Collaborative University School Partnerships

Research Brief: ARTS in CUSP - 2013

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ARTS IN CUSP RESEARCH PROJECT – 2013

Introduction

Across a number of studies, pre-service teachers have identified their practicum experience as one of the more challenging, positive, and significant aspects of their initial teacher education (ITE) (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, & Le Cornu, 2006; Hoban, 2005; Le Cornu, 2005). Coherence and integration between ITE course work and practicum and the development of a shared understanding of the programme’s vision between school and faculty have been highlighted as essential components of exemplary teacher education programmes (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Le Cornu & Ewing 2008). Ziechner (2010) argues that a non-hierarchical interplay between academic, practitioner, and community expertise creates expanded learning opportunities for prospective teachers that will better prepare them to be successful in enacting complex teaching practices. Bringing practitioner and academic knowledge together has the potential to create, “a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p.152).

The CUSP model

The co-construction and implementation of the Collaborative University School Partnership (CUSP) programme for ITE at the University of Waikato was grounded on Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice. The CUSP programme aimed to establish shared goals and processes between the teacher educator, teacher and pre-service teacher communities to support pre-service teacher learning.

Prior to 2012 student teachers in their first year of the three-year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) programme worked with local schools in two ways - placement where they worked with children for micro-teaching episodes on demand from the Faculty of Education and practicum where they were in schools full time for four weeks and supervised by experienced teachers. There was no connection between the placement and the practicum as these were conducted in different schools. Placement was disruptive to schools as often class programmes need to be altered in order to accommodate Faculty demands.

Faculty of Education lecturers collaborated with teachers from the local Normal Schools¹ to co-construct the CUSP programme implemented in 2012. The CUSP programme involves first-year pre-service teachers being placed in pairs in one classroom for one day a week during the first semester, and in a second classroom for one day a week in the second semester, followed by a three-week practicum in the same school. The semester placements are designed to give pre-service teachers experience of day-to-day classroom programmes and opportunities to carry out required tasks and observations linked to specific papers. They provide opportunities for practical teaching. Associate lecturers in each partner school are expected to co-teach pre-service teachers in the schools for aspects of professional practice, and to oversee the CUSP programme in schools.

¹ Normal schools in New Zealand are primary and intermediate schools mandated by government in the 1970s to have a specific role to support initial teacher education
Background to the research

The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), comprising music, dance, drama and visual arts, is treated as one paper in the first-year primary pre-service teacher programme. After one year of the CUSP programme the Arts lecturers felt a sense of loss of agency in terms of their capacity to contribute to the decisions regarding the structuring of the one-day per week that first-year pre-service teachers spent in schools. Specifically, some of the Arts lecturers considered that school placement experiences for pre-service teachers could not occur until they had sufficient skill and understanding in each arts discipline so held back the placement teaching task until the busy end of the semester. They also found that the placement teaching times available to pre-service teachers were not sufficiently flexible to allow for lecturers to visit, observe and support pre-service teachers, to model practice and to engage in constructive dialogue with associate teachers in the CUSP schools.

This research brief

The ARTS in CUSP research study was a part of the wider CUSP research project that is running alongside the implementation of the CUSP programme (Harlow, Cooper & Cowie, 2013). The CUSP programme has altered the way in which lecturers in the Arts programme (Faculty of Education, University of Waikato) work in schools. This is a report on a small study conducted in the second half of 2013 by members of the Arts team, who expressed an interest in connecting with teachers in schools and working together, to improve the first-year pre-service teachers’ experience of the Arts placement tasks. The collaborative research project aimed to understand the challenges and opportunities for pre-service teachers from the perspective of the university Arts’ lecturers and the associate teachers. School visits and teacher interviews were undertaken by the Arts lecturers to explore current practices, assumptions and attitudes to the Arts disciplines. These aimed to identify strategies lecturers could use in their work as partners with associate teachers and schools to support pre-service teachers to have successful placement experiences. The research also explored the ways in which authentic dialogue could be established that would lead to improved support for everyone concerned.

The ARTS in CUSP study was conducted in the second half of 2013, by six members of the Arts team, who participated as practitioner researchers. The three research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the current teaching/teacher practices, assumptions and attitudes to (one of the Arts disciplines) in the selected CUSP school?
2. What strategies can members of the Arts in CUSP team use in their work as partners with associate teachers in CUSP schools, to support first-year pre-service teachers to have a successful experience in teaching one of the Arts disciplines on placement/practicum?
3. What methods of communication are currently used by school-based and university-based staff involved in Arts placements during TEAL 123, and how dialogic are these?

Data were collected from the six practitioner researchers and from 14 teachers working in six schools. Online responses to a question about preparedness to teach in the Arts disciplines were collected from 70 first-year pre-service teachers.

Key findings

This research enabled the practitioner researchers to understand what was happening in the Arts in schools and to explore ways of building a dialogic relationship with CUSP teachers. They collected interview data from teachers in Phase 1 and worked together with teachers where possible in Phase 2, to find better ways to communicate the Arts placement task requirements to associate teachers.
Lecturers’ understanding what happens in the Arts teaching in schools

The Arts is one of the eight learning areas in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). Within the participating schools they were taught and learnt through whole-school initiatives and through productions, performances and exhibitions. Associate teachers perceived there was a lack of coherence in the Arts programme both in the classroom and across the school. Where there was a strong Arts focus in the classroom, associate teachers considered it was due to their own experience or talents in a particular Arts discipline. In this case, the programmes tended to focus on the current topic – either another learning area focus or as a direct Arts focus linked to inquiry learning. A national focus on literacy and numeracy was seen to be the emphasis in schools and teachers in two schools felt this was marginalising teaching in the Arts, however teachers from two other schools described linking Arts subjects to literacy. In three schools, ‘specialist’ teachers were teaching Arts subjects as part of teacher-release time and electives.

Preparedness of pre-service teachers

Associate teachers in the six project schools believed that pre-service teachers were well prepared to teach their Arts placement lessons, and to provide a teaching model for associate teachers. Associate teachers found that by Semester B the paired placement worked well for small group work in the Arts. They felt the pre-service teachers were confident to take responsibility and that they enjoyed taking the lessons.

After their first-year practicum, more than half of the 2013 cohort of first-year pre-service teachers, responding to a survey, reported being well prepared to teach in the Arts areas. Aspects of their first-year coursework, personal background, a successful placement teaching experience and making use of online resources played a role in this preparedness. Pre-service teacher comments indicated they grew in confidence, experienced ‘Wow!’ moments and learned to be reflective through teaching the Arts placement lessons.

I felt very confident going teaching the dance arts. Because the children don’t normally get to do those sorts of activities, it allows the children to become more involved and excited about the lessons. (First-year pre-service teacher)

I think what we were able to learn in our [on-campus] classes helped, but I really think there needs to be more time spent learning through the Arts disciplines to help us effectively teach through the Arts. I was particularly interested in teaching other core subjects using process drama, but we did not have time to expand upon this aspect of the Arts. I think it would be useful and worthwhile to include more Arts in our [first] year or into the second year. (First-year pre-service teacher)

The Arts placement tasks

During the placement phase of the CUSP programme pre-service teachers were required to teach episodes in the four Arts disciplines; visual art, music-sound art, dance and drama within a specified time frame, as well as carry out requirements for other learning areas. Associate teachers reported there were often too many tasks for one placement day and expressed a preference for more flexible timing and requirements for placement tasks. In response to this comment, the practitioner researchers as a group discussed making tasks smaller to fit in with the school and placement-day timetable, peer teaching in the on-campus class and being more flexible about the placement tasks. Although none of them was able to trial these suggestions within the research framework, their work on revising the placement task requirements may eventually lead to variations and hopefully more flexibility within the tasks.

The Arts placement tasks required the student pair to work with a group of children but that could mean the associate teachers needed to supervise/teach the rest of the class and were not able to give the placement task their full attention and/or offer effective feedback. The associate teachers took their
role in supporting pre-service teachers seriously but tended to focus on teaching skills that could be
generalised such as classroom management rather than as one practitioner researcher put it ‘nuances of
the Art form’. They commented that they needed support in what to observe and how to give feedback
in the Arts subjects. Three of the practitioner researchers designed ways of involving pre-service
teachers in collecting feedback from associate teachers to help them to comment on children’s
learning in the Arts, rather than on children’s behaviour during the placement lesson (an example is
given below):

In one of the Arts areas (drama), the practitioner researcher trialled an observation/feedback sheet in
her on-campus classes during the second part of Semester B, 2013. As part of their planning process,
pre-service teachers were asked to come up with three specific questions to give to their associate
teacher to guide their feedback. The pre-service teachers moved between a set of different ‘stations’,
using the questions to peer and self review their planning before handing it to the practitioner
researcher to check. The pre-service teachers were asked to come up with the questions for the
associate teacher based on what they were most concerned about in their teaching and take these to the
placement lesson. Examples of questions produced were:

- Do I make the transition in and out of role clear?
- Am I able to sustain my teacher in role character convincingly?
- Do I include reflection questions?
- Do I read the story in a clear voice?
- Are my instructions sufficiently detailed?

No formal evaluation was undertaken of the success of these observation/feedback sheets but during
in-class discussions, pre-service teachers said they found them useful to clarify their teaching goals.
The practitioner researcher commented:

> From my point of view, I think the observation/feedback sheets were a really good
innovation because they helped the pre-service teachers focus on themselves as teachers
and what they were doing. They also permitted the pre-service teachers to let associate
teachers know what the intentions of the lesson were from the pre-service teacher point of
view.

Associate teachers viewed pre-service teacher placement tasks as an opportunity for pre-service
teachers to receive valid feedback from the children on their developing teaching skills, and to test out
strategies and sequences in a live setting, for as one associate teacher claimed ‘most of the learning
happens in interacting with children’. Teachers looked forward to the pre-service teachers doing
follow-up Arts activities in the practicum period. This idea was not developed in any way during the
research period.

Communication between the Arts department and the schools

The practitioner researchers felt that they needed to keep the focus on the children’s creativity and
promoted the embodiment of the Arts disciplines by pre-service teachers. They believed that this
enabled the pre-service teachers to lead/motivate children to engage creatively in Arts activities in
their placement tasks, where children benefited through tasks that fostered genuine, open-ended
creativity.

The research revealed that associate teachers did not know what the university-based Arts programme
for pre-service teachers comprised of and teacher comments indicated that ways of communicating
Arts placement requirements were not considered effective. Teachers appreciated information about
placement tasks in advance, but at least one school would prefer weekly communication, rather than
all information being included in a booklet. Face-to-face dialogue was preferred to written information
to help teachers understand the intentions of the Arts programme. An alternative suggested was a
podcast on each Arts placement task. Associate teachers tended to rely on pre-service teachers to keep
them informed about placement tasks, even although the schools were provided with concise written information about placement task requirements.

Teacher professional learning opportunities in the Arts disciplines

Associate teachers were unanimous in their request for professional learning opportunities in the Arts disciplines. Three factors have altered the climate in schools regarding professional learning opportunities in the Arts that might explain this request:

1. The national focus on literacy and numeracy has meant that professional development in the Arts curriculum does not receive high priority.
2. Professional development in the Arts is not a government priority so no in-school professional development is offered free of charge.
3. Arts lecturers no longer visit schools to observe pre-service teachers limiting opportunities for informal conversations about the Arts disciplines.

Recommendations from the research

These recommendations regarding the support that may be offered to teachers in CUSP schools are drawn from the case studies conducted by the research team.

Communication with schools

- Arts department lecturers to work together as a team to simplify, clarify and provide consistency across the Arts disciplinary placement task requirements.
- Lecturers review with schools the best mechanisms to communicate and send documentation related to pre-service teacher placement tasks to schools.

Professional learning opportunities for teachers

- Lecturers visit schools to establish practice-based relationships with CUSP teachers wherever and whenever possible.
- Offer teachers support to teach the Arts within their current programmes, perhaps with a focus on integrating literacy and numeracy goals through Arts pedagogy.
- Make use of the pre-service teachers’ relationships within the CUSP schools to promote the aims and objectives of the Arts programme in schools and give pre-service teachers more responsibility to i) discuss their Arts placement task and the type of feedback they need with their associate teacher well in advance of undertaking the task and ii) model good pedagogy, for example, by positioning the placement task as a first lesson in a unit of work.

The Arts placement tasks

- Consider being more flexible in placement task requirements. For example: revise placement tasks in the Arts to be smaller tasks; scaffold teaching steps; model learning experiences; pre-service teachers teach to peers before teaching children; and prepare video exemplars of teachers working with children.
- Encourage students to discuss their Arts placement task with their associate teacher well in advance of undertaking it to ensure links to the current school programme and check availability of suitable spaces and supervision.
• Include observational guidelines and feedback sheets in pre-service teacher planning requirements.

• Engage pre-service teachers in discussion of their campus experience and placement experience within the six-week module.

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References


