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Innovating in First Year Pre-Service Teacher Education: “Buddy up”

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Abstract

In response to the changing regulatory climate of initial teacher education, coupled with first year students’ needs to effectively transition to higher education, the School of Education at RMIT University reconceptualised its first year Bachelor of Education program to incorporate paired (buddied) placements as an integral component of a site-based professional experience model. This chapter presents an overview of this innovation, grounded in current literature about innovations in the pre-service teacher (PST) practicum and literature about transition into higher education. It presents research that examines PSTs’ perceptions of being ‘buddied’ and highlights the complexity and sometimes uncomfortable nature of innovation and change within initial teacher education.

1 Introduction

Professional experience (placement/practicum) describes the aspect of Teacher Education whereby PSTs spend time in schools to observe practice, gain authentic experience and develop their professional identity. Professional experience is recognised as an essential part of initial teacher education programs (Le Cornu, 2015; Ure et al., 2009) yet it is also the site of contestation around how it is conceptualised, structured and supervised (Le Cornu, 2015). Professional experience takes multiple forms across universities from block placements (PSTs are sent to schools for a set number of weeks at a time) to models such as one day a week over a period of time, internships and more extended placements. There are also examples of different placement location settings such as virtual placements, overseas placements and placements in alternative educational settings.

Despite the diverse constructions of practicum across universities, national reports into initial teacher education continue to question the quality of professional experience programs. In 2007, the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training tabled the *Top of the Class* report into teacher education. In this report, it iterated that “high quality placements for school-based professional experience are a critical

component of teacher education courses" but that there was little consensus around "how much practicum there should be, when practicum should begin and the best structure for practicum" (p. 67).

Despite calls for reform, any innovation in professional experience is influenced by regulatory, political and historical contexts. In 2011, the Australian Government introduced a national approach to accreditation for initial teacher education regulated by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011). Teacher education providers are now required to meet a set of national program standards that relates to the development, structure and delivery, as well as student selection of their courses. Currently, professional experience needs to consist of at least 80 days for undergraduate programs and 60 days for graduate entry and must involve "well-structured, supervised and assessed teaching practice in schools" (AITSL, 2011, p. 15). Providers need to document the practicum component of their programs including partnership relationship with schools. For some universities, change in the regulatory environment has encouraged innovation. It has meant a rethink in the way professional experience is conceptualised, a reconsideration of the curriculum and pedagogy of placement-based courses and the development of different practicum models.

Innovation in the area of professional experience is also bound by historic notions of what practicum is. Stakeholders such as school leadership, teacher mentors and the teacher education students themselves have formed, and hold, values and expectations based on their own experiences and "by history and tradition and by the universal qualities that are embedded in the tradition of the profession" (Mattsson et al., 2012, p. 3). This history can "facilitate as well as hamper certain practices" (Mattsson et al., 2012, p. 3) and innovation.

It is within these histories, regulatory environment and political times that innovation around placement in first year courses discussed in this Chapter was introduced. The site-based professional experience model reported in this Chapter has been developed by the School of Education at RMIT University and 13 partner primary schools in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Drawing on a view that learning is fundamentally a social process (Brown et al., 1989; Vygotsky 1978), where context or situatedness is key in knowledge construction (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this model involved placing 209 first year PSTs in small groups (12-16 students) in partner schools, then pairing the students, their buddy, for their professional experience placement. Whilst in schools, the small groups were taught course content by a school-based tutor.

Two sets of literature informed the development of this model including: literature related to professional experience, the importance of partnerships between university and schools, and the value of paired placements; and literature related to transition into higher education and

best practice strategies for supporting first year students. This chapter begins by examining these two sets of literature then describes the elements of the innovation, its method of delivery and examines, through focus group data, PSTs' perceptions of being paired/buddied. A number of key implications in relation to buddies are then discussed.

2 Literature

2.1 Professional Experience Partnerships

Numerous reports into initial teacher education in Australia refer to the need to improve the quality, with consistent concerns about the lack of connection between theory and practice (Ure et al., 2009). This rhetoric drives political commentary and has been the premise for a number of reports and initiatives. For instance, the *Top of the Class* report (Australian Parliament House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007), argued that at the centre of the issue around interconnection was the "current distribution of responsibilities in Teacher Education" (p. 2); whereby theoretical components are typically taught on campus by faculty and the teaching practicum undertaken on-site in schools by practising teachers. The more recent Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) report (2014) shared similar sentiments; schools and universities need to form closer partnerships and practising teachers should be more involved in preparing PSTs.

Practicum is generally acknowledged as one site where universities and schools can connect, as well as being vital for the development of practical skills for future teachers (Ure et al., 2009). Yet, how the practicum should be designed and implemented, and its relationship to university coursework is heavily contested by policy makers, practising teachers, university educators as well as students. Zeichner (2010) is critical of the way universities approach the practicum, arguing that they typically have very little involvement in its details, leaving these to be worked out between PSTs and their teacher mentors. Drawing on his own extensive experience, Zeichner suggests that practicum is often perceived by universities as an administrative task. Another problem with the practicum he suggests is that schools and teacher mentors know very little about the university coursework, and university educators have little knowledge of what happens in schools. Darling-Hammond (2010) similarly suggests that:

> *... [the practicum] side of teacher education has been fairly haphazard, depending on the idiosyncrasies of loosely selected placements with little guidance about what happens in them and little connection to university work (p. 40).*

While there is acknowledgment by policy makers, academics, researchers and practitioners alike, that university-based coursework and practicum should be more connected, achieving this connection is complex. As noted by Grossman et al. (2009, p. 276):

> *… though scholars of teacher education periodically revise the relationship between theory and practice, teacher education programs struggle to redesign programmatic structures and pedagogy to acknowledge and build on the integrated nature of theory and practice as well as the potentially deep interplay between coursework and field placements.*

In response, initial teacher education providers have attempted to improve professional experience through various innovations involving partnerships with schools, including versions of a teaching schools, site-based curriculum (Lang et al., 2015) teacher residencies between universities, schools and school districts (Klein et al., 2013). This chapter adds to research around innovations that connect schools and universities and focuses on how this partnership has been structured to support the transition of first year students to university and the profession.

2.2 Transition to Higher Education

Many of the pedagogical and organisational decisions around this innovation were influenced by the literature in relation to transitioning to university that is understood as challenging. This is particularly challenging within initial teacher education, as PSTs often feel vulnerable in their placements (Le Cornu, 2009). Given this course was located in first semester of first year, it was designed to acknowledge both the transition to university and the profession.

Studies have repeatedly shown that transition to university, whether entering university directly from school or from other starting points, is characterised by stress, challenges and a sense of being overwhelmed (Harvey et al., 2006; Kift et al., 2010; Tinto, 1993). Indeed, the highest academic failure and attrition occurs in the first year of tertiary education (McInnis et al., 2000) and brings with it substantial social and economic costs (Kuh et al., 2008).

Institutional changes to higher education have also influenced transition to university. The shift to blended and online models of learning and teaching within the university sector also means fewer days on campus (James et al., 2010). The massification of higher education, that is the move to larger and larger class sizes, is placing small group teaching practices under threat (Black & MacKenzie, 2008). Students also face external pressure from the need to take employment alongside their study, which may reduce attendance on campus for both formal classes and networking with fellow students (Bowles et al., 2011; Hillman, 2005; James et al., 2010). The combined effects of these recent trends means that students spend less time on campus compared to ten years ago, and less time interacting with one another. There has also been a significant decline in the proportion of first year students who feel confident that they are known by name by at least one teacher, and only 26% of students believe that staff take an interest in their progress (James et al., 2010). The potential for social isolation that results from these trends is concerning since social connectedness is increasingly recognised as key to successful transition (James et al., 2010; Kift et al., 2010; Masters & Donnison, 2010).

To counter these effects, the literature suggests that there needs to be an effective transition strategy for both student well-being and academic success (Bovill et al., 2011). Some specific strategies include creating a curriculum where students have a sense of belonging and address the personal, social and academic literacies of first year students (Krause, 2007; Reason et al., 2007). Other strategies include: orientation activities; academic support programs such as study skills (Harvey et al., 2006); formal and informal social events (Kift et al., 2010); and explicit forms of peer support through year levels, with more experienced students mentoring first year students (Bowles et al., 2011; James et al., 2010). More recent initiatives designed to support the first year experience involve creating learning communities, where students are allocated to a specific learning community for tutorials and seminars and remain in that learning community, sharing common classes for a semester or longer (Black & MacKenzie, 2008; Bowles et al., 2011; Masters & Donnison, 2010;).

3 The Innovation

In 2014, the School of Education at RMIT University reconceptualised professional experience for its four year Bachelor of Education program. Drawing on the literature outlined above, the new program centres on forming partnerships with schools to bring about better connections between theory and practice including a co-constructed curriculum. Each year of the program has a different model/approach to professional experience.

The first year model focuses on providing effective transition to university and to the profession in the course *Orientation to Teaching*. The course content and assessment has been designed collaboratively by practising teachers and teacher educators. The course begins at university, with PSTs undertaking eight two hour workshops involving tasks recommended in the transition literature including academic skills development, getting to know you activities, and scaffolded tasks which progressively introduce students to key teaching skills, such as questioning and feedback.

Based on the transitional literature, we encouraged peer engagement and social support through a number of social activities, including establishing a shared Facebook page between university staff and students. In keeping with research that supports fostering belonging and improving engagement through creating communities of learners (Black & MacKenzie, 2008; Harvey et al., 2006), we placed the PSTs into small groups of 12-16. We “buddied” them with a peer for support, both socially and academically.

The course then continued at 13 partner primary schools in Melbourne. Two hundred and nine PSTs observed and experienced teaching first-hand for two weeks, supported by five two hour tutorials taught by a school-based tutor (a practicing teacher employed by the university)

who customised the core curriculum to the individual school context. As they undertook the course they applied their knowledge and skills in a teacher mentor's classroom through activities such as audits and observations. The PSTs were required to complete a number of tasks that were assessed by the school-based tutor.

While there were many aspects of this innovation, such as co-constructed curriculum with schools, site-based learning, peer learning communities in schools, audits that critically question observation, this chapter examines the key element of pairing up PSTs; which was referred to as "buddies". This pairing was random and no effort was made to match partners although PSTs were given some direction as to how to work together as "buddies".

Previous approaches to buddied practicum experiences suggest that the benefits include overcoming the sense of isolation that many first time PSTs report (Lang et al., 2015) by providing a source of personal and professional support in a situation where PSTs often feel vulnerable and intimidated (Lang et al., 2015; LeCornu, 2009). Being paired fosters opportunities for critical reflection on practice (Manouchehri, 2002) in the belief that reflecting with a peer is not as intimidating as reflecting with a mentor teacher (Smith, 2004; Walsh & Elmslie, 2005). PSTs were also exposed to other approaches and perspectives about the same observed experiences, helping to broaden their teaching repertoires (Smith, 2004). Sharing the classroom with a buddy also enculturates PSTs into a profession increasingly characterised by team teaching, reflective practice, collegiality, collaborative relationships and socialised knowledge (Manoucherhi, 2002; Le Cornu, 2009).

4 Method

The course, *Orientation to Teaching* was delivered in Semester One, 2014 to 209 PSTs who were predominantly preparing to be generalist primary school teachers. The majority of the PSTs were female (86%), aged between 18 to 39 years (mean age of 21), and Australian-born (89.3%) with English as their language spoken at home (81.3%). Following the completion of the course, we invited the PSTs to participate in a variety of focus group discussions led by an independent facilitator. Some 42 PSTs participated across the four focus groups that were held on separate days over a two-week period. The focus group discussions used a number of open questions to prompt discussion around their experiences in the course and its design. The four focus groups included:

1. a random sample of PSTs who were buddied from a cross section of schools (only one of the buddies was invited to participate);

2. a selected group of PSTs who had not been buddied (due to student withdrawal or uneven numbers);

3. a selected group of international PSTs; and

4. an open forum where everyone was invited to attend.

Discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. The research team then identified in the transcript when being buddied was discussed. Findings from each focus group are presented in Section Five. The main issues identified are then discussed thematically to examine the buddy role in placements in first year courses.

5 Findings

5.1 Focus Group: Buddied Group

This focus group included 12 PSTs participated in this focus group. When asked specifically about having a buddy, several of the PSTs commented favourably. "Loved it" was one response, and "I had a really good buddy experience," was another. Often, as each PST gave their response they offered a justification for their response, and these differed from supporting learning to personal reasons. For example, in terms of learning, one PST commented that having a buddy enabled her "just to clarify my views and things that were happening in the classroom." Another PST commented that having a buddy exposed her to other ways of handling situations:

> *I thought it interesting, like I'd see some of the ways my buddy would approach the kids about certain things, topics. I was like, I hadn't thought about it like that before but it's really interesting to see.*

This PST also added:

> *At the end of the day we would always like debrief, how we felt about the day and … upcoming tasks and stuff, what we're going to do to prepare, do we need help with this.*

Another PST perceived that having a buddy enabled her:

> *… to find out as well how you work best. Like sometimes there are certain activities where we do decide we're going to do this because that's what works for us. So, I think just as a learner as well, it's good to work out how you like to do this.*

However, other PSTs provided less favourable responses to being paired with a buddy. One PST commented that having a buddy "took away from the work". Another PST elaborated on this theme and added:

> I was really having to help her get through the task and just constantly supporting her. All my focus was on her most of the time and not actually what I'm supposed to be doing.

Not all the PSTs had a definitive view; one PST highlighted this tension. Initially, when he had not been assigned a buddy he was pleased. "I was really lucky because I didn't have a buddy" adding that as a result, "It was about me all day long. Whatever I needed I got. I had all the attention on me and I loved that. I didn't need to compete with anybody else".

When he realised that a buddy was being assigned he commented, “it was the first day panic set in.” As he elaborated, he became very suspicious and quite nervous about the motives underpinning the buddy design, commenting “I thought that they designed this buddy system for a reason. Maybe PSTs in the past weren’t very confident?” and this possible motivation seemed to make him anxious. Later in this same conversation he turns full circle commenting that when his buddy was assigned, he realised there were benefits:

> *…because I got to not keep so many things to myself. Like if I thought about what was happening with the kid or interaction between the student and the teacher I could go to my buddy and ask him what did you think of this? What did you think of that?*

Many of the negative comments about having a buddy were mostly personality based, including “I was with a lovely girl but I found her very hard to work with and although I was patient and professional at all times, I know there was a lot of extra stress”.

Others felt that even if the pairing was not ideal, it was a reality of what they may experience in schools. One PST commented, “if you’re put with someone who doesn’t work well with you, you’d have to take that on board as an experience in itself.” Another commented, that experiencing such a pairing could prepare for the workplace “because there is always going to be people in your profession that you might not be best friends with, you might not get along with, so experiencing that now, you’re sort of more prepared for it”.

Another PST, who acknowledged that while she didn’t “have the best experience” added that “you’ve got to think of everybody else in the course and how it can benefit them.”

The issue of whether PSTs should have been able to choose their own buddy was one that generated considerable discussion in this focus group. This is typified in the following comment:

> *the buddy system was a huge hit and miss … it was pretty much pot luck for all of us because we didn’t know who we were going to be partnered with and I don’t think that, you know, the coordinators of this course researched all of us and our personalities and said let’s mash these two up together and create this awesome union. So, it was really just random.*

The issue of choosing your own buddy didn’t come up in the non-buddy group or the international group, but was raised in the open forum discussed in Section 5.4 (below).

When asked about how they specifically related with their buddy, again mixed views were expressed. One PST responded that she thought this relationship was one-sided and felt under pressure and assumed more of a parental relationship with her buddy:

> *I was always having to touch base with her and make sure that she understood what was required of her to do. And yeah, I emailed her like every night just to remind her about little things because I was a buddy. I felt like that if she didn’t do something it would let us both down, so I always feeling that pressure that I had to keep on, that things were getting done. It’s a joint effort and at times I felt like I was doing more work.*

Another commented that her relationship with her buddy was very different:

> *I think it helped that I already knew my buddy, so like I would pick her up from the bus every morning and we would go together, everything together. As far as our assignment went, we would send emails back and forth, 'oh I've added this, what do you think of what I've added in that'.*

And yet another PST commented that she and her buddy worked rather independently from one another; "we had a lot of discussion and that but when it came to actually teaching and doing class stuff we were very independent."

In summary, members of this focus group found benefits in using their buddies as a sounding board, to explore ideas and different perspectives about the same experiences. Being with a buddy exposed them to different approaches to situations and helped to develop their own practice. Many buddies worked in highly collaborative and supportive ways, whereas other buddies supported each other, but operated at more independent levels. For some, however, particularly where PSTs perceived themselves to be more experienced or capable, buddies were seen as a burden.

5.2 Focus Group: Non-Buddied Group

This group of eight PSTs was not assigned a buddy. We were interested to research their views to see how not having a buddy may have influenced their experience. For this group being placed in the one school with a peer group rather than having a buddy seemed to matter more, "I think that having a buddy isn't necessary but having a group of teachers like learning teachers is a really good thing."

This group of PSTs commented that they liked not having a buddy. As one of them said, "I preferred being alone" as she thought that having a buddy would restrict what she was able to do. As she elaborated, "I was by myself in the classroom, I really felt like I can just do everything as my teacher mentor wanted me to do by myself and just like, be more me than both of us". As another PST similarly commented, "I got to do so much more than they got to do because it was simply that there was one of me". Not surprisingly, this focus group paid minimal attention to the issue of buddies, preferring to discuss other core aspects of the course.

5.3 Focus Group: International Pre-Service Teachers Group

To this group of four PSTs having a buddy was one of the best features of the course. For the most part, PSTs in this group commented that they felt anxious about placement, and that having a buddy provided them with support:

> *… for me, stepping into a new environment like a primary school in Melbourne, I was really daunted by the prospect. I was really worried about what I was going to do in that environment. But having a buddy was really helpful in the sense that she motivated me and encouraged me to do well.*

Also commenting that, “I know nothing about Australia’s schools. When I first met her, she just tell me, no worries, I’ll help you. That actually comforted me a lot.” The buddy feature was seen as important: “Especially for the first placement for first year. Because we’re so confused. We worry about what we are going to do, just in class by ourselves, but with two persons, we can talk to each other, discuss”.

This assistance and support was a common theme throughout the comments:

> *My buddy just assists me and helps me a lot. So she [my buddy] tells me if there’s something I don’t know, just ask her. Sometimes in some classes I have to ask her to explain what the teacher is talking about, or the process. I am really glad and thankful for the buddies.*

Having a buddy to some also meant that they could work as a team:

> He [my buddy] doesn’t have experience with the children like I had experience with children, so I could help him with the children, but he could help me with how to organise my work, put my lesson plan together.

However as one of the PSTs commented, not all pairs worked in teams.

> *…there was no team work. They were just doing it for themselves, working in competition with each other. This moved on to the others in the school. Everyone started to become more competitive. Even my buddy started to become more competitive. There was a lot of change over the weeks. She started to become a bit rude to me in front of the teachers: “It’s your turn now, come on!”*

Buddies, for the international students, were a conduit to understanding the unfamiliar culture of Australian classrooms. However, uneven perceptions of ability by some of the Australian PSTs over the period of the practicum lead to a sense of competitiveness.

5.4 Focus Group: Open Group

This group was the largest focus group with 42 PSTs in attendance. Many of their opinions echoed that of the buddied focus group (Section 5.1) and tended to support the notion of being paired, especially as this was their first placement: “For first year students and first placement in primary school, it was just a huge support for my buddy and we helped each other a lot”. It was also seen as providing support from a peer: “It was really good to have someone at the same level as you so it’s not quite as scary because you are not there by yourself being shoved into that situation”.

Similar to the buddied focus group (Section 5.1), the reasons for liking the buddy ranged from personal, learning and professional understanding, and for some PSTs multiple reasons, for example:

> *Initially when I found out we were going to have buddies in the classroom with us I was a little bit disappointed…in the end I ended up loving it because I actually felt more confident more than I probably would have done on my own in the classroom. I would have really … I could stand up there and I could do the questioning and I really felt a lot more confident. We did things that I probably wouldn’t have done otherwise. I found it really good.*

I spent the first week with a buddy, I spent the second week alone and I did not like that at all. It was, I just, it was all right, it was good because I got more opportunities to learn but I didn't have that person to lean on and sort of help me through it all as well.

An issue that didn't arise in any of the other focus groups was around self-imposed comparisons when buddied. For example, one PST commented:

During class time I found that I would watch my buddy and how he interacted with the kids and I would kind of reflect on myself. So I was constantly comparing myself ... I thought he was a little bit more ahead. So, I was like all right, how can I, you know, change my teaching so I'm on par with him.

In a similar vein, another noted:

I found at certain times I would again watch my buddy and how she was reacting and I'd kind of sometimes I'd feel, I think the kids like her a little bit better or they are just becoming a little bit more attached or she's acting more natural and fluent with them than I am.

As with the other groups, there were a number of PSTs who weren't supportive of the buddy model:

I think in our classroom especially it was very crowded and like its exactly like you have different views and you just go about things totally differently ...I would much prefer to just like for the first day sit back and be able to watch the teacher interacting with the student.

Again, however, the issue of uneven relationships with a buddy arose:

My buddy was lovely. It's nothing against her but having years of experience in early childhood and teaching we weren't on the same level. And although she was here to support me and that was great and if I had a question that was fine, but working together we had very different views and I get that that's a great introduction into teaching because there will always be somebody in your teaching staff that is different, but different levels of professionalism, different levels of what I would expect from a buddy and what I expect to be as a buddy.

The findings demonstrate that the relationships between buddies are complex and variable. Focus group data suggests that a number felt that buddying had advantages such as overcoming the sense of isolation, providing support and being able to share ideas and debrief on lessons with peers rather than teacher mentors. Others were less favourable. The issue of whether PSTs should be able to choose their buddy generated considerable discussion. Focus group data also suggested that working in a pair, or even in a group, requires more support and planning than was originally assumed. However, a number of themes arose that need further discussion (see Section 6) to better understand this innovation being utilised in a first year placement.

6 Discussion

6.1 Buddy Up: Learning Potential

This study reinforces much of the research around the benefits of pairing PSTs for placement as identified in the literature.

Many of the PSTs in this study felt that the paired placement allowed them to share problems, concerns and worries with a person in the same situation who was not assessing them (Smith, 2004) and they valued the support of a peer (Gardiner & Robinson, 2010). This support came in multiple forms: practical support, "picking me up from the bus"; personal support, "I felt more confident"; supporting reflective practice, "just to clarify my views"; and support with learning. This was similar to King's (2006) research that found that pairing students increased confidence, provided a peer to share problems, the highs and lows of the classroom, and to share resources.

Some PSTs reported that they learned vicariously from watching each other teach (Smith, 2004) and provided different perspectives about the teaching process, "I hadn't thought about it like that before" and helped each other take pedagogical risks, "we did things that I probably wouldn't have done otherwise" (Gardiner & Robinson, 2010). It seemed that working in pairs provided PSTs with an additional layer of support that enabled them to make meaning from their early teaching experiences; "it's not quite as scary." Working in pairs also helped them gain confidence in their ability as teachers and they began to see themselves as teachers as they engaged in learning conversations with their partners (Harlow & Cobb, 2014). This may not have been the case if they had been placed alone with their mentor as research has found that often the dialogue between PSTs and their mentors tends to be "directive and focused on pragmatic tasks, such as which lessons to teach, what to do to differently next time" (Gardiner & Robinson, 2010, p. 204). There was evidence that some PSTs engaged in more open-ended brainstorming and problem solving as well as feedback on each other's teaching. This may be because the peer relationship is more equal than the mentor/student relationship and the peers were more comfortable questioning and analysing each other's teaching than they would be engaging in similar talk with their mentor teacher (Gardiner & Robinson, 2010). This was evident in comments where PSTs felt they might "annoy" their mentor with questions and concerns but felt more "on the same level" as a peer.

6.2 Buddy Up: Transition Potential

The buddy approach, set within learning communities of students placed in schools and taught by a school-based tutor, supports elements of a transition pedagogy. The innovation supported social networks amongst first-year PSTs and many of the students spoke about how the intimacy of buddying up acted to promote close bonds and a sense of belonging to a community of learners in ways that larger, university tutorial classes may not have supported.

The focus group with the most positive views about the buddy system was the international focus group. International students, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, face significant challenges that can impede their successful transition to their new university

environment (Goldingay et al., 2014). Teacher education students can struggle with communication issues, cultural differences, financial burdens, heavy workloads and difficulty in developing relationships with local students. This can lead to high levels of anxiety. One of the benefits of the new first year program is that, whilst on placement, international students are with students who are familiar with the culture of Australian classrooms and, through peer and group discussions both formally and informally, support is there for the international students to understand and interpret what they were seeing and experiencing.

6.3 Buddy Up: Potential for Competition

Pairing worked well when both PSTs had a positive attitude to learning, were respectful and helpful towards each other and the teaching staff (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005) and perceived each other as being on relatively equal footing (Gardiner & Robinson, 2010). However, competitive individualism (Schniewind & Davidson, 1998) emerged in some instances. Being buddied made it difficult for some PSTs to avoid comparison, either overtly or covertly, "I was constantly comparing myself". They buddying system was less successful where there were perceived differences in ability, either academic or practical; "we weren't on the same level" which created a sense of competition (King, 2006). Perceptions of disparity emerged from a PSTs' comparison of their own performance and ability with their buddy's, or if one PST perceived that the teacher mentor favoured their partner over them, or had not created a balance of individual and shared learning experiences within the classroom. Feelings of competition and comparison (Walsh & Elmslie, 2005) also emerged in relation to assessments. Tensions sometimes arose where PSTs were encouraged to work as a team but were assessed individually.

Universities often pre-suppose that students come with the maturity and skills necessary to work in a professional setting with peers, but such skills are rarely explicitly taught. Many first year PSTs generally come from backgrounds where individualism and winning is valued, rather than from a more collectivist or collegial stance.

6.4 Buddy Up: Potential for Teacher Education

While some of the literature tends to report pairing of PSTs for organisational or pragmatic reasons, for example, the relative scarcity of school placements and teacher mentors (King, 2006), in this study they were purposefully paired to support transition and the belief that working together may build "collegiality, peer feedback and socialised knowledge" (Manouchehri, 2002, p. 735). The idea that from first year, we are embedding professional dialogue, peer feedback, working in teams, collaboration and reflective practice in initial teaching education may make it more likely to become a foundation of their practice (King, 2006). However, the focus group data revealed that paired placements throw up complexities

such as unprofessional behaviour, individualised competition and at times seeing peers as a burden. PSTs questioned the random buddying of students and recommended that we spend more time researching personalities and capabilities to engineer more productive buddying. However, setting aside the practical and resource implications from this suggestion, one of the foundations of teaching is working with others, therefore it is imperative that we provide opportunities, especially for first year PSTs, to collaborate and develop these skills. We acknowledge that we have our role to play in preparing them for this challenge. We may have to focus time and energy in teaching collaboration skills, problem solving, active listening, and overcoming personality challenges as this will be a feature when they enter the teaching profession.

7. Conclusion

> *So, I guess the constructive criticism would be then for the coordinators to emphasis so no matter who you've been paired with there are positives... because if [they] don't get along with their buddy and they are not working together they could be really... let down, and saying "this sucks I don't get along with this person"... There are always positives... (PST, buddied group)*

This chapter provided comment and research around PSTs' perceptions of the buddy model for professional experience using data from four focus groups. The decision to buddy students was based upon the literature around practicum to better facilitate professional conversations and learning that connect theory and practice. It was also informed by the transition to university literature, with calls to foster learning communities and encourage social and professional networks.

The findings from the focus groups offer insights into the complexities involved in buddying PSTs on practicum. Some PSTs felt there were positives including: learning possibilities, professional engagement through dialogue and personal benefits such as increased confidence. Others were less favourable, often citing personality clashes or differences in workplace experience, commitment or knowledge of course requirements as well as competitive individualism. Focus group data suggested that working with a buddy does require a certain skill-set. There is much we can do in an initial teacher education program to support the development of teaching professionals that goes beyond classroom instruction, behaviour management and content. Given the current demands of the teaching profession, we will need to create innovative professional experience models such as buddying to prepare them for the challenges of collaboration. Further, it is necessary that we provide development opportunities for PSTs to learn about themselves and strategies for working with others and the skills to become reflective practitioners.

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