

TEACHER EDUCATORS: COURSE EXPERIENCES OF BACHELOR OF EDUCATION PRIMARY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This investigation examined the course experiences of Bachelor of Education Primary students across each year of the course. The aims of the study were to identify gaps in what we know about our students; to identify relevant domains in student experiences and to assist with course improvements. A reflective inquiry paradigm was adopted for students to give feedback on their course experience as key stakeholders. A mixed methods approach was used to examine participants' reflections on their course experiences. The emphasis was on an analysis of the students' reflections of their experiences and their online responses. The research was designed to engage participants in processes for twenty first century learning using technology that could be replicated in the field. The online survey items were developed through focus group discussions with volunteer students reflecting about their previous years' experiences. Focus group participants were encouraged to identify their positive, negative and interesting experiences through completing a 'PMI' template prior to the focus group discussion. Each cohort in Years 1, 2, 3, and 4 were invited to complete the anonymous online survey. The findings provided insights into relevant domains of student experiences for those requiring improvements as well as those operating effectively.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine feedback from pre-service primary teachers on their course experiences across the four years of the Bachelor of Education program at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in metropolitan Sydney, NSW, Australia. The aims and objectives of the study were to identify gaps in knowledge about students; to identify relevant domains in the student experience and to assist with course improvements. It was envisaged that findings may benefit teacher educators in designing better ways to prepare pre-service teachers for their complex future teaching roles in catering for increasingly diverse student populations.

Earlier research has emphasised the pivotal role that dispositions of pre-service teachers play in preparing them for inclusive classrooms (Garmon, 2004). Mills & Ballantyne, (2010) advocated developing a hierarchy of change beginning with self-awareness/self-reflectiveness, moving to openness and finally a commitment to social justice. A recent study conducted by O'Neill and Stephenson (2012) reported on final-year Australian pre-service primary teachers highlighting that personal beliefs about physiological and affective states predicted their self-efficacy. This particular study looked more broadly across the teacher education course to explore perspectives of pre-service teachers to gain information that could assist with holistic course design and to remediate or alleviate arising issues.

At the time of the study (June 2012) there were 785 pre-service teachers enrolled in the 4 year Bachelor of Education Primary course at ACU. In 2013 there will be a national accreditation process introduced for all Australian university teacher education courses. In light of this shift from state to National Teaching Professional Standards it was considered timely to get feedback from the students' perspectives on their course in relation to various pedagogical aspects of teaching, learning and assessment practices as well as other issues affecting the nature and quality of their emotional

experiences with relationships, support services and wider university experiences (Chang, Anagnostopoulos & Omae, 2011; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012).

The NSW Institute of Teachers reported on the implications of moving to the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (ITE Bulletin, 2012) and advised that 2012 is essentially a transition year to the National Standards both for schools and initial teacher education providers, with scheduled implementation of the National Graduate Teacher and Proficient level Standards from 2013 onwards. The Standards are described as follows:

The Standards within each key stage are intended to describe the nature of teachers' work in three domains: They are: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Commitment. The elements describe the areas encompassed within the domains. They give a logical organisational structure for consistent presentation of the standards within each key stage. The seven elements are:

1. Teachers know their subject/content and how to teach that content to their students
2. Teachers know their students and how students learn
3. Teachers plan, assess and report for effective learning
4. Teachers communicate effectively with their students
5. Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments through the use of classroom management skills
6. Teachers continually improve their professional knowledge and practice
7. Teachers are actively engaged members of their profession and the wider community.

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Pages/ProfessionalStandardsForTeachers.aspx>

These Standards are relevant in considering the pre-service teachers' perspectives on their course in relation to the identified domains.

Research design

The research study was designed to engage participants in processes for twenty first century learning using technology that could be replicated in the field. A reflective inquiry paradigm was adopted for pre-service teachers to give feedback on their course experience as key stakeholders. A mixed methods approach was used to examine participants' reflections on their course experiences. Open-ended questions were included in the survey to gain information on respondents' feelings and concerns (Hemmings & Woodstock, 2011).

The emphasis was on an analysis of pre-service teachers' reflections of their experiences (qualitative) and students' online responses provided wider cohort quantitative perspectives (Creswell, 2002). The online survey items were developed through analysis of focus group discussions with volunteer students reflecting about their previous years' experiences.

Focus group participants were self-selected and recruited through a brief presentation overview of the research project and an information flyer delivered by the two researchers at education and curriculum lectures to pre-service teachers in Years 2, 3 and 4 of the Bachelor of Education Primary Course. Focus group participants were encouraged to identify their positive, negative and interesting experiences through completing a 'PMI' template as a manner of reflecting on features of the course prior to the focus group discussion.

Small group focus group discussions were held for each of Years 2, 3 and 4 of the course. Six pre-service teachers volunteered for the focus groups consisting of two participants in Year 2, one participant in Year 3 and three participants in Year 4. Of the six participants, five were female, one was male and three were mature-aged. The following protocol was used with focus group participants.

Focus Group Questions/Discussion

Reflecting on your last year's experiences at ACU as a (second/third/fourth) year Bachelor of Education primary student what have been some key issues that you have experienced? You might like to use your PMI notes as a starting point:

- What have been some of the positive experiences? Can you expand/explain in more detail using an example?
- What have been some of the negative experiences? Can you expand/explain in more detail using an example?
- What have been some of the interesting experiences? Can you expand/explain in more detail using an example?
- What are the three most important issues for you? How can each of these issues be addressed?
- Are there any other matters that you would like to raise?

Focus group participants' feedback informed the development of an online survey developed by the researchers for distribution to the whole Bachelor of Education Primary cohort. The survey was divided into 5 sections with 38 questions consisting of items about demographics, assessment, program structure, teaching and learning, and relationships, with a 5 point Likert scale for responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Additionally, there were three open-ended questions and an opportunity for further comments at the end of the survey, namely:

- In your view, what are the most important qualities and attributes of an exemplary teacher?
- What have been the highlights of your experience?
- What have been the disappointments of your experience?
- Please add any other comments or suggestions about your learning or experiences.

A total of approximately 785 pre-service teachers in Years 1, 2 3, and 4 of the Primary course were invited to complete the anonymous online survey sent through a broadcast email to students' university email address and a follow-up reminder was sent through the Student Association. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the study was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee Number N201182.

Responses to the online survey were obtained from 38 students at the end of Semester 1, 2012 with a follow-up phase to be conducted at the end Semester 2, 2012. The average age of survey participants was 23 years and ranged from 18 to 39 years; of the 38 participants 36 students were studying full-time and 2 part-time. There were 31 female and 7 male participants which reflect the imbalance of gender in the course enrolments. The number of respondents in Year 1 was 18, 6 respondents were in Years 2, 6 were in Year 3 and there were 8 in Year 4 of the course.

Findings and Discussion

The findings provided insights into relevant domains of the student experience for those requiring improvements as well as those operating effectively. Participants' responses were analysed in relation to the fields of assessment, program structure, teaching and learning, and relationships. The results are presented in tables which give the percentage of responses within a category. Content analysis was undertaken to identify key themes from the open-ended questions.

Assessment issues covered specific issues raised by focus group participants about the ideal size of group work, the extent of collaboration and independence required in the task, marking systems and feedback processes and the length of assessments. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of responses to assessment questions (% , n=38)

In group work the ideal size is:	2 26.32	3 34.21	4 36.84	5 2.63	6 00.0
ASSESSMENT ISSUES	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Prefer to work with my friends	0.00	7.89	10.53	44.74	36.84
Prefer my contribution to be identifiable	0.00	10.53	13.16	55.26	21.05
Prefer only independent tasks	5.26	31.58	23.68	23.68	15.79
Prefer only collaborative tasks	2.63	28.95	28.95	36.84	2.63
Prefer both independent & collaborative	5.26	18.42	15.79	44.74	15.79
Prefer academic grades to marks	21.05	36.84	21.05	18.42	2.63
Comments on assessments are important to me	2.63	0.00	2.63	23.68	71.05
In general, the size of the word count is appropriate	7.89	15.79	13.16	60.53	2.63

The findings indicate that participants mostly prefer to work on both collaborative and independent assessment tasks in groups of 3 or 4 with other students who are their friends and where their contributions to the final product is identifiable. Most of the participants prefer percentage marks rather than grades and feedback comments are important to them. The majority of participants considered the word length of assessments as very appropriate.

Focus group participants had discussed the different types of assessment used across the course and their preference for a varied approach. Results for online survey participants' preferences for assessment types are shown below.

Table 2: Summary of preferred types of assessments (% , n=38)

PREFERRED TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
essay	23.68	15.79	15.79	31.58	13.16
online quiz	13.16	13.16	23.68	36.84	13.16
online virtual child	26.32	2.63	21.05	31.58	18.42
case study analysis	13.16	31.58	21.05	31.58	2.63
designing a web quest	31.58	26.32	21.05	15.79	5.26
designing a unit of work	10.53	7.89	28.95	44.74	7.89
tutorial presentation	13.16	13.16	13.16	52.63	7.89
exam	36.84	28.95	5.26	23.68	5.26

lesson plans	5.26	15.79	18.42	42.11	18.42
literature review	10.53	36.84	21.05	31.58	0.00
community based field work	0.00	13.16	15.79	44.74	26.32
reflective diary	15.79	26.32	13.16	39.47	5.26

The participants' responses revealed their preference for active, practical approaches which had direct relevance to their future role as teachers such as designing a unit of work, developing lesson plans and field work.

The participants' responses to the overall Program structure are presented in three areas: sequence, contents and alternate modes of delivery.

Table 3: Summary of responses to Program structure (% , n=38)

PROGRAM STRUCTURE	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
The sequence of units in my course makes sense to me	2.63	10.53	31.58	52.63	2.63
The contents of units available to me are appropriate for my course	2.63	18.42	10.53	65.79	2.63
There are enough opportunities for me to do units in intensive mode	21.05	18.42	39.47	15.79	5.26

The responses indicated that most participants thought the selection of the contents of units was appropriate and agreed that the sequence made sense. However they were unsure whether there would be opportunities for them to study units in intensive mode as limited number of units were offered. The third area investigated concerned teaching and learning feedback. The participants' responses are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of responses on teaching and learning issues (% , n=38)

TEACHING AND LEARNING ISSUES	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
I prefer face-to-face lectures rather than online	47.37	5.26	26.32	2.63	18.42
In my units, lecturers and tutors use ICT well	2.63	23.68	21.05	52.63	0.00
In my units I have sufficient opportunities to use different ICT	0.00	28.95	26.32	42.11	2.63
Tutorial preparation workload for students is appropriate	7.89	7.89	13.16	68.42	2.63
In addition to the tutorial time, I would like opportunities to participate in group discussions with peers on new ideas and concepts	7.89	31.58	28.95	28.95	2.63

I find time management of my university tasks difficult	5.26	36.84	13.16	26.32	18.42
I find that the lecturers' and tutors' expectations of my independent learning is excessive	0.00	42.11	10.53	39.47	7.89
I find that the same content is repeated in different units throughout my course	2.63	7.89	34.21	34.21	21.05
For my learning I find it helpful when the following are provided in addition to the lecture:	2.63	2.63	10.53	60.53	23.68
a. hand-outs					
b. podcasts	2.63	10.53	23.68	44.74	18.42

Participants showed their preference for online lectures rather than face-to-face; yet more than half the participants felt their lecturers did use ICT well and would have appreciated podcasts of their lectures. There was varied feedback about whether participants wanted opportunities to follow-up with peers in small group discussions. Participants provided feedback on their expectations about lectures in terms of pedagogical knowledge in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of responses about lectures (% , n=38)

LEARNING ISSUES RELATING TO LECTURES	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
It is useful for my learning that lectures	0.00	2.63	2.63	71.05	23.68
1. deliver information					
2. outline key concepts	0.00	0.00	0.00	68.42	31.58
3. present underpinning theories	0.00	0.00	2.63	78.95	18.42
4. trigger inquiry and reflection	2.63	2.63	13.16	68.42	13.16
5. include practical examples	0.00	2.63	2.63	52.63	42.11
6. are interesting	0.00	5.26	0.00	42.11	52.63
7. provide relevant information for practicum	0.00	5.26	0.00	47.37	47.37

Relevance to practicum featured as a key purpose for lectures as well valuing the giving of information, and developing their theoretical and reflective, inquiry orientations. Similarly, participants gave feedback on their expectations about tutorials in Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of responses about tutorials. (% , n=38)

LEARNING ISSUES RELATING TO TUTORIALS	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
It is useful for my learning that lectures	0.00	0.00	5.26	55.26	39.47
1. deliver information					
2. outline key concepts	0.00	2.63	2.63	55.26	39.47
3. present underpinning theories	0.00	5.26	7.89	60.53	26.32
4. trigger inquiry and reflection	0.00	2.63	10.53	57.89	28.95
5. include practical examples	0.00	0.00	2.63	57.89	39.47
6. are interesting	0.00	2.63	2.63	42.11	52.63
7. provide relevant information for practicum	0.00	0.00	2.63	47.37	50.00

A concern for tutorials to support their practicum experiences featured in participants' responses to both lectures and tutorials. Participants' engagement in lectures and tutorials was enhanced through connecting with their interest and the use of practical examples. Responses on participants' feelings about relationships and experiences with lecturers and tutors are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Summary of responses to feelings about relationships and experiences with lecturers and tutors (% , n=38)

RELATIONSHIPS	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel that my lecturers and tutors are inspirational	2.63	15.79	28.95	52.63	0.00
good communicators	2.63	7.89	15.79	68.42	5.26
empathetic	7.89	26.32	13.16	50.00	2.63
available	10.53	13.16	21.05	52.63	2.63
flexible	5.26	21.05	26.32	39.47	7.89
approachable	5.26	10.53	21.05	57.89	5.26
interested in students	2.63	15.79	23.68	55.26	2.63
credible practitioners	0.00	5.26	31.58	55.26	7.89
up-to-date with current school practices	2.63	7.89	21.05	65.79	2.63
mindful that I'm an adult learner	10.53	13.16	18.42	55.26	2.63

Other emotional interactions showed participants' responses to their sense of connectedness illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8: Summary of participants' sense of connectedness (% , n=38)

CONNECTEDNESS	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel a strong sense of being welcomed	0.00	5.26	18.42	60.53	15.79
friendship with peers	0.00	15.79	13.16	55.26	15.79
valuing the university's reputation	2.63	0.00	18.42	63.16	15.79
involvement in student associations	5.26	36.84	34.21	23.68	0.00
personal safety	0.00	2.63	10.53	63.16	23.68
psychological safety	0.00	2.63	18.42	60.53	18.42
involvement in university life	2.63	13.16	36.84	42.11	5.26
belonging	2.63	13.16	21.05	57.89	5.26
acceptance of student diversity	2.63	0.00	21.05	68.42	7.89

Personal qualities of relationships with staff, peers and the conduciveness of the university environment were factors which influenced participants' feelings of connectedness. Another key factor contributing to participants' feelings about their experiences related to the degree of support available. The participants provided feedback on their perceptions about the appropriateness of university support services in Table 9.

Table 9: Responses on appropriateness of support services (% , n=38)

SUPPORT SERVICES	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
I have appropriate access to support services for academic skills	0.00	5.26	13.16	63.16	18.42
counselling	0.00	0.00	31.58	55.26	13.16
disability advice	0.00	0.00	47.37	39.47	13.16
indigenous advice	0.00	0.00	68.42	28.95	2.63
career advice	0.00	5.26	50.00	39.47	5.26
I have flexible access to resources and advice for library materials	2.63	7.89	18.42	60.53	10.53
orientation materials	2.63	5.26	44.74	44.74	2.63
guest speakers	5.26	21.05	55.26	18.42	0.00
employer links with CEO and DEC	5.26	13.16	52.63	23.68	5.26

Clearly, these support services played a significant role in the participants' sense of assisted them. Influences on the participants' sense of self-identity were identified across a range of contexts.

Table 10: Influences on participants' sense of identity

SENSE OF IDENTITY	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
My perception of myself as a teacher is influenced by:	0.00	15.79	15.79	63.16	5.26
colleague teachers					
school practicum coordinators	2.63	18.42	21.05	50.00	7.89
university supervisors	5.26	23.68	21.05	39.47	10.53
lecturers	2.63	28.95	21.05	39.47	7.89
tutors	2.63	13.16	10.53	65.79	7.89
peers	0.00	18.42	13.16	52.63	15.79
school students	0.00	5.26	2.63	65.79	26.32
family	2.63	13.16	13.16	52.63	18.42
friends	2.63	7.89	15.79	52.63	21.05

Key influences on participants' perceptions of themselves as prospective teachers came from their colleague teachers, university tutors and the school students showing the important role that classroom practice has on their sense of identity.

Qualitative Responses

The most important qualities of exemplary teachers were described by participants as *fun, caring, approachable, sense of empathy, knowing the information, engaging, enthusiastic, enjoying the job of teaching*. Highlights of their university experiences included their *practicum in schools, meeting new people and making friends, and learning in fun, interactive units*. In contrast, disappointments included when there was a lack of support from staff, a lack of flexibility in unit content and requirements, and technology problems. Participants' suggestions for improvements included *questioning why lectures should be compulsory, posting lectures online prior to the lecture, careful planning of group tasks and teaching students how to participate in group/collaborative situations; and more links with organisations and what they offer*. Overall, participants' comments were positive and as one participant recognised any 'failings' are probably the same issues that would be faced at other universities.

Conclusion

The research has provided insights regarding what we know about our pre-service teachers and reaffirmed what makes for good teacher education practice. The participants' feedback aligns in domains with the National Professional Standards. The findings serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of the role of pre-service course designers, teacher educators and the wider school community in continually striving for excellence to meet Professional Standards.

The outcomes of the Project were:

- for student focus group participants - increased understanding of the research process, collaborative interactions with peers and staff, a certificate of participation
- for student survey participants - opportunity to provide anonymous feedback across the whole semester as distinct from individual unit evaluations
- for teacher educators - increased understanding of the student experience enabling improved delivery of course materials to meet articulated student needs where possible/relevant.

The responses from participants reflect the diversity of the pre-service teacher population. It will be interesting to compare the second round of responses to determine if there is a consistency in findings and whether significant numbers of pre-service teachers engage in the research process. Reported responses indicated the pre-service teachers' wants as distinct from their needs. A further phase will examine the perspectives of Lecturers in-Charge of units to get their analyses on issues raised. The over-riding goal of this on-going research is to lead to better prepared pre-service teachers who graduate from their course with knowledge, skills and confidence in their ability to teach all students.

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