6. Creativity outside convention: how a saturation placement can develop 21st century holistic teachers

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Summary

Creativity outside convention discusses an Excellence and Enjoyment driven theme week school placement for primary postgraduate students at St. Martin's College that took place in March 2005. Within this paper we evaluate the contribution made to the education of the student teachers and highlight benefits and areas to improve from the viewpoints of all the main stakeholders: students, teachers, college tutors and children. We also explore its success in relation to a key aim of asking the students to plan and teach in collaboration with each other whilst allowing curriculum subjects to collaborate with each other under a freedom of removed assessment constraints. Excellence and Enjoyment is about allowing the students to be excellent and enjoy the business of teaching. We aimed to facilitate this whilst developing skills of reflection, collaboration and dialogue.

Keywords

Professional dialogue / reflection / professional voice / teacher education / cross curricular / 'excellence and enjoyment' / collaboration / Standards framework.

Context for innovation

The high intensity placement provided opportunities for primary postgraduate students to strengthen links between their learning at school and college by engaging in professional dialogue and reflection. In this way it was hoped that they would be able to combine theory and practice by working in a non-assessed, team teaching context. The 'theory' and 'rationale' was driven by the government's Primary Strategy, Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003), with a focus on meeting individual pupil need and cross-curricular thematic planning as a vehicle for learning. Students were encouraged to enter into a professional dialogue and reflect on practice through collaborative planning and peer review.

Our agenda was to create a context in which students would experience a different way of working. We wanted to give students the opportunity to use the rationale of the Excellence and Enjoyment document (DfES, 2003) to plan topics, which purposively crossed the borders of subjects whilst still teaching key skills. We wanted to create a context for reflection without worry of formal assessment including the scrutiny of meticulous paperwork. The opportunity was there to be creative, take risks, have an idea and run with it. As one teacher commented, 'an opportunity to opt in not opt out'. Perhaps of primary importance was the opportunity for students to find their 'professional' voice and negotiate the established authoritative voice of the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Standards (TTA, 2000) along with the professional dialogue in which they would engage in school. The focus was definitely on developing our students, as reflective practitioners rather than mere technicians, providing opportunities where they could construct their own knowledge through professional dialogue and collaboration and in doing so develop a more holistic approach to teaching.

Rationale for innovation (connecting school based and HEI based learning)

The Primary National Strategy, Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003) was a key driver for the saturation placement enabling us to find 'space' within the school context for students to engage with the professional context in order to develop both personally and professionally. In our current placement model, there seemed to be little time for lifting one's head above the surface of the water to stop, reflect, think, act and review, so we wanted to provide time for reflection in action, and collaborative dialogue. We also wanted to establish a context where pupil need was not viewed in terms of the subject driven curriculum.

However, developing reflective practitioners through ITT is not perhaps as straightforward as we might at first believe. Although reflection might be considered a more meaningful way to learn for experienced teachers, McIntyre (1992) argued that student teachers who are at an early stage in their teaching career can only really reflect on the 'technical' aspects of teaching, such as maintaining classroom order or gaining children's attention. Only at a later stage in training did he feel students could articulate their own criteria and evaluate and develop their own practice accordingly. A more recent concern has been that the model of teacher education we have at present focuses only on reflection in terms of classroom practice (Reynolds and Salter, 1998; Turner-Bisset, 1999). Reynolds and Salter (1998) argue that if reflection is just focused on teaching techniques and problem solving in the classroom, it then neglects the wider importance of knowledge, understanding and values in promoting successful teaching. Although the present Standards (TTA, 2002) have given 'professional values' a higher profile, it is still predominantly focused on teaching skills.

Burton and Povey (in Hustler, McIntyre, 1996) apply McIntyre's (1992) argument to postgraduate programmes and suggest that the interrogation of theories in relation to practice cannot have high priority on a PGCE course due to the pressurised environment and the time constraints. They suggest that due to their limited experience, students do not have anything to reflect on, so how can they become reflective teachers? They query:

> how much it is possible to develop a reflective practitioner through a short course of teacher education…

With this in mind we wanted to give the students opportunity to reflect as honestly and as widely as possible on their own teaching. Whilst we acknowledged that the current ITT framework might have imposed a particular kind of reflection on our students, (Reynolds and Salters, 1998), we also hoped that by using Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003) as the focus for the placement, the students might be more creative in their reflection. We also hoped by moving out of their comfort zone of the prescribed framework of literacy and numeracy students would be placed in a position where knowledge could only be gained through discussion and negotiation.

Underlying this view was the notion that the model of 'competency' outlined by the Standards (TTA, 2002) allows the students opportunity to be 'mediocre' and still pass. Eraut, in Burton and Povey (in Hustler, McIntyre, 1996) redefines competency and states that in today's climate teachers need to be able to stand back from their existing practice and to keep it under critical review.

This whole concept of reflection and competency as outlined above means that the nature of knowledge needs to be questioned. The pedagogic content knowledge that is required to meet the Standards (TTA, 2002) could be viewed as embedded in a transmissive model of teaching, defined predominantly in terms of technical competency only (Turner-Bisset, 1999). Knowledge needs to be more fluid and take into account the different experiences, beliefs and values that both students and pupils bring to the classroom context. Thus, here lies the tension. Clearly we must be 'compliant' with the Standards (TTA, 2002) and enable students to demonstrate competencies so that they can gain their Qualified Teacher Status, on the other hand what value do we place upon the wider definition of pedagogic content knowledge which takes account of existing knowledge, beliefs and experiences and is constructed by teachers and students through professional dialogue and practice in school settings?

In order to develop reflection on practice, the notion of collaboration and dialogue between students and

teachers was central to planning the placement in terms of a 'themed' week and giving the children opportunity to learn and practise cross-curricular skills. Mercer (1995) argues that the most effective way to evaluate and revise your own understanding is through debate and dialogue. He uses the example of Piaget's notion of 'cognitive conflict' which enables children to decentre, to become sensitive to other perspectives by listening and reflecting on these in relation to their own ideas. Thus opportunities for 'cognitive restructuring' and 'debate and dialogue' (Mercier 1995) were provided on the placement by placing groups of students in unfamiliar team planning and teaching settings forcing them to share ideas in relation to developing thematic learning experiences for the children. In this sense the creation of knowledge was, 'not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people' (Isaacs in Leong, 1999).

Overview of the placement

The one-week placement placed approximately two hundred postgraduate students in eight contrasting primary schools, in the North West of England. College tutors and teachers from participating schools decided on themes appropriate for cross-curricular planning for the week's placement. Students were briefed at college regarding the purpose of and organisational aspects of the placement and were given inputs on the rationale behind the Primary Strategy and cross-curricular planning. They were also briefed on the informal nature of assessment through peer observation.

Two weeks prior to the placement, students met with teachers within schools to discuss and plan in relation to the suggested themes. Teachers worked with the students to support the initial planning by constructing mind maps which were then developed into appropriate and detailed lesson plans using either college or school based planning proformas. Students worked in groups of three to four per class.

During the placement students became responsible for running the theme week, maximising the opportunities for cross-curricular links. Teachers took on a variety of roles; some withdrew from the class completely allowing the students to have total autonomy, whilst others worked along side them in the classroom as part of the teaching team. All teachers met with students at various times during the week to pick up on issues and to help them reflect on the teaching experience, often through seminars at the end of the day. Finally the students were asked to complete at least two peer reviews of another student teacher working in the class, ideally at the beginning and towards the end of the week.

Student and school evaluations

Students and school evaluations highlighted a number of similar comments regarding the placement and these are summarised below. On the whole teachers felt that students had drawn on each other's strengths and been able to experience cross-curricular work in a very practical and intense way. Teachers felt that there had been increased collaboration between staff and students as well as between students themselves. They also felt that the majority of lessons were practical and gave children a chance to try things out for themselves and that children had experienced a variety of teaching styles:

> With four student teachers and class teacher we were able to support and aid the children on a much greater scale, which we saw the benefits of in terms of the work produced. (SCH G)

Some students felt that they had a chance to discuss a government initiative and reflect upon the thinking behind Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003) and be involved in translating this is to practical experience in the classroom:

> Actually doing it and seeing the results the children thoroughly enjoyed it (especially showing the rest of the school) highlights it s benefits. Just reading about it isn't enough. (SCH E).

They were pleased to see how easy it was to link subjects through a theme and thought this way of teaching definitely had a place in the curriculum:

> This week has been such a roaring success that rather than feel apathetic towards another guidance document, I strongly believe in this method now and feel the need to incorporate it in my future teaching! (SCH E)

Students cited a range of advantages in relation to cross curricular planning; many felt that this way of working was more interesting, engaging and fun for the children. They liked the way they could move away from distinct blocks and schemes of work and become more creative. Some even felt they could fit more in:

> Cross curricular planning not only creates interest but also provides opportunities to get the most use of available time so an interesting approach towards targeted learning. (SCH G)

Many students felt children enjoyed this way of working and tended to study more in depth and become more focused as they can see the point of their work and as a result seemed to remember more. They too felt they were able to develop their knowledge and have a better understanding:

> Focuses thinking and encourages children to view their knowledge and understanding of the world in a more holistic way. (SCH F).

Because the placement was not assessed in the conventional way, they felt they could take risks try out different kinds of organisation and groupings:

> I enjoyed the freedom to do my own planning and use my own ideas without sticking so rigidly to NLS and NNS. (SCH E)

They felt the placement gave them an opportunity to try out activities they wouldn't do on their own and they found they could really focus on non-core subjects, developing cross-curricular themes in subjects like art, drama and D&T:

> The freedom to be creative. The feeling of seeing the children enjoying the lessons and the ability to try ideas that otherwise you would not. After the toil of our last placement this had reminded me of the reasons I went into teaching! (SCH G)

Students cited working with their peers and teamwork as one of the most positive aspects of the placement. They liked the fact that they could learn from their peers, that they could share their ideas and reflect upon different approaches to teaching. Many found it a worthwhile experience as they felt they not only received feed back on their own teaching they also learnt from each other's teaching styles. They also commented on the positive aspects of teamwork in that they shared ideas and could work closely with class teachers in a supportive context. They liked the opportunity to collaborate in terms of planning together and in terms of experiencing different teaching styles and ways of organising the classroom and pupils.

Schools were pleased with the way students seemed to collaborate effectively without the pressure of formal assessment. Teachers felt that opportunities to develop professional dialogue and reflection were provided at the end of school in order to support planning for the next day. Some schools commented that where the students actively selected their groups they worked much better together and were more willing to engage in collaborative dialogue and reflection. Where groups were made up from those students left, it was noticeable in the way they found it harder to work together.

Issues raised

There was much evidence from student and school feedback that the experience was 'dynamic, effective and inspirational at all levels'. Schools spoke of the overwhelming success and excitement for all involved and particularly for pupils who wanted it to continue. For

some students it proved to be a definitive moment in their teaching experience in terms of challenging their views and conceptions of cross-curricular planning:

This has shown me a way of teaching that I strongly believe in I have now seen it in practice and planned for it, and would like to see it introduced much more.

Students not only took part in cross-curricular planning, teaching and learning but gained a great deal by doing so, both in terms of developing a wider range of teaching strategies and in terms of challenging their conceptions of planning successful learning experiences across subject boundaries. For many this seemed to be a completely new way of viewing learning and knowledge in the curriculum. By doing so they actively engaged in professional dialogue in reflecting upon the different way of organising learning experiences, other than by subject. This led to greater collaboration with peers not only in terms of verifying their own ideas, but also in terms of listening to the ideas of others and reflecting on them in light of their existing knowledge of the curriculum and children's learning (Mercer, 1995).

Many were forced into a situation where previous notions were challenged; some were able to adjust to this whilst others found this to be a challenge throughout the placement. In this way students were able to construct new knowledge and understanding with the opportunity to test this out within the school environment. They were able to engage in ongoing reflecting and evaluation by assessing the response and learning of the pupils and through discussion with teaching colleagues during the placement. In order to support this approach, students' notions of teaching predominantly through written work were challenged; they had begun to realise that in order to include all pupils, other strategies and learning experiences needed to be developed. This led to a greater proportion of 'lessons' becoming practical based and not necessarily fitting into hourly time slots, again a new experience for the students. Whilst students felt they were in a situation of uncertainty they felt that collaboration and open dialogue with each other and the teachers provided the 'scaffold' in which to try out new ideas. At the end of the placement many reported it as being exhausting yet exhilarating.

The removal of formalised assessment also enabled students and schools to focus on a team approach. Peer review and observation allowed students to engage in more formative assessment through reflection and dialogue.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the overwhelming positive feed back from both schools and students, it is difficult to measure the impact of the placement in terms of developing student's abilities to reflect in any greater depth on wider issues in relation to teaching (McIntyre, 1992). It is also difficult to ascertain whether the existing Standards Framework (TTA, 2002) still constrains reflection on teaching skills only (Reynolds and Salter, 1998). We like to think that challenging students' existing beliefs about curriculum organisation through using a thematic approach to meeting individual pupil need, required students to engage in more reflective, critical and creative thinking about their practice. However evidence for this may not be apparent until they are teaching in their first teaching posts. However, in order to understand why reflection is important, students need to be exposed to alternative and often conflicting ideas about education policy and how it influences practice in the classroom in order to understand why it is necessary to develop their powers of critical reflection during their Initial Teacher Education.

Biographies

Sandra Eady - Before moving into Higher Education, Sandra Eady taught in a range of primary schools in the South of England for thirteen years. She took up her first post in teacher education at Canterbury Christ Church University College, lecturing on undergraduate and postgraduate primary education programmes. She is now a Principal Lecturer at St Martin's College, where she co-ordinates research and scholarly activity for the Education Faculty. Sandra also teaches on the primary PGCE and Masters in Education programmes and is actively involved in Initial Mentor Training with partnership schools.

Adrian Copping - After his training at St. Martin's College, Adrian Copping taught in contrasting schools in Lancashire for seven years. During this time he was actively involved in initial teacher education as lead mentor in a large primary school in Lancaster. Upon return to St. Martin's College as a lecturer, Adrian joined the English and Literacy team where he now teaches on primary postgraduate and undergraduate programmes. Adrian now jointly leads the primary PGCE and is also actively involved in research within the Education faculty.

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