Using the first year curriculum to develop preservice teacher resilience and self-efficacy

Sharn Donnison, School of Education, University of the Sunshine Coast
Sorrel Penn-Edwards, School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University
Lisa Albion, School of Education, University of the Sunshine Coast

This paper reports on measures to develop preservice teachers’ well-being, in particular their self-efficacy, resilience and coping skills, by embedding these into a core first semester, first year course in a preservice teacher education program. These factors have been shown as vital for ongoing engagement in studies and retention of tertiary students as well as the retention of teachers in the workforce, in particular the beginning teacher in their first year out. The design of the course draws upon and extends the work of Donnison, Oprescu, and Penn-Edwards (2013) who argued for the addition of soft outcomes as well as the more traditional academic hard outcomes in first year courses “in order to foster students’ holistic well-being and support transition” (p. 1) into tertiary studies.

Introduction

The quality and purpose of the student’s first year experience in higher education continues to be a priority for Australian and international higher education providers (Zepke, 2013). The importance of this area has grown over the past decade and will continue to be an imperative as government funding to higher education institutions decreases, competition for students increases and wider participation, measurement and accountability agendas continue to influence the work and purpose of institutions (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Furthermore, changes to the way personal, social and civic life is organised and experienced has, and will, continue to impact commencing student’s motivations for, expectations of, and experiences during their tertiary careers.

Being a first year student in higher education in 2014 involves considerable emotional, cultural, social and psychological adjustment (Zepke, 2013). For students undertaking a professional degree, and especially teacher education students, negotiating new institutional discourses, juggling personal, financial and social commitments as well as learning to become a teaching professional is demanding and stressful and for some students, unfortunately, an overwhelming motivation for leaving university.

This nuts and bolts presentation continues the work of Donnison, Oprescu, and Penn-Edwards (2013) who argued that first year curriculum design should support first year transition by focusing on soft outcomes, such as developing resilience and self-efficacy, as well as hard academic driven outcomes. By doing so, it responds to Zepke’s (2013) call for “practical ways to improve engagement in the first year experience” (p. 12) by developing students strength to succeed, not only as an undergraduate student but in their future profession as a teacher. In this nuts and bolts paper we report on measures taken to embed soft outcomes into a first semester, first year preservice teacher education course and in the presentation, our findings. Our paper is contextualised within the teacher education literature and especially that literature that deals with a teacher’s and preservice teacher’s holistic well-being.
Teacher well-being

There has been considerable research into practicing teachers’ well-being or lack of, stress and consequential burnout and it continues to be an area of concern in the teaching profession. It is also recognised that practicing teachers’ appraisal of and ability to cope with their work demands are critical to their work performance, levels of stress, and commitment to their job (Pillay, Goddard & Wilss, 2005). Teacher stress and burnout is a disturbing matter for newly graduated teachers. Goddard and O’Brien (2003) report on a study conducted with 123 graduated teachers six weeks and then six months after they commenced full time teaching in Queensland, Australia. They noted that these new teachers experienced high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion and that one third of the cohort indicated an intention to leave the profession after the first eight months of teaching. While these studies are about practicing teachers the implications for preservice teacher education are evident: resilience to these stresses should ideally be in place before teachers enter the workforce.

There has been considerable research into the social and psychological well-being of undergraduate students in Australia and overseas. It is recognised that university students, as a population, are at risk of serious mental, physical and/or emotional stress (Bitsika, Sharpley & Rubenstein, 2010). A recent study conducted with first year University students by Wrench, Garrett and King (2013) indicates that students’ health and well-being can be (and often are) compromised through “relocation and sense of loss felt when students no longer have easy access to friends and family” (p. 743). Inevitably, this impacts on students’ academic progress results and retention.

Zepke (2013) reviewed the first year experience across higher education institutions in the UK, USA and Australia stating that although student well-being is implicit in the engagement strategies undertaken by learning institutions “the importance of wellbeing for student engagement is not often discussed in the engagement literature” (p. 8). He made clear connections between student engagement and student success and noted that a key factor is that students need to hold “positive emotions towards learning and a willing commitment to learning tasks” (p. 4) and that “student self-belief is vital for success” (p. 6).

Similarly, Armstrong and Sanson (2012) highlight the heightened levels of psychological distress in first year students in Australian Universities and advocate for greater support for first year students (in particular law students) for successful academic transitioning to occur.

Specific research into preservice teachers, stress and well-being has also been recently undertaken (Ripski, LoCasale-Couch & Decker, 2011). Findings from these studies concur with O’Neill and Stephensen (2012) that preservice teachers with a healthy sense of well-being and self-efficacy are less likely to suffer stress, burnout and attrition as students and consequently as teachers.

Using the curriculum as a tool to develop students’ well-being, resilience and self-efficacy has been considered. Mansfield, Price, McConney, Beltman, Pelliccione and Wosnitza (2012) proposed a framework for embedding resilience training into the final year of a teacher education degree and Yager (2011) reported on the success of a first year, first semester course designed for preservice teachers to develop and reflect on their behaviours and attitudes as commencing teaching professionals. Considering the work of Mansfield, et al. (2012) Donnison, Oprescu and Penn-Edwards (2013) presented a model for curriculum...
design based on holistic student well-being that encompassed four student well-being areas, physical, psychological, social and academic (see Figure 1).

![Diagram of Four Proposed Areas (APPS) of a Holistic View of Student Wellbeing]

**Figure 1. Four proposed areas (APPS) of a holistic view of student wellbeing.**

They argued for first year curriculum design that was student centred, and which supported the students in taking responsibility for their own learning, well-being and academic success and proposed the following design and implementation considerations:

1. Well-being learning (resilience, coping skills, self efficacy) begins in the first weeks of the student’s first semester;
2. Students self-assess their own levels of resilience and coping skills and consider which areas they need to work on using self assessment tools;
3. Students formulate a plan to address their own areas of need and identify goals selecting a tool to assist them in charting their own progress; and
4. Staff works with students to identify how the students might achieve their goals. (Donnison, Oprescu & Penn-Edwards, 2013, p. 6).

In line with these considerations, we have developed a first year first semester teacher education course (EDU105 Professional Learning: Building Community Connections) that supports and promotes students’ holistic well-being through providing opportunities for them to identify, develop and scaffold their own well-being learning. This course is offered for the first time in 2014.

**Embedding well-being into a first semester teacher education course**

The course has 10 weeks of coursework plus 10 days of professional experience. It aims to prepare students for their first professional experience by framing that experience in the broader context of their personal and professional learning journey. The course focus is on supporting the students in their transition to their academic careers, assisting them to develop a sense of their own teacher identity and develop the skills, knowledges and resources they need to become that teacher. In addition to content which prepares the students for their first professional experience, the course also provides opportunities for students to reflect upon their professional and personal strengths and weaknesses and identify and plan individual learning goals.

As per Donnison, Oprescu and Penn-Edwards (2013), well-being learning commences at the beginning of their course with instruction and discussions on the importance of their holistic
well-being for their academic success and their future professional roles. This is framed within a context of the research and theory about first year student engagement and academic success, such as Lizzio and Wilson (2004) and Kift (2009), and being a proactive and effective teacher in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Lombardi, 2007).

Students then self-assess their personal, social, academic and professional strengths and areas of need through completing various reflective and diagnostic tasks. In doing so, the students gain a deeper understanding of their behaviours, attitudes and attributes with a view to identifying their areas of strength and those areas that require attention and development.

The students create an electronic Personal and Professional Development Plan (PPDP) based upon their growing understanding of their personal and professional strengths and areas for development. In building their PPDP students work closely with staff to determine their future learning goals, plan how to achieve them, develop a strategy for monitoring their progress towards those goals, and start to investigate resources to assist with the achievement of the goals (Donnison, Oprescu & Penn-Edwards, 2013; Zepke, 2013). The PPDP is continually added to, re-evaluated and monitored over the four years of the students’ degree. While it provides a history of the students’ personal, academic and professional growth it also contains evidence towards the students’ demonstration of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Graduates) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012). An e-portfolio is used to house the PPDP.

The effectiveness of the first semester strategies for student engagement and retention and for developing the preservice teacher’s self-efficacy and resilience will be researched. Students will be interviewed and surveyed at the commencement of the course and then again at the completion of the course. This research aims to provide qualitative and quantitative data regarding:

- student engagement and attitudes to the inclusion of a well-being focus in academic courses
- measurable development of increased well-being (self-efficacy, resilience, and coping skills)
- effects of the course on student retention

**Conclusion**

Transitioning into the first year of university is one of the biggest and most stressful challenges that students will face in their personal and professional lives. The support they receive at this time and the skills, abilities and beliefs they develop about themselves throughout this transition will set the path not only for their future learning as tertiary students but for the development of their well-being, self-efficacy and resilience skills as teachers.

**Questions for discussion**

- How can students be encouraged and supported to take responsibility for, and ownership of, their ongoing professional and personal learning journey?
- What are the additional roles and responsibilities for staff in supporting students to become responsible for their own personal and professional well-being and growth?
• How could the development of soft outcomes (i.e. resilience, well-being, coping skills, self-efficacy and awareness) be supported throughout the rest of the 4 year program?

References


Using the first year curriculum to develop preservice teacher resilience and self-efficacy. Nuts and Bolts.