someone who is able to more effectively take on the roles of guide, philosopher and friend to such students because she can empathise with the students concerned, and has the personal and professional skills to bridge the unforeseen “gaps” that a culturally and ethnically textured context can hold. An accurate way to describe the relationship that such a mentor can develop is through the Maori concept of *tuakana/teina* . This relates to the relationship wherein older siblings teach younger siblings, and “walk” them through important learning experiences, drawing on rapport, empathy, knowledge and skills that they have gained through similar experiences. An ideal Pasifika term to identify the role, is *so’otaga* – a

bridge, between ethnic and cultural minority students and the different aspects of the predominantly pakeha or palāgi course. As *so'otaga*, this mentor takes responsibility for the following:

the recruitment and retention of Pasifika students

mediation between students, associate teachers, mentors, lecturers and the course Director

support visits to school (formal and informal)

developing and maintaining a mutual support group

collaboration in heightening awareness of Pasifika perspectives of schooling and education

professional and personal support to Pasifika students

As has already been stated, effective as well as continuous dialogue between theory and practice relies heavily on the interactions between students, their mentors, associate teachers and lecturers. These relationships can be unintentionally constrained by the dynamics of cross-cultural communication - or, more precisely, culturally-based miscommunication and misunderstanding. This can lead to distress and frustration, not to mention a sense of failure that could cripple individual performance in any of the roles involved. Hence the need for additional "bridges" of social and professional support.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, all those involved in the courses described here were generally positive about both their conception and implementation - consortium schools in particular were appreciative of their inclusion in the teacher education project and the nature of the professional relationships developed through the university/school collaboration. Also highlighted as a significantly positive feature of our

programmes has been the quality of provision for Maori and Pasifika students. However, despite these positive aspects of the programmes, many School of Education faculty continue to express disquiet about the "market discourse" which the university employs in both justifying and promoting the move into professional teacher education programmes. We are also mindful of the need to focus on programmes that complement rather than compete with those of our College of Education colleagues. Plans for the immediate future, therefore, revolve around expanding the numbers involved in the graduate programmes, and developing the means by which teacher education can more adequately address the needs of Maori and Pasifika students in New Zealand schools.

References

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