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Jenna Gillett-Swan & Deanna Grant-Smith

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EDITORIAL



## Complex, compound and critical: recognising and responding to the factors influencing diverse preservice teacher experiences of practicum

The practicum (or professional experience) is an entrenched feature of initial teacher education programs. In recent years, there has been an emphasis on improving the quality of practicum experiences in both academic research (e.g. Grudnoff & Williams, 2010; Lawson, Çakmak, Gunduz, & Busher, 2015) and in teacher education policy (e.g. TEMAG, 2014). However, while the practicum is generally considered by participants to be one of the most influential experiences in their preservice teacher education (Busher, Gündüz, Cakmak, & Lawson, 2015) it is also recognised as being one of the most stressful (Gardner, 2010). As a result, there is an increasing tendency in recent work to explore the practicum through the eyes and experiences of participants (Buckworth, 2017; Grant-Smith & Gillett-Swan, 2017). Yet, despite increasing recognition of the personal factors that can influence experiences of practicum, and the impact that of practicum participation can exert on other life domains and commitments, these ideas are rarely centred in discussions of practicum (Grant-Smith, Gillett-Swan, & Chapman, 2016). Indeed, it could be argued that in the pressurised environment of the practicum, these considerations are especially influential and are of growing importance as a result of the increased participation of non-traditional students in teacher education programs.

The papers in this issue coalesce around the theme of complexity, particularly as it relates to the practice and promotion of practicum as the preeminent activity in initial teacher education for developing and practicing teaching skills in an authentic yet supervised teaching environment.

The importance of understanding the complexity involved in providing positive practicum experiences and the influence of personal factors on success is foregrounded in the contribution by Fiona Ell, Mavis Haigh, Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Lexie Grudnoff, Larry Ludlow and Mary Hill. They highlight the need to account for and respond to the individual differences of preservice teachers – such as their personal circumstances, learning history, and prior experiences – as well as the complex and multi-layered contexts, schools, and policy/political environments in which new teachers learn to teach and the larger structures of privilege and inequality that intersect with these.

Providing appropriate support systems is often posited as a way of helping preservice teachers to navigate this complexity. Wendy Nielsen, Juanjo Mena, Anthony Clarke, Sarah O'Shea, Garry Hoban and John Collins describe the importance of in-school mentoring by supervising teachers in supporting preservice teacher success during placement, and outline the challenges mentors face in undertaking this role. In particular, they highlight the implications of providing limited capacity building for supervising teachers on the practicum experiences of preservice teachers. Emphasising the

differences between teaching preservice teachers and children, they argue that in order to ensure a quality learning experience for preservice teachers, it is incumbent upon universities to invest in the development of in-school mentors to increase their capacity to provide personalised and focused support. This support should respond to the unique needs and circumstances of individual preservice teachers when undertaking their professional placements. The authors further argue that this investment will likely have positive flow on effects for the profession more generally as a result of greater alignment with the key desired outcomes and attributes that each university hopes to instil in their graduates.

The remaining papers in this issue take an intersectional view to consider the impacts of the practicum experience on, and challenges experienced by, preservice teachers with parental responsibilities, second-career preservice teachers, failing preservice teachers, and preservice teachers with English as an additional language. These challenges have the potential to have significant impacts on the development of preservice teachers' professional identity and successful degree and practicum completion as they navigate a complex, and often conflicting, web of professional, academic, and personal expectations and commitments. Recognition of the challenges individual practicum participants face, validates their experiences and provides opportunities for self-reflection and development. However, they may also provide context for those tasked with educating and safeguarding the wellbeing of the next generation of teachers as they enter the profession and embark on their own professional journeys.

Highlighting the influence of a range of personal and external pressures on the ability of failing final year preservice teachers to complete their studies, or enter the teaching profession, Jenny Buckworth's contribution presents an under-represented voice and perspective in the practicum experience by focussing on the experiences of those being left behind – failing students. She argues that preservice teacher experiences of relational disparity and alienation contributes significantly to their experiences and that a mismatch between expectations and the realities they were faced in the classroom was a source of additional pressure and tension which contributed to their unsuccessful completion of the practicum experience.

Consistent with this critique of the one-size-fits-most approach to preservice teacher education, Lisa Murtagh argues in the next paper that this reductionist approach serves to exclude, rather than include, those that do not fit the normative model of pre-service teachers rather than accommodating the complexity and diversity of preservice teachers. In particular she highlights the complexities faced by teacher educators in meeting the needs of the growing number of "non-traditional" students participating in initial teacher education. These non-traditional students are faced with additional personal and family responsibilities and challenges relative to the more "traditional" school-leaver undergraduate student. This includes the compound impact of the need of "mature-aged" students to concurrently manage complex personal lives (such as caring responsibilities) and their nascent professional identity and academic responsibilities in which they are caught up in a balancing act between study, work and domestic responsibilities. Reflecting on tutors' perspectives of working with preservice teacher students with parental responsibilities, Murtagh suggests that while they are aware of some of the issues that these students face, there is little consensus on what they as initial teacher educators can do to help.

Although there are also growing numbers of international students electing to undertake initial teacher education programs in countries like Australia, for whom English is not their first language, little research has been undertaken which focusses on their unique experiences and needs. Minh Nguyen's contribution provides a case study of the practicum experiences of a non-native English speaker preservice teacher and the additional challenges faced in engaging in professional experience. She argues that being an international student presents additional academic, personal, and institutional complexities, which may impact their practicum experiences. Additionally, Nguyen asserts that there are difficulties and tensions inherent in resolving and negotiating different identities through, and as a result of, the practicum experience.

In the final paper, Denise Beutel and Leanne Crosswell draw on the perspectives of second-career teachers ("career-changers") to explore the implications of identity development and resilience alongside the challenges associated with their preconceptions and initial classroom experiences. They argue that it is during practicum that teacher identity is at its most unstable and that this is particularly so for career-changers, as they need to navigate the transition from their previous career identity to reformatting a new professional identity as a teacher. This shift requires them to revert to a sometimes uncomfortable novice professional identity while at the same time benchmarking teaching against their previous career identities, practices and performance.

The competing demands on, and inconsistency in experiences of, the preservice teachers discussed in these papers highlights the increasing complexity and diversity of the preservice teacher cohort and the ways that their individual and unique needs compound the challenges of entering a stressful, high-accountability and expectation laden profession. Together these papers make a compelling case for initial teacher education programs to focus not only on the pedagogical quality of the preservice teacher experience but also on the need to ensure that the expectations and needs of the diversity of the cohort are met. As Murtagh in this issue describes, "while the university is opening its doors to a diverse group of trainees, they remain, in many ways invisible". This has significant implications for preservice teachers, their wellbeing, professional experiences and preparation for the profession. These papers demonstrate an increasing awareness of these issues but also a concerning lack of action in responding to them.

It is clear that there are significant challenges facing the profession and those involved in preservice teacher education, that are compounded by a range of internal and external pressures. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau invites readers to reflect that "the cost of a thing is the amount of...life which is required to be exchanged for it" (2010, p. 17). These words, first penned in 1854, highlight the need to consider not just what is gained through certain experiences but also what these experiences might cost us. This is particularly the case when these experiences are mandated. In the case of preservice teachers it is imperative that the benefits of participation in practicum don't just outweigh any financial, emotional, psychological and physical costs, but that we actively work toward minimising these costs. Individually and collectively the papers included in this Special Issue foreground the practicum experiences of different cohorts to remind us of the imperative of providing voice to the diverse student cohort and ensuring that the benefits of practicum do not outweigh the costs of participation.

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Jenna Gillett-Swan and Deanna Grant-Smith  
Queensland University of Technology  
 [jenna.gillettswan@qut.edu.au](mailto:jenna.gillettswan@qut.edu.au)