Site-Based Teacher Education as a Context for Attending to the Complexity and Person-Centred Nature of Teaching and Learning: A Narrative Inquiry Involving Teacher Educators from Australia and the United States

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Abstract While research suggests that those who graduate from site-based teacher education programs are better prepared to teach (Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden 2007), (Zeichner 2012) reminds us that advocates of practice-based teacher education “give insufficient attention to other aspects of teaching that are fundamentally important to improving the quality of teaching” (p. 376). This narrative inquiry foregrounds stories told by teacher educators who work within site-based teacher education programs separated by vast distances (one in Australia and the other in the United States). While the university and school contexts differ in some cultural respects, there are fundamental similarities between the site-based programs which have emerged through responsive, social, dynamic processes. Theory/practice connections are heightened through a focus on movement between diverse spaces and learning from different voices; critical attention to teaching and learning situations; the use of experiential learning processes; and the ongoing commitment and passion of those who work behind the scenes to develop and maintain partnerships. We write narratively about significant experiences related to site-based teacher education and as a ‘response community’ (2013)
demonstrate the way improvement occurs through interaction. We examine the challenges associated with measuring the impact of site-based teacher education; however, argue that the experiential and critically responsive processes central in our programs prepare pre-service teachers for the complex systems of schooling (Cochran-Smith et al. 2014) and its person-centred nature (Fielding 2006).

1 Introduction

In both Australia and the United States, university-school partnerships are recognised by those who work in teacher education (Darling-Hammond 2006; Johnston-Parsons 2012; Neapolitan and Levine 2011) and those who develop policy directions (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group 2015; NCATE 2010) as a significant way to enhance theory/practice connections for pre-service teachers (PSTs) and to develop classroom readiness. In line with Clifford and Miller’s (2007) definition, we suggest that partnerships are a formal agreement “intended to accomplish mutual benefits that the partners, alone, could not accomplish” (p. 11). There is a long tradition of university-school partnership approaches in the US where the Professional Development School (PDS) model, an evolution of the laboratory school created early last century (Darling-Hammond 2006, p. 154), has been in place since the 1980s. In Australia, a House of Representatives review into teacher education in 2007 (“Top of the Class”) promoted “the adoption of partnerships as a condition of teacher education” (Kruger et al. 2009). Yet, as Kruger et al suggest, the report opted for a widely based approach rather than a single model such as PDS. Consequently, university-school partnerships in Australia are varied and continue to take on the flavour of those ‘inspired individuals’ who work within them.

In conjunction with an emphasis on partnerships, there is a re-emerging focus in the literature on making practice central in teacher education (Zeichner 2012). In recent times the term ‘practice-based teacher education’ has come to mean a number of things: from increased time in schools to an intense focus on core practices (Forzani 2014) which are seen to have high leverage. An emphasis on who should be permitted to teach and what teachers do in classrooms has led to a high-stakes performance assessment in the US, with edTPA (administered by the publishing corporation Pearson) currently required by universities in 34 states (edTPA website: http://edtpa.ncte.org/welcome). New accreditation procedures in both Australia and the US require a focus on using evidence to demonstrate compliance with teaching standards and to show the impact of teaching on student students’ achievements. It is in the context of international debates focused increasingly on who should be allowed to teach, how teaching should be enacted, and where teacher education should take place that we write about our experiences, as university teacher educators, of developing and teaching within site-based teacher education programs.

This narrative inquiry aims to examine the work of teacher educators in two universities: one located in Australia and the other in the United States. In both universities site-based teacher education and university-school partnerships are central in certain teacher education programs. Through narrative reflections this chapter examines the nature of site-based teacher education where rich teaching and learning opportunities are created through relational and responsive processes and regular ‘behind-the-scenes’ work undertaken by people who are passionate about what happens for young people in schools. We show, through our narratives, that while clinically rich teaching practices are central in our programs, critical attention is given to schooling as PSTs move through diverse school spaces, hear divergent voices, and conduct inquiries in professional learning communities. While research suggests that those who graduate from site-based teacher education programs are better prepared to teach (Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden 2007), we suggest, like Cochran-Smith et al. (2014), that teacher education is a complex system involving “multi-dimensional relationships and dynamic interactions among agents and elements” (p. 106) and should be appreciated, understood and represented as such. Questions posed by Cochran-Smith et al. (2014) inspire our ongoing research agenda: “How do teacher education program systems interact with schools as systems? What learning opportunities for teacher candidates emerge from different types of interactions and relationships? To what extent are teacher candidates’ abilities to enact teaching that enable learning for all students influenced by different school system/teacher education system interactions and relationships? How do these influence students’ learning opportunities and outcomes?” (p. 114–115). Questions related to teaching practice environments, which are fundamentally person-centred (Fielding 2006), give us new opportunities to examine the learning that can occur for those who interact in new ways in school spaces.

2 Contexts and Connections

As program leader of the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program at Federation University Australia, Amanda has worked for over 13 years with colleagues to create formal partnerships with a cluster of schools in the regional city of Ballarat and surrounding rural areas. The program contains around 70 on-campus graduate level students. All core courses (which are carefully integrated) and most specialist teaching areas are taught in schools by university lecturers and school-based teachers. Different courses and areas of the curriculum are taught at different school sites. Most classes with a focus on learning and teaching are taught at a large state secondary college. A course on youth culture is taught at an applied learning centre with direct involvement from young people, many of whom have opted out of mainstream schooling. When PSTs examine policy and practices related to teaching young people with disabilities, they engage in learning experiences at the local specialist school. A 2-day bus trip to a distant rural school enables PSTs to learn about the rich community and school-based experiences young people have in rural locations.
3 A Response Community

Through the connection between our universities, we are considering whether Clandinin’s (2013) notion of ‘response community’ (p. 210) can be used to frame and foster an ongoing dialogue as we share our narratives and research puzzles, engage in practitioner inquiries, and grapple with the shared challenge to demonstrate impact. Clandinin (2013) suggests that response communities are ‘marked by diversity’ (p. 210) and provide opportunities for developing insight and enhancing works-in-progress. We take the notion of ‘responding’ to another level in this chapter. In preparation, we wrote a series of narratives about our on-site teacher education experiences prompted by Amanda’s visit, and then wrote responses to narratives constructed by others in the group. This chapter includes a selection of those narratives and the responses. Writing and responding in this way has enabled us to continue our dialogue across vast distances and the ‘response’ enables us to expand our inquiry and identify interesting connections. The narratives, as they interconnect and jointly create meaning are examples of how people think through experience in social interactions and learn. When we make meaning from dispersed narratives that are juxtaposed, interwoven and contrasted, a satisfying sense of knowing emanates (McGrav 2014). We intend to illustrate through our own example, how learning occurs in social networks of activity and through narrative constructions that trigger sense-making. We also suggest that on-site teacher education experiences, where complex, responsive processes of relating (Stacey 2001) are inherent, create rich opportunities for professional learning and ongoing inquiry.

4 Complexity and How Things Work in On-site Teacher Education

The work of teaching, and especially of learning to teach, is extraordinarily complex. A deeper engagement with theory while simultaneously becoming more firmly grounded in the world of practice may enable us to come to grips with this complexity. Recent scholarship in teacher education has explored complexity theory, as used in sociology, to propose a new approach, “an opening and broadening perspective that invites new questions, methods, and combinations of research tools” (Cochran-Smith et al. 2014, p. 16). A perspective that highlights the power of relationships, acknowledges the enormous variety and unpredictability of the teacher education community, recognises the emergent nature of school-based teacher education, accounts for the lack of linear mechanisms of change, and yet still enables us to consider how we might learn from and support one another would be profoundly beneficial to the ongoing study of teacher education.

Cochran-Smith et al. (2014) explain that studies using complexity theory, “need to account for and foreground relationships, interactions, and processes across
levels" (p. 28). Second, acknowledging variety “and unpredictability … requires … more complex and contingent notions of agency and responsibility that depend on deep understanding of the local (e.g., initial conditions, sequences, and transformative events) linked to larger understanding of processes and outcomes at various systems levels that are widely variable but not inexplicable” (p. 21). Third, complex systems are recognised as emergent in this theoretical framework: “Their change and growth occurs as a bottom-up emergent process, rather than as a top-down directed process” (p. 25). In addition, complexity theory rejects linear notions of cause and effect, but does not reject “the idea that things have causes … Understanding cause as complex, multiple, and contingent is quite consistent with focusing on the particulars of local contexts” (p. 20). And despite the variety, fluidity and contextualised and emergent nature of educational settings, complexity theory proposes that it is possible to “contribute insights about the particular that are also useful beyond the local context and beyond a single moment in time” (p. 19).

Mainstream thinking privileges explicit knowledge in the form of lists, models, codes and so on (Stacey 2001) and this is particularly so in our contemporary educational contexts where evidence of impact is required. Alternatively, we use narrative inquiry as a research methodology to capture and examine the complex, generative layers of interaction at work in our on-site teacher education programs. Narrative inquiry allows us to attend to the complexity of our lived experiences, to how things work in our programs, and to show that local contexts and ‘small stories’ are inextricably linked to larger educational issues (Phoenix 2013, p. 74).

5 A Narrative Inquiry

The narratives that follow are at once what Greene (1995) would suggest as “seeing things small” and “looking at things large” (p. 16). Autobiographical narrative enables us to show the disorderly connections in experience between the personal, professional, political and cultural. The notion of travel, of movement between diverse spaces, is discussed by Elbaz-Luwisch (2014) in her exploration of autobiography and pedagogy. Writing in and visiting faraway places, she suggests, creates ‘wakefulness’ (p. 163). Connecting to the lives of others through close attention, sitting in their worlds, even for a moment, is something we value in our teacher education programs and underpins the opportunities we create for PSTs to shadow students, listen attentively to stories told in school, and complete some of the learning tasks they design for students. This chapter was conceived through the physical act of visiting and through our narratives, we ‘take the imagination visiting’ (Elbaz-Luwisch 2014, p. 163) in order to see afresh and consider new possibilities. Our autobiographic, narrative writing serves a number of purposes. As Elbaz-Luwisch (2014, p. 142) suggests, we write to clarify our personal stories, to reflect on our work, to communicate engagingly with others, and to make sense of the things that puzzle and disturb us. At a time, in both our countries, when functional writing genres in schools and in universities dominate, we value and emphasise the personal narrative for the multileveled insights it can capture about the nature of our complex work, and for the pleasure it can produce. We also wonder, like Elbaz-Luwisch (2014), whether such writing can be used to effectively interrogate authoritative discourses and question educational practices (p. 142). Kamler (2001) relocates the personal within social, cultural and political domains. Stories related to her life and work as a writer, teacher and researcher, are ‘littered with metaphors of movement and place’ (Kamler 2001, p. 5) and should be seen as a political project.

We turn now to Amanda’s narratives, describing her visit to UGA and to responses written by Melissa and Janna.

6 Amanda’s Narrative: The Wonderful Ambiguity of Place

We arrive at the Graduate Hotel in Athens. The hotel, decked out with vintage College-style décor—tartan throws, coloured 60s telephones and bulldog lamps—makes me think of American college films, football, boys in varsity jackets, and girls with blond pig tails. On the first night in Athens we eat grits and fried chicken.

Melissa picks me up in her car early on Tuesday and we drive to a school where a site-based university class is about to begin. We are initially hesitant with one another knowing nothing about each other’s history or intentions and yet, as time goes on and Melissa drives me daily between schools and the university, we engage in thoughtful discussion about all sorts of educational issues, stimulated by the shared experiences of what we see and the different voices we encounter along the way.

As I travel through the schools as a stranger that week, I am struck by the artefacts that adorn corridors and classrooms. Schools are ambiguous texts in need of constant interpretation (Bruner 1986, p. 122). The presence of high-level security on entry is unsettling, not so much at airports and museums, but, in schools, the process of checking in, and at times with armed security personnel located in protective booths, is unnerving. In the corridors of some schools are blatant messages about the need to leave guns at home; about the importance of solving problems with language rather than with weapons and hate. Hand-drawn posters hang clumsily in the spacious, highly polished corridors asking fellow students to respect diversity, be proud and choose wisely. Carefully arranged trophies competing for space in sparkling glass cabinets mark great sporting achievements, yet in the uncomfortably quiet corridors there is little sign of life. I suddenly realise that the only way to see into classrooms is through a narrow rectangular panel of glass on the doors. There are no internal windows.
Later that week I visit a school with Melissa; it is the first class for the university students at this particular school and the principal has arranged a tour. He shows us the school with a confident 14-year-old African American girl who tells stories from her own perspective about school life. They show us the sensory garden, the outdoor classroom, the language centre and the farm animals. In a classroom, later, the PSTs sit at collaborative tables. They could easily be my Australian students; they even dress the same way. Hilary and Matt, the On-Site Instructors (OSIs) who co-teach this class, ask the PSTs what they have noticed. The PSTs talk about the technology, the sense of activity, the goats and the collaboration between principal and student. They say that this school feels alive and comfortable and as though it has a strong sense of community. They notice that there’s a focus on life-long learning. They compare the school to others they have inhabited and some, they suggest, seem more like prisons. The PSTs have just written poems titled ‘Where I’m from’. They lie in a messy pile on the desk in front of me and I take a peek at one close by: “I’m from fried corn and strong coffee; from the finger my grand-father lost to the auger”. The class moves from observations to assumptions and the OSIs lead the discussion to carefully focusing the PSTs on the assumptions they make about schools, neighbourhoods, races, particular kids. They will soon shadow a student for a day which is intended to help PSTs stand in different shoes and see life as others may experience it.

In our program in Australia, our first class of the year in one of our partnering schools is spent in very similar ways. We send the PSTs off to wander around the school and they use the See, Think, Wonder visible thinking routine to jot down what they see and their initial thoughts. We talk explicitly about the disposition to attend, to notice fleeting moments, to collect small stories. When they return to the classroom, we lead carefully into a discussion about assumptions and they read about Brookfield’s (1995) critically reflective lenses. I mentally steal the idea of the PSTs writing poems about their own lives and the small, yet significant cultural moments that make them who they are. When we talk after class, I wonder about the possibility of the PSTs completing the school work of the student they shadow: of them doing what students are asked to do during the course of a day, and we all agree that this would be an interesting experience to try and examine. In this classroom space, with these people on this day, I am amazed by the connections we have made separately and by our shared sense of purpose. We use the experience of schooling, the emerging dialogue and our own imaginative enterprises to examine the meanings we make and to create new possibilities for active learning where stance and counter-stance in spaces heavily layered with ambiguities, enable insight.

6.1 Melissa Responds

Amanda’s observations of schools I thought I knew well proceeded to open my eyes to scenes I normally gloss over. Seeing our schools through her eyes brought to light some stark realisations. Every time we walked in to a school, doors beyond a main foyer were locked. At one school a receptionist spoke to us through a protective glass window before we presented ID, explained why we were at the school and were buzzed in. I found myself explaining to Amanda that over the last few years schools in this district had begun to secure their entrances in case an intruder with a gun came to their campus. I pause as I write this, reflecting on Amanda’s mention of armed security, because it now leads me to wonder how students in our schools perceive their school. Does this space feel like a prison to them, a place to keep others out as much as keep them in or, despite or possibly because of these fixtures, do they view it as a safe space? These questions make me wonder and want to adapt George Ella Lyon’s poem ‘Where I’m From’ with a template for our K-12 students. Amanda noted our PSTs wrote poems based on the original as a way to reflect on where they come from and how where they come from can impact how they view the world, schools and the teaching profession. But how powerful and simple it is to adapt the template for K-12 students to write about their world, their school. It has the opportunity to give teachers insight into their students’ lives and become aware of how they move through different spaces, including their school.

6.2 Amanda’s Narrative: A Focus on Performance

My first conversation about edTPA and performance assessment is with Kevin, one of the OSIs. I observe Kevin’s English Curriculum class held at one of the partnering high schools, in a neighbourhood considered to be one of the poorest in the country. After a workshop which focuses on the PSTs creating visual maps of their personal literacy experiences in high school, the PSTs leave the room to observe students in classrooms with a focus on literacy learning. Kevin, Melissa and I chat about the changes occurring in teacher education: the focus on testing in schools and the increasing number of families in the US who are opting out; the focus on judging and measuring teachers’ performance and the use of performance pay to ensure accountability; the push away from reading imaginative texts in English due to a focus on informative and persuasive texts in high-stakes tests; and the requirement in over 30 states in the US to use Pearson’s edTPA performance assessment as a method of ensuring PSTs’ classroom readiness. As time goes on through my conversations with teacher educators and PSTs and finally through a training session focused on the assessment of edTPA portfolios, I learn more about this process of performance assessment. I learn that PSTs submit lesson planning documentation, two filmed segments of them teaching, and an analysis of their performance based on key indicators outlined in a series of rubrics. They must pay $300 US to Pearson which is one of three fees they pay to complete externally assessed tests. The edTPA portfolios, which include extensive written documents, are evaluated by external assessors trained and paid by Pearson. In the edTPA
6.3 Janna Responds

I think Amanda’s description of the possibility inherent in on-site teaching has clarified a very important point: there is enormous power in having multiple voices participating in conversations about pedagogical practices. These conversations are the essence of professional practice and yet they are difficult to legislate. People have deep, meaningful conversations when they are presented with interesting dilemmas or questions and when they are given the time and space to explore these questions. These conversations are especially productive when different points of view are presented. Amanda’s description of the Maths class is an example of this kind of conversation and I, too, recently viewed a situation that was structurally very different, but that afforded a similar set of opportunities for teachers and PSTs, and was grounded in an on-site teaching experience. I was fortunate enough to observe a group of PSTs who were meeting with a mentor teacher to share their plans for an upcoming unit of study. The mentor teacher was a first grade teacher and the PSTs were currently doing fieldwork in first grade classrooms. The stated purpose of this meeting was for the mentor to provide feedback and guidance to the PSTs and this certainly did happen, but the richness of the exchange derived from the many conversations that happened between and among the people in the room. The PSTs shared concerns and suggestions with one another, the mentor teacher asked questions of me because she knew me as a member of the university community, I queried the PSTs to make sure I understood their goals, the mentor teacher and I together tried to clarify the task, and the mentor teacher commented on how the ideas presented by the PSTs had broadened her thoughts about the upcoming topic for study. All of this happened in just a few minutes and strengthened understanding and practice for PSTs, the mentor teacher, and myself as a teacher educator. These brief interactions are immensely powerful, but they cannot be effectively prescribed or planned—they arise spontaneously when people engaged in different aspects of pedagogy are able to talk with one another. These experiences are the emergent manifestations of a true community of learners. Although such experiences would wither away or stagnate if they were required, it is possible to create environments where they are more likely to occur. And those environments are exactly what is enabled through intentional and thoughtful on-site teaching.

7 The Person-Centred Nature of Teacher Education

From an organisational perspective, teacher education of this sort can be best understood as webs of people generating, using and retaining knowledge as opposed to hierarchical structures where knowledge is centrally controlled and distributed. Our narrative accounts highlight the agency people take in unpredictable and surprising situations; the way interactions and joint inquiries create new possibilities and deeper understandings; and the value of learning about theory through practice.
in local contexts. While we have focused on the enactment of experiences occurring within on-site teacher education, we also want to point to the complexity involved 'behind the scenes' in establishing and maintaining partnerships that enable on-site teacher education to flourish. This approach to teacher education is only possible when teacher educators, teachers, principals and bureaucrats are willing to work collaboratively in ongoing ways that build trust and respect.

7.1 Erica’s Narrative: Complexity and What Happens Behind the Scenes

As a manager of university-school partnerships, all of my work is embedded within complexity, much of which occurs 'behind the scenes'. From the university viewpoint, the primary work of managing a partnership involves ongoing relationship building and considering the work as an emergent process rather than anything predetermined. Only through intentional and ongoing trust-building with administrators, school principals, and teachers do opportunities for reciprocal learning result. The best site-based contexts for teacher educators rarely just 'happen'.

In forming the Professional Development School District (PDSD) in 2011, the leadership created four different interconnected groups that enable relationship building and joint decision-making. The groups meet often (the leadership team meets monthly) and because there is cross-over among the groups, each continually informs the others, resulting in continuous improvement and innovation. Without discussing each of the groups in detail, the commitment to a structure that recognizes the complexity of both institutions and is driven by individuals who have personal passion and emotional commitment to a mutually beneficial partnership is the core foundation that enables the site-based teacher preparation to flourish.

For example, in fall 2016, a new faculty member named Hilary easily gained access to a middle school to teach her middle grades methods course on-site. She already had the trust of the principal and teachers that enabled her to immediately take full advantage of a rich context for her teacher candidates. What is not apparent, yet needs to be recognized, is that UGA cultivated a relationship with the school for five years preceding this. Laying the groundwork for site-based learning takes ongoing, collaborative work and significant investment of time and energy. In this case, trust was built over the years through the following types of activities/projects: meeting regularly with the principal, involving the principal in a partnership writing retreat and presentations at national conferences, involving teachers in developing professional learning and restructuring the secondary Math education program, and including teachers and administrators as guest lecturers in the first site-based course. Through these behind-the-scenes activities that all emerged organically over time, the school became one of the best sites in the district to authentically connect theory and practice.

8 Challenges Related to Evidence and Impact

Given the different layers of complexity inherent in both what occurs in on-site teacher education and what occurs behind the scenes, it is challenging to demonstrate the 'impact' of partnerships in measurable terms. The COE at UGA have survey data from PSTs each semester that shows that 93% agree that on-site courses better prepare them for the realities of teaching. This is encouraging data, yet in a national context of increasing accountability, teacher educators are more often asked: “What is the impact of the partnership on student achievement?” At the COE in 2015, one faculty member, Jori, embarked on a case study of two of the partnership elementary schools. One aspect of her investigation was the relationship between Professional Development School School (PDS) practices and student achievement. The two schools were robust examples of the PDS model. Throughout the year of data collection, it became increasingly clear that the partnership work in the schools was far too complex to result in a one size fits all ‘formula’ that could be replicated. Jori describes the PDS schools’ success in terms of ‘collective capacity’ where every element of the partnership contributes to the whole. Jori explains that collective capacity supports results for school students and drives a continuous improvement cycle for educators. Unfortunately, when we are forced to show ‘impact’, we ignore relationship-based complexity, which is central to the nature of site-based teacher preparation.

Teacher educators at Federation University have also been researching the impact of key partnership initiatives on the knowledge, skills and dispositions of their PSTs. One ongoing project examines the impact of Classroom Intensives on PSTs’ thinking dispositions. They are examining whether dispositions that are central to effective teaching like critical attention, reflection, strategic thinking, creativity and people-centeredness are activated when PSTs use a structured approach to classroom observation. Another project examines PSTs’ use of core teaching practices in a co-teaching initiative focused on Values in Action. This research suggests that as PSTs work in the gritty reality of schools in social contexts that are both carefully scaffolded and open to the complex reality of schools, their learning is multidimensional and fuelled by challenges they must understand and deal with in their teaching careers.

9 Conclusion

There is danger in a turn toward practice. As Reid (2011) points out, practice without a study of practice can lead us to school-based training models as they have in the UK where universities are marginalised. Zeichner (2012) suggests that site-based teacher education does not need to be a return to practice based teacher education (p. 376). Through site-based teacher education where thoughtful
movement between diverse spaces is central, an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009) is nurtured. PSTs and teacher educators collaborate with school teachers and leaders in professional learning communities and attend critically to matters of schooling with a focus on continual improvement. While we suggest that complex relational and responsive processes are at the heart of this approach, we propose, finally, that regular access to the voices and experiences of young people is one of the most powerful aspects of this work.

References

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