How Ready Are You? A Preliminary Investigation Into the Workplace Readiness of Final-Year Education Students at a Regional University

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One criticism of teacher-training programs is that they do not sufficiently prepare graduating teachers for the transition between higher education and the demands and practicalities of classroom teaching. This lack of workplace readiness or 'teacher ready' status of graduates has been attributed to insufficient pre-service practical experience and the failure of training programs to adequately coach pre-service teachers in the delivery of quality pedagogy (Nelson, 2005). On the other hand, the Australian Council of Deans of Education (2005, p. 3) argues that teacher-training programs should provide foundational knowledge and skills, with the onus on the profession to build on these foundations and elevate the teacher 'to the point of full and complete practitioner-readiness'. Central Queensland University has tried to respond to these concerns through the introduction of the Bachelor of Learning Management. This paper reports on a preliminary investigation into the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program in preparing graduates and enabling workplace readiness. Towards the end of 2005 a cohort of final year students was asked to identify their levels of confidence in the transition from university to work; and how the cohort could have been better prepared. It is intended that the issues identified will be translated into recommendations for future program improvements.

The workplace readiness of graduating teachers is currently under scrutiny, and a perceived failure of training programs to adequately prepare graduates is driving calls for program reform (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2005; Donnelly, 2004; Rural Education Forum Australia, 2005; Education & Training Committee, 2005). Workplace readiness in this context can be defined as a graduate's ability to successfully operate 'within the characteristics of current schooling practice' (Lynch, 2004, p. 41). In response to the perceived low levels of graduates' workplace readiness, the federal government has established an inquiry into national teaching standards and committed $10 million towards the establishment of a National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL). A major brief of the institute is the establishment of 'nationally consistent standards for teachers and principals' (Nelson, 2005, p. 12). A number of issues are identified as paramount in a shift towards nationally consistent standards and structural reform of Australian teacher-training programs. These include concerns about stakeholder perceptions of the quality and relevance of current teacher-training programs; the focus of programs on practical teaching preparation; and the responsibility of the profession in preparing practitioners for work in the classroom. For example, the Victorian Government's

Education and Training Committee argues that there is considerable dissatisfaction on the part of key stakeholders (industry, school principals, experienced teachers, parents and students) regarding the quality and relevance of pre-service teacher training and the workplace-ready status of new teachers (Victorian Education and Training Committee, 2005). The committee argues that 'current arrangements are both unsuitable and unsustainable' and recommends a stronger focus on practical classroom teaching and a move away from educational theory (Victorian Education and Training Committee, 2005, p. 46). This view is challenged by the Australian Council of Deans of Education that argues it is the responsibility of the profession to elevate the teacher 'to the point of full and complete practitioner-readiness' (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2005, p. 3). In other words, according to the council, to narrow the focus of teacher-training programs to classroom practice and the instrumental aspects of teaching would be to overlook the importance of foundational disciplines, such as psychology and sociology (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2005).

Hargreaves (2003) points out, however, that despite the advent of the knowledge society and the impact of technology, there have been limited changes in models of teacher-training programs in Australia. Smith (2000) and Tom (1997) agree that apart from some modifications to enhance program efficiency, teacher-training programs have changed little since their establishment in the 1960s when teachers were elevated to professional status and teacher training became 'degree worthy' (Lynch, 2004). Course work remains the major component of the contemporary pre-service teaching program. It is typically prepared by education faculty staff and delivered to students through a lecture and tutorial mode and 'organised around the same professional knowledge domains as attributed to the 1960s' (Lynch, 2004,

p. 31). Hargreaves (2001) refers to a pre-professional model of teacher education where pedagogical practice is predominantly learnt through transmission teaching or a brief period of apprenticeship with experienced teachers during practical placements. Hargreaves (2003) argues that this is unsustainable and totally inadequate for teachers in the knowledge society where teaching is technically more complex and wide-ranging than it has ever been. He urges a move away from the familiar model of professional practice where much teaching and many activities are 'no more than a face-saving disguise for pedagogic impotence' (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 17) to workplace-ready teachers who have knowledge and understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, behaviour management, state and national education policies, child protection issues and emotional intelligence (Hargreaves, 2003; Fullan, 2003; Nelson, 2005; Rural Education Forum Australia, 2005).

The Bachelor of Learning Management

The model of teacher training introduced at Central Queensland University in 2001 is an attempt to move away from the pre-professional model of teacher education with its focus on 'what students know, rather than how they use that knowledge' (Seltzer & Bentley, 1999, p. 9). The Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) attempts to offer a different program of teacher education from those based on the assumption that: 'theoretical underpinnings, provided through "on-campus work", are automatically translated by student teachers into actionable sequences during fieldwork' (Invargson, 2005; Korthagen, 2001; Smith, 2000; Tom, 1997). The BLM attempts to provide a *pedagogic scaffold* that 'bridges the "theory/practice" divide and which articulates for the novice, what good pedagogic activity actually is' (Lynch, 2003).

The primary aim, therefore, of the program is to prepare future teachers or learning managers to have the foundational knowledge, as well as the requisite skills, techniques and pedagogical strategies necessary to be able to teach, upon graduation. The implications of this approach are that the program relies on partnership arrangements with employers and schools, attempts to bridge the theory-practice gap by emphasising 'from illumination to performativity', includes practical placement experiences where students have to 'show' their understanding and application of 'pedagogical strategy' knowledge, and relies on in-school supervisors and the administrators who have a good knowledge of pedagogical strategies (Smith, 2004).

This Study

Motivated by concerns about the effectiveness of the BLM in preparing workplace-ready graduates we decided to ask students about their levels of confidence and how the program had helped to prepare them for the transition to work. In June 2005 a cohort of final-year students were approached to participate in interview and focus group discussions concerned with their fast approaching transition from pre-service teacher training to (hopefully) employment as a teacher or learning manager. All final-year students enrolled in the course EDED11399 Professional Knowledge & Practice on the Rockhampton campus were invited to participate. The invitation was extended via e-mail and a verbal invitation during lectures and tutorials. This course was targeted because it is one of a suite of courses which focus on best teaching practice and which 'provide student learning managers with "tools" for designing and delivering learning strategies to achieve student-learning outcomes in schools and other learning sites' (Central Queensland University, 2005). Students were informed of the voluntary nature of the project and of the assured anonymity

of participants (pseudonyms were used and any identifying details removed from the transcripts). Those who responded were given an information sheet and asked to complete an informed consent form.

Of the seven students who agreed to participate all were enrolled in the faculty's Graduate Entry Program. This is currently a two-year, accelerated program, available to candidates who satisfy academic prerequisites. As with the BLM the Graduate Entry Program is intended as a futures-oriented degree that is dedicated to the graduation of 'classroom-ready' teachers who are experts in 'learning' and its management. The program was developed in partnership with teachers and principals and provides students with opportunities to teach in a range of settings and spend a minimum of 80 days of assessed fieldwork with a practising teacher. Throughout their studies, students are supported by learning managers who are experienced teachers trained to mentor pre-service teachers.

Semistructured interview and focus-group discussion were chosen as data-gathering techniques in this study because they could help provide an authentic insight into the way the participants understand and engage with the world (Silverman, 1993). Also the focus group discussion provided an opportunity to discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews and clarify our interpretations. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 302) call this 'peer debriefing' as it helps explore aspects of the inquiry that 'might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind'. The interviews were semistructured and questions included:

1. Does the BLM program help you to do teaching rather than thinking about it?

2. When you are in classrooms, do you find that the program has prepared you to do the teaching that is required?

3. What aspects of the program have helped you to develop confidence?

Table 1

Summary of Interview Data

1. Does the *program* help you to do teaching rather than thinking about it?
   YES: pracs, early introduction to schools (e.g., arts, hpe); feedback from prac teachers; strategies to use in classroom.
   NO: draw on own background and prior knowledge and prac teachers; juggling theory and prac; grad students issues regarding length and structure of program; 'How is it all connected?'

2. When you are in classrooms, do you find that the program has prepared you to do the teaching that is required?
   YES: curriculum helps you to do teaching; dimensions of learning (Marzano et al., 1988) could be useful (e.g., setting up classroom and beginning teachers); exposure to classroom; ideas; behaviour management; numeracy; ADHD.
   NO: repetition; gaps; dimensions of learning general k/ledge and common sense; assessment; unit planning; literacy; more hands on.

3. What aspects of the program have helped you to develop confidence?
   Structure; a bit of everything; being with a group; social support; sharing resources and ideas (e.g., understanding assignments); prac support from uni staff; portal task; presentations (increased anxiety about what I don't know); need more role play.

4. What could have been included in the program to better prepare you for the transition to work in the classroom?
   POSITIVES: 'I've definitely got out of the program what I needed to'; 'I've been happy'; 'I'm very happy with it';'Overall, I can take away a lot'; behaviour management; numeracy — concrete and specific; science; staff in BLM; pracs.
   NEGATIVES: assessment; 'I'm not up with assessment'; behaviour management; 'bits and pieces'; 'maybe some extraneous stuff'; gifted students — not prepared for them; portfolios; how to apply for jobs: unit planning; too much variety; needs more; 'airy fairy'; some courses could be condensed: too much PP, DoL; too many models.

4. What could have been included in the program to better prepare you for the transition to work in the classroom?

Table 1 provides a summary of the interview data.

Discussion

How Ready Are You?

Data reported in the previous section show that participants identified a range of issues related to their levels of confidence and ways that they could have been better prepared. From these data, themes were identified and these were presented to the focus group for further discussion. The main themes related to practical experience and theoretical knowledge. The issues raised in relation to levels of confidence and practical experience included opportu-nities that the program provided to teach in a range of learning settings, work in groups, and learn practical strategies for application in the classroom. The main issues raised in relation to theoretical knowledge and levels of confidence were assessment, unit planning, literacy, behaviour management, and working with diverse students. All of these issues are worth further investigation; however, this paper focuses on opportunities to teach in a range of learning settings, working in groups, behaviour management, and assessment.

Opportunities to Teach in a Range of Learning Settings

Participants identified their early introduction to learning sites and their subsequent experience in the site as salient features in the program. This aligns with the principles

underlying the incorporation of extended periods of practical work in the BLM. Typical of the participants' comments was: 'It was the second week and I was, like, "ahh, I'm out in the schools already"'. It was particularly in hindsight that the value of the on-site experience became clear: 'really worthwhile in hindsight; frightening at the time'. The literature shows these to be typical responses for many of today's students for whom practicum is an extremely stressful time as they struggle to deal with everyday issues such as planning, pedagogy and classroom management (Beck & Kornik, 2000; Veal & Rikard, 1998; Wideen). The value of on-site experience is strongly endorsed by Australian pre-service teachers, with 83.7% of respondents in a 2005 pilot survey rating the 'value of the practicum' highly (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). When asked to indicate the most worthwhile aspects of the experience, students mentioned behaviour management techniques, lesson planning and out-of-class activities, such as sports days and school camps. The major drawback to the early introduction to learning sites was the lack of preparation that students received; 'we were literally [sic] thrown in the deep end'; the class cohort 'pretty much halved after the first week in schools'.

Working in Groups

Working in groups is an integral part of assessment tasks across the BLM program. Students across all year levels are expected to develop the skills to work effectively in groups on tasks that often culminate in an oral presentation. One respondent explained during interview that 'getting out in front of [the university] class' had helped increase his confidence. He explained 'I'd never been a public speaker ... now it doesn't worry me as much'. Another interviewee agreed '... presentations are a good chance to speak in front of groups'; she pointed out that 'presentations should be like speaking to a class' but that not enough students used this

opportunity to its full advantage. Other respondents commented on the usefulness of learning to plan and research together. However, some participants in the focus-group discussion were surprised that working in groups emerged as an aspect of the training program that helped develop confidence. The focus-group discussion highlighted pitfalls of group work such as inequitable workload distribution and difficult group dynamics. Comments included 'We soon learnt to choose [group members] ... chose very wisely' and 'I had to basically do most of the assignment'. Another response was that group work can 'leave a lot of people on the outer'. These responses are congruent with findings of a recent study of first-year students in the BLM who were asked to provide feedback on a collaborative learning task (Peach, Grainger, Campbell, & Aldred, 2005). Respondents also identified value in group work but raised concerns about parity in terms of student workload and mark allocation. To maximise the benefits of group work Finkelstein (1984, as cited in Braxton et al., 2000) argues that teaching staff must clearly communicate the value of collaborative learning to students and provide strong guidance with the task and group process. Mu and Gnyawali (2003) add that conflict in group work is inevitable and the role of teaching staff is critical in guiding and facilitating the process.

Behaviour Management

Rogers (1997) shows the importance of professional development and ongoing regular in-service for staff in achieving the balance of 'prevention and correction; short- and long-term discipline; correction and encouragement; and repairing and rebuilding strained relationships' which comprise effective classroom management (Rogers, 1997, p. 47). Positive behaviour management is based upon fundamental rights and responsibilities. Teachers need to be trained to teach both rights and responsibilities and to manage their teaching

within an environment that emphasises both (Rogers, 1997). Participants reported varying levels of confidence regarding classroom management. 'I'm comfortable with that' was one response; however, other students commented that they did not believe they had learnt much through the program: 'not much in class'; 'in one of the subjects'; 'we were told to read a book [in one subject]'. The management of diverse students was another problematic issue; 'how do you cater for gifted students' and 'not just give them something extra to go on with'? The literature shows that these are common feelings among pre-service and beginning teachers whose reports of their practical experiences often reveal that they feel unprepared for teaching (Loughran, Brown, & Doecke, 2001).

Assessment

Participants referred to their school experience when discussing how the program had helped prepare them for assessing students. Two students had observed assessment systems that their supervising teachers used to record grades and one spent time going over class reports with his supervising teacher. Others were not sure of what assessment processes were in place and commented that assessment is 'maybe not done particularly well in schools', 'I didn't see that much in schools', and 'assessment is kept in the background'. Participants were not at all confident about knowing which assessment strategies they would use in their classes, giving such responses as: we'll 'wing it', 'talk to other first year teachers', and form professional teams. These responses stand in contrast to recommendations in the literature about the importance of teachers being skilled in formative assessment processes. Black and Wiliam (1998) put forward a body of firm evidence that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that development of it produces important, and often substantial, learning gains. The key to effective learning is 'to find ways to help pupils restructure

their knowledge to build in new and more powerful ideas' (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2002, p. 14); the ways put forward by the authors are effective formative assessment strategies. These and other findings in the literature (Loughran, & Russell, 1997; Shepard, 1995) would seem to suggest that the participants are not sufficiently prepared to implement effective formative assessment strategies in the classroom. This is also reflected in their lack of confidence in the area.

Conclusion

This study is significant because the transition of pre-service teachers into the workforce is an under-researched and poorly documented field of study. That is, the pre-service preparation that teachers receive and the realities of their professional experiences is an area 'as unstudied today — as superficially discussed today — as in previous decades' (Sarason, Davidson, & Blatt, 1986, p. xiv). The focus of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program in preparing them and enabling workplace readiness. In particular, the study aimed to identify students' levels of confidence in the transition from university to work; and how they could have been better prepared.

Interviewees all spoke positively about their early introduction into the schools and the subsequent on-site experience. They acknowledged that it was difficult and 'frightening' at times, but believed that it had made them more confident and ready to cross the border into the workplace. Reponses were mixed when participants were asked to reflect upon how much they could take from the on-campus subjects of the program to the classroom. However, the participants were reasonably confident that the program had prepared them for classroom practice, which suggests that the partnership model of the BLM goes some way at least towards overcoming the discrepancy between theory and

practice that occurs when university-based pre-teacher education is disconnected from schools (Driscoll, Benson, & Livneh, 1994). This would suggest that, while the aim of the BLM program in enabling workplace readiness of graduates is to emphasise pedagogy or the *how* to teach, participants valued the curriculum subjects which focus on the *what* to teach. Overall, this study has identified that students in this cohort have high levels of confidence about the transition from university to work. All interviewees rated their level of workplace readiness as 8/10 or above and the statement, 'I've definitely got out of the program what I needed to', typifies the students' responses. Further to this study, research will be carried out to explore the role of a pedagogical framework in a teacher-training program in enabling workplace readiness.

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