

Early Childhood Education



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Teaching Context

EDB014/15 forms part of the capstone experience in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood), at QUT. This capstone experience includes an 8-week professional field experience component.

Students: Approximately 80 students enrol in the Bachelor of Education each year. Approximately 60 enrol in these capstone units.

Teaching team: Amanda McFadden coordinates the final professional field experience (EDB014) and the Internship experience (EDB015) for early childhood education pre-service teachers.

Mode: 8-week placement at an early childhood context (e.g., kindergarten, primary school) during second semester.

Amanda and her colleagues including university supervisors, fellow lecturers and host teachers recognised a high level of anxiety among undergraduate pre-service teachers prior to, and following final field experience and internship. These anxieties were especially pertinent for fourth year students during internships, where teaching responsibilities increase alongside prolonged field experience placements. Pre-service teachers who do not have effective strategies for dealing with challenges that arise in their teaching are particularly affected.

Aim

To help pre-service teachers: (1) develop attitudes and strategies for coping with the anxieties and pressures of prolonged field experiences; and (2) make the transition from pre-service teacher to professional teacher.

Subject design strategies

The strategies developed to meet this aim include activities and assessments introduced prior to and during the final professional experience and Internship:

Embedding a pre-placement conference in the semester 2 orientation week, to build students' professional teaching identity and mirror professional development in the field

Talking to pre-service teachers as 'future colleagues' creates a professional dynamic that differs from expert-student dynamic in most undergraduate classes. It empowers pre-service teachers to position themselves as future teachers, and to think about how the concepts and tasks that they are learning as pre-service teachers will apply in their professional lives as teachers. This dynamic also provides an avenue for pre-service teachers to reposition the increased responsibilities of their 4th year Internship as indicators of their strengthened identity and capacities as teachers.

This intensive 2-day conference provides various opportunities for pre-service teachers to begin to see themselves as professional teachers, including:

- Panel discussions with teachers who are in their first year of teaching;
- Sessions with principals and experts about emerging issues in early childhood education and care; and
- Professional conversations with practicing teachers and with peers.

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Using a portfolio assessment piece to document each student's 'enacted practice' during placement

The portfolio piece is an opportunity to practice developing a professional teaching portfolio, which is an increasingly necessary tool for educators. The portfolio piece includes a synopsis of the pre-service teachers' teaching practice, and a reflection of how their actions developed their understanding of teaching and learning with a particular focus on the issues discussed at the conference.

Creating opportunities for feedback

A variety of feedback tools are used throughout the conference and throughout the final professional experience and Internship.

- **During the conference** feedback tools include discussion boards, blogs, key survey, email feedback, 'one word to describe the session' post-it notes, and sheets of cardboard for comments are posted on walls. These provide avenues for students to express their thoughts, questions, or concerns to academic staff or to each other in a timely manner. Comments are presented in a follow up online collaboration session and responded to in ways that are designed to be useful for all pre-service teachers.
- **During the Internship** feedback on progress is provided through professional conversations with the appointed mentoring teacher, the University Supervisor and the Unit Coordinator. It is also provided in email communication from the teaching team, and on comments from peers, tutors, and professional colleagues in the portfolio documents and through discussion boards.

Adopting accessible and current media formats

Amanda worked with her university's counselling service to develop a podcast (digital audio recording) about the issues that pre-service teachers face during placement, to be made available prior to and throughout placement. Podcasts are increasingly popular and familiar media formats among people under the age of 35. The podcast, called "In conversation", covers common issues that pre-service teachers face, and ways that the counselling service advises them to address such issues. The podcast has been so successful that it is now offered to all students across the Education program. There are unique issues associated with lengthy professional experiences and this was a way to target known challenges that pre-service teachers face in the field.

Introducing failure as a learning opportunity early in the conference

The first lecture to students begins with a discussion about failure, prompted by a visual aid (slide) stating: "*FAIL: First Attempt In Learning*" and a recount of the difficulties Amanda faced in postgraduate studies. This attitude is central to Carol Dweck's "open mindset"¹, which reframes failure as a learning opportunity to develop students' work instead of some sort of final judgement of the student as a person. Pre-service teachers with open mindsets are better placed to cope with anxieties and issues on placement because they can see the difficulties as learning opportunities that help them develop their skills as professional teachers. Presenting this discussion as a lecture provides a safe way introduce pre-service teachers to this way of thinking about failure, and for them to reflect on their own experiences and past opportunities to learn.

This approach shifts the focus on *performing* on field experience to *learning* while on field experiences.

Evaluating outcomes

The pre-Internship conference was developed, and is refined each year by drawing on existing evidence of good-practice models from existing capstone models and from large datasets of practice in teacher education (Mayer, 2015), so that organisers can be confident that the conference will be effective in providing pre-service teachers with relevant graduate experience. Amanda is currently applying for funding to systematically evaluate the conference. In the mean time, she has anecdotal evidence that supports her confidence in its effectiveness.

With the incorporation of multiple forms of feedback and an emphasis on the pre-service teachers as future colleagues, Amanda has noticed that there is more open dialogue between pre-service teachers and teachers about how they are experiencing and dealing with difficult situations. These dialogues happen during the actual difficult event, rather than after the event has occurred, which means that pre-service teachers are building agency in taking control over challenging situations. Amanda sees this dialogue as a crucial indicator of pre-service teachers' ability to articulate their challenges and find ways to proactively address those difficulties.

Although only anecdotal, evidence of the success of the program also comes from correspondence with program graduates. These comments are

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overwhelmingly positive, with statements such as *"I feel like a new teacher now"*, *"Amanda has reassured me, particularly at the start of the degree, that I can do it"*, and *"with your encouragement and advice I was able to have a more than successful field experience"*. *"Amanda's support has been invaluable ... She guides us, pulls us back on track, and provides us with so many wonderful experiences"*.

Over the past two years there has been a decrease in pre-service teachers accessing the support of Amanda as Unit Coordinator for challenges while on their field experience. Of note as well is the peer support and collaboration through discussion board threads and posts that show a clear uptake in final year pre-service teachers talking about their mindset and how they are reframing challenges on their final field and Internship experiences.

In 2015 a group of pre-service teachers at the conference discussed setting up their own early career sub-committee group to support pre-service teachers and early career teachers. After discussing this idea more broadly within pre-service teacher networks and professional networks these pre-

service teachers have combined to develop and sustain an early career sub-committee of Early Childhood Australia Qld. In 2016 this is now a fully functioning sub-committee with members including pre-service teachers across other Queensland Universities and early career teachers working in the field.

REFERENCES

- 1 (Dweck, C. S. (2000). Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development. Psychology Press.
- Mayer, A., Woulfin, S., & Warhol, L. (2015). Moving the center of expertise: Applying a communities of practice framework to understand coaching in urban school reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(1), 101-123.