

# Principal's Sabbatical Report

## The Place of the Practicum in Initial Teacher Education

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## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate practices regarding the practicum aspect of Initial Teacher Education. The methodology was mainly anecdotal through interviews with students, Teachers, Lecturers, Associate Teachers and University personnel. Research in New Zealand and overseas consistently rates the practicum by students as the most useful part of their initial education course.

The major finding from the sabbatical was that it wasn't necessarily the training, length or place of the practicum that had the greatest impact, but it was the quality of the practicum and the relationships formed that had the greatest potential for success.

Of the factors affecting quality, feedback from the provider and school and the alignment between the provider and school would seem to have the greatest impact.

A further finding from the study indicated some problems with the place of the practicum in One Year Graduate Courses.

## **Purpose of the Sabbatical**

The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate current practices regarding the Practicum aspect of Initial Teacher Education.

### **Particular Focuses**

- Duration of the practicum
- Timing of the practicum within courses
- Observations and supervision during the practicum
- Number of practica
- Preparation for the practicum, especially:
  - shared understandings between trainee, school and University
  - perceived relationship between theory and practice
- Comparison of practices in New Zealand with some selected places overseas
- Literature search.

## **Background and Rationale**

Four factors influenced the purpose of this sabbatical.

1. In September 2007, the Ministry of Education in NZ conducted a Review of the Initial Teacher Education Policy. The review was entitled, 'Becoming a Teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'.  
A proposition from that review was that, "The knowledge, skills and dispositions required of associate teachers be specified and formally recognised as the basis for determining a teacher's qualification for the role of mentoring student teachers".  
I wanted to examine this proposition.
2. Victoria University in Wellington introduced a change to the length and number of practica in their One Year Graduate courses in 2009. I wanted to gather some feedback on this change.
3. My school, Raroa Normal Intermediate, is a Normal School and has close affiliation with Victoria University and with training teachers. I wanted to examine ways that this association could be strengthened and the quality of the practicum offered at Raroa could be increased.
4. In 2007 the New Zealand Teachers Council developed a set of Graduating Teacher Standards. In 2007 they also started a review to establish a process for the approval, continuing approval and monitoring of Initial Teacher Education programmes. A consultation document for this purpose was distributed in 2009.

## **Activities and Methodology**

Email and interviewing were the main methods for gathering information for this sabbatical study. During the course of the sabbatical, interviews were conducted with:

- Student teachers (both 1 year Graduate course and 4 year course)
- Associate Teachers at both Normal Schools and non Normal Schools in NZ.
- University personnel, including course directors.
- Personnel at the NZ Graduate School of Education, Christchurch.
- Course directors at three Universities in Minneapolis, USA.
- Former Global Student Teacher graduates in the USA.
- Professor John Furlong, Director of the Oxford University Department of Education.

During the course of the sabbatical, I travelled to the USA, in particular Minneapolis, to interview teachers who had been involved in the Global Student Teaching (GST) Scheme operating from the University of Minnesota. I wanted to gather information about their perceptions of completing their final practicum in a foreign (English speaking) country.

Much of the information obtained was anecdotal, with a concentration on perceived alignment of University courses with the practicum.

Interviews with Principals in Christchurch concentrated on the different philosophical approaches between the NZ Graduate School and the University of Canterbury with regards to the practicum.

Considerable time was spent on Literature searches.

## Findings

Beginning Teachers and Training Teachers consistently rate the practicum as the most useful part of educational courses. Surveys conducted in Australia also re-iterate this finding.

Factors affecting the quality (and the potential success) of a practicum:

- Preparation for the Practicum
- Quality of the Associate
- Quality of the feedback given by the Associate
- Quality of the University supervision / observation
- Alignment (perceived) between school and university
- Number of visits and relationships formed
- Partnerships or shared understandings between – school / trainee / associate / university observer
- Timing of the practicum within the course
- Number of practica within the course
- Level of placement and gap between the placements and the school level especially in the one year graduate course.

### Quality of the Associate

Probably the single most important aspect contributing to the success of a practicum, according to the trainees and beginning teachers, is the quality of the Associate and the quality of the feedback given during the practicum.

The New Zealand Review of Initial Teacher Education Policy 'Becoming a Teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' (2007) had some interesting views on how this quality could be achieved. Many of the Reviews of Teacher Training in other countries also make this observation.

### Quality of University Supervision and Observation

The partnership or alignment between the school, trainee, Associate, University and University supervisor also had a major bearing on the success of a practicum. Many trainees often felt this aspect could be better. They were observed often by someone they didn't know. There was little time to get to know them or for the observer to meet the Associate.

Universities I visited in the USA and England had addressed this by forming partnerships with the schools (Normal Schools have been working on this) and / or by contracting

observers / supervisors who form relationships with both the Associate and the Trainee Teacher.

The NZ Graduate School take a different view, they don't form a relationship, but the supervisor knows the Training Teacher very well through very regular observations. This supervisor is known to the training teacher, as they are also responsible for courses at the Graduate school.

### Level of Placement

My findings indicated that the level of placement within the school, and the number of practica, were factors hindering the success of the 1 year Graduate Course at Victoria University, as operated in 2009.

Many of the Associates I spoke to, at a number of schools, were concerned that the first practicum did not prepare trainees well for the second practicum especially if there was a large gap between placement levels e.g. Year 1 / 2 in one placement and Year 7 / 8 in another.

### 1 Year Graduate Course

There seems to be some problems with the current 1 year Graduate Course at Victoria University. Many of the trainees I spoke to could not see any alignment between what they were doing at University and what they met and were expected to do in schools. The link between theory and practice was not made explicit for them.

Many Associates that I spoke to made the comment that these 1 year Graduate Trainees seemed less well prepared, and this was during their second (and last) practicum, than in previous years. Some of these Associates had been Graduate Students themselves.

### 4 Year Courses

Trainees and Associates spoken to indicated that the practica in the longer course seemed more relevant. Associates indicated that trainees seemed better prepared and trainees indicated a stronger alignment between their courses at University and the practicum. In all cases however, trainees valued the practicum as more relevant than University courses and the feedback they received from Associates as more relevant and meaningful than feedback from the University observer.

## **Findings from Overseas**

### a) Oxford University

Oxford University offer an Internship Scheme which involves a close partnership between the University department and local comprehensive schools. This enables all aspects of the course to be planned, carried out and evaluated jointly by university and school staff. This partnership results in a course which integrates work in the university and in the school throughout the year.

Initially, interns spend three days in the university and two in school. This changes to two days in the university and three days in the school each week later in the term.

During the summer term, interns move to a second school so that they have the opportunity to consolidate and extend their understanding and experience of teaching and learning.

b) University of St Thomas, Minnesota and St Catherine University, Minnesota, USA.  
Both of these universities operate similar schemes for the supervision of Clinical Practice (the Practicum). They both contract supervisors to mentor student teachers meet with and have regular liaison with Host (Associate) Teachers and meet regularly with the student teacher during the practicum. Host teachers play a lesser role in the supervision than do Associate Teachers in NZ.

c) Global Student Teaching – University of Minnesota

Students involved in the Global Student Teaching Scheme complete their final practicum in an overseas English speaking country. Having had a number of GST students at my school, I was keen to follow up their progress.

The Global Student Teaching Scheme began in 1989 and only now is the University of Minnesota beginning to do some research on its effectiveness. Students spend ten weeks at a school and are observed at least four times by a contracted supervisor from the country in which they are completing their practicum.

Students interviewed, having successfully completed the practicum and returned to the USA, all say the scheme was a success. Benefits stated included:

- Broadening of perspectives
- Outlook a lot less insular
- Growth in personal development
- Greater awareness of cultural diversity
- Personal challenge and growth
- Educational questioning and inquiry enhanced

Although they stated there were disadvantages, all stated that the benefits far outweighed the disadvantages. However, one of the disadvantages stated was the lack of alignment between the requirements of the University and what was happening in NZ schools. This concern is not isolated to GST students as I also found this stated by NZ student teachers I interviewed.

## Implications

My findings regarding the place of the practicum in Initial teacher Education in NZ mirrors that of surveys in Australia. The following statements from 'The Inquiry into Teacher Education' tabled in February 2007 to the Australian House of Representatives, could equally be true of the situation in NZ.

"In surveys drawn to the committee's attention, beginning teachers consistently rate practicum as the most useful part of teacher education courses".

"There were suggestions that the amount [of practicum] had dropped markedly in recent years".

"A number of contributors regarded the amount of practicum in one year graduate teacher education programmes as particularly insufficient".

"Many submitters stressed that the quality of the practicum is more important than the number of days".

As stated earlier in my findings, increasing the quality of the practicum has implications for both schools and providers. The review of Initial Teacher Education in NZ concentrated on schools and suggested that Associate Teachers need to have particular qualifications before becoming an Associate in order to increase quality.

An increase in Normal Schools, where the control of Associates can be monitored with the payment of the Normal School Allowance, could also have the desired effect on quality. Normal Schools also have close affiliations with Universities, thus increasing the likelihood of closer alignment, another factor influencing the quality of the practicum.

On the other hand, Universities and providers could take the process entirely out of the school's hands and provide their own supervisors, observers and mentors as happens now with the NZ Graduate School. Providers would then be responsible for their own quality control.

In the last few years, Universities have found it more difficult to place students, with many schools deciding it was too hard or too disruptive to have student teachers. However, in NZ, as it was in the USA, many teachers feel it is an obligation to continue to train the next batch of teachers, with money not necessarily an incentive.

Whatever the answer, a key to success of the practicum is the strength of the relationship developed and the quality of the feedback given, whoever provides it. If these two factors can be maximised, then there is a chance the quality of all practica can be increased. This is certainly 'do-able' for us at Raroa Normal Intermediate and it is something we will be working on.

## **Conclusion**

The Sabbatical enabled me to examine more closely a major aspect of Initial Teacher Education. The conclusion to be drawn from the study was that no single one of focuses identified in the purpose for the Sabbatical had any more effect on success than any other, but that taken in total they would all contribute to success. If they all aligned, and each was maximised or optimised, then there is every chance the practicum would be successful for the student teacher. On the other hand, if one or more of the stated focuses was not optimised then the practicum could also be successful because of its perceived quality, especially if the relationship formed between the Associate Teacher and the Student Teacher was professional, improvement focussed and mutually beneficial.

What I didn't examine or attempt to define was – what counted as success? This would be the subject of a much larger study.

However, I did report some of my findings to Victoria University, Wellington with the result that the University undertook some of its own research in 2009 which included the question:

“What or who helped you make connections between professional knowledge (lectures) and professional practice (learning while on teaching experience)?”

The surprising result of this particular survey question was that other student teachers were seen as being marginally more helpful than Associate Teachers and that these two groups were seen as being more helpful than any other personnel intervention, course or examination.

A conclusion for me and my school is that there are some clear signals that need to be pursued so that we can make the practicum as successful as possible. We have begun that journey.

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