

Teaching Partners: Enhancing the Practicum Experience

Raylene J. Galvin

University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Abstract

At a large New Zealand metropolitan university, first-year student teachers have traditionally been placed in pairs for their first practicum (professional experience). Central to student teachers' initial teacher education program, practicum provides an opportunity for student teachers to work alongside experienced (associate) teachers and to be mentored into the culture of teaching and the classroom learning environment. First-year student teachers placed as a pair have generally worked alone while on practicum. They have not been encouraged to plan, teach co-operatively, or to provide feedback to their teaching partner, leaving experiences and interactions mostly to chance. This situation highlights a need for first-year student teachers to be fully informed about the benefits of their paired practicum and for the university to increase opportunities for them to teach and learn together to further enhance their practicum experience.

1. Introduction

In May 2012, 132 first year student teachers at the University of Otago were placed in 66 primary (elementary) classrooms for their first two week practicum. The New Zealand university academic year is from February to November. The first practicum was timetabled after six weeks of lectures and is the only practicum where all first-year student teachers are placed with a partner.

The New Zealand Teachers Council's requirement for initial teacher education providers is for student teachers to be placed in schools for periods of no less than a three week block of practicum. A future plan is for the University of Otago to extend the first-year and second-year May practicum to three weeks. At the end of a student teacher's university program documentation is provided that they have achieved the Graduating Teacher Standards (GTS). Evidence against each of the seven standards is stored in a personal e-portfolio. The role of the practicum underpins each of the key areas in the GTS; professional values and relationships, professional knowledge and professional practice.

The practicum is the professional experience aspect of the initial teacher education program. Student teachers generally enjoy this essential component as they regard it as an opportunity (with an associate teacher's guidance) to put what they learn in their academic and curriculum studies into practise in a classroom. Currently, the three year program at the University of Otago places student teachers for a total of 22 weeks in a variety of primary schools and with children at different age levels. Student teachers in the first two years are placed at four different schools and the same school for their final year with three practicum placements totalling 12 weeks in the one classroom.

First-year student teachers are briefed about practicum requirements before they go to a school but there is limited time to prepare them for working with a teaching partner. Since 2011, lecturers at the University of Otago no longer observe individual student teachers teaching the class during their first practicum. Instead, lecturers run one school-based group meeting, with an opportunity for student teachers to discuss teaching experiences, ask questions and to seek professional advice. At this early point in the program there is no feedback from the university lecturer about an individual student teacher's professional practice. It is however, an opportunity for first-year student teachers to provide each other with feedback and advice about teaching. This procedure would be in addition to the associate teacher's oral and written feedback (in the form of a practicum report) emailed to the university for record keeping purposes. The report addresses aspects of the student teacher's professional practice and they also receive a copy of this official documentation.

In the absence of formal feedback (focused on a student teacher's professional relationships knowledge, and practice) from the university lecturer, it is desirable for first-year student teachers to be encouraged to find ways to support their teaching partner during this first practicum and to share planning ideas and provide some teaching focused feedback.

For the second three week practicum in November, locally based students are again placed in pairs while students who return to their home cities or towns are placed in a class on their own. During this end of year practicum the visiting lecturer

completes a formal (30-40 minute) observation of each student and provides oral and written feedback at a follow-up meeting. For the November practicum observation lesson those student teachers again placed in pairs plan and teach on an individual basis. The student teacher is encouraged to reflect on their teaching session and, together with the visiting lecturer, set professional goals for the remainder of the practicum and for future school placements. A more formal written report (the assessment) is used to determine if a student teacher has met the professional requirements of the practicum and passed that aspect of their degree program.

2. Literature Review

Social constructivism [1] is the theoretical framework underpinning this study. An emphasis on discourse is particularly important when practicum partners are involved in professional dialogue with each other and their associate (mentor) teacher. Discourse provides opportunities for student teachers to explain their ideas about a teaching plan or approach, and debate or challenge their partner's viewpoint. Working in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) [1] with their teaching partner encourages student teachers to, on occasion, provide advice and guidance. Often a student may have expertise in a particular curriculum area and is able to assist their teaching partner with practical ideas. Vygotsky [1] emphasized a socio-cultural outlook as important for knowledge construction. Therefore, more opportunities for student teachers to plan together and share ideas will likely be beneficial to not only them but also to the children they are teaching. It is anticipated that working together using cooperative skills early in their career will ensure that first-year student teachers can contribute in a professional manner during future interactions once they join the teaching profession.

A paired practicum literature search can include early childhood centers, primary and secondary school contexts. There are also several approaches to investigating this critical area of a student teacher's initial teaching program; partners in the same class, partners in different classes in the same school, or partners teaching the same subject area to different classes.

In New Zealand based research, Ovens [2] analyzed paired practicum in a secondary (Years 9-13) context, noting that procedures are required to ensure that associate teachers are adequately prepared to support student teachers on a paired placement. Sorenson et al. [3] and Borko and Mayfield [4] also found that student teachers and associate teachers were often inadequately prepared for paired placements. In Bullough's et al. [5] research, paired student teachers were encouraged to decide on their own approach for collaborative

teaching. They shared planning ideas and curriculum expertise, and their lessons proved to be creative and inspiring for the children. These researchers concluded that everyone benefitted from the experience; the mentor teacher, the student teachers and the children.

Walsh and Elmslie [6] identified practical features and organizational principles to drive the implementation of practicum pairs as an alternative approach for student teachers' first practicum in Australian early childhood centers. Their project included thorough briefings and preparation for the classroom teacher and the students. The researchers recommended that a positive approach to the pairing be adopted which would encourage partners to trial inventive and creative ways to organize their teaching delivery. They recommended that teaching cooperative and teamwork skills during the academic strand of the teaching program would further enhance practicum partners' interactions and their professional experiences while they were placed at early childhood centers.

McKerr, Stanton and Turner [7] proposed that "two heads were better than one" (p.283) when investigating paired placements in a United Kingdom context. They recommended preparation for all involved in a paired placement as well as ongoing support for student teachers during the practicum. Learning with a teaching partner, receiving feedback and having the confidence to try new ideas and teaching approaches were endorsed in their study. In addition, Wilkins', Shin's and Ainsworth's [8] participants reported an increase in confidence about their teaching ability after receiving peer feedback. As a result of this peer feedback process they concluded that student teachers learn from two viewpoints (their own and that of the observer). Insight into this same aspect was described by Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell and Merrell [9] when they found that interaction between partners during the planning and reflection process resulted in a wider content coverage in their teaching topics due in part to the two different levels of expertise. Teaching plans were altered and enriched through partner discussion and this reflection proved to be a valuable experience for the student teachers and the children they were teaching. This study also gathered data from the perspectives of secondary school children (an otherwise unreported perspective) who appreciated the extra help, and improved behavior in the classroom when two student teachers were placed together.

A recommendation from Wilson and Edwards [10] was for their one-year postgraduate secondary student teachers to participate in a structured preparation and to receive ongoing support for their paired mathematics practicum. This was as a result of perceived difficulties faced by student teachers who were moving from a solo to a paired practicum.

Emphasis on compatibility of teaching partners was also deemed as important to the success of this practicum experience. The researchers concluded that in a paired practicum student teachers received both emotional and professional support from their teaching partner. Their participants reported that they were more likely to explore different teaching strategies because they had their partner's support and guidance. Further benefits from the paired practicum were identified including improved professional documentation and organization, as well as the understanding that each student teacher was also contributing to their ongoing professional development.

Another more structured organization of paired placements was the research by Smith [11] who introduced the notion of tandem teaching with the roles of a lead and a backup teacher organized during the planning stage before each lesson. Guidelines were established for the paired student teachers to follow with the focus of tandem teaching on balance and cooperation [11]. Smith's [11] participants were positive about their experiences and appreciated the opportunity to observe another student teacher teaching as they found that they learnt not only from their partner's success but also from any difficulties they may have faced. Criticism about an increased number of teachers in the classroom was justified with the prediction that many classrooms are moving to more of a team teaching model. Classrooms have developed into busy spaces with visiting specialist teachers, part-time support, teacher assistants and often parent/caregiver helpers working in the room at the same time.

Finally, Bowen and Roth [12] described an alternative as tag-team teaching, which happens when teaching partners change responsibility and roles during a single lesson. The authors described a model where planning was shared or not, roles shared or roles remained constant, or a blend of all four suggestions was also possible. Their aim was to allow their participants to adopt the organization which best suited their needs, and the choices were open-ended enough to encourage diversity.

In the present research, teaching with a partner was described as cooperative teaching. Student teachers decided when to use cooperative teaching and organized themselves to take turns introducing a new topic or sharing the teaching of linked lessons. There were no written guidelines for partnerships to follow rather there were suggestions and possibilities as to ways to support each other and to teach together.

3. Research Rationale

This research aimed to explore student teachers' experiences and perspectives about paired practicum, to see if giving and/or receiving feedback and the

sharing of teaching ideas was helpful. A qualitative design was used to explore the research question, Does encouraging first-year teaching partners to support each other to plan, teach, reflect and give feedback enhance their practicum experience? The research timeline was April to June 2012.

One school (School A) was selected from local primary schools that volunteered to mentor first-year student teachers for the May 2012 practicum. School A, a large city school, was willing to host four pairs of first-year student teachers. The principal and staff at School A are very supportive of the university teacher education program, and the associate teachers at this school have extensive experience supporting first, second, and third-year student teachers.

Student teachers were randomly partnered and placed in schools by a university administrator. There was no consideration at all for matching students. After notification (a list placed on the noticeboard) the eight first-year students placed at School A were invited to participate in this research project. All students (four males and four females) volunteered to take part. The participants were aged between 18 and 20 years. Two participants identified as New Zealand Māori and six as New Zealand European. Three participants live locally and five are from elsewhere in New Zealand. All eight students are enrolled in a three-year undergraduate teaching degree. The partnerships at School A were Beth and Paul (all names are pseudonyms), Jill and Simon, Sandy and Tim, and Jackie and John.

The researcher held a meeting with associate teachers at School A in preparation for the paired placement. The advantages of a paired practicum were discussed, as well as strategies associate teachers could use to support student teachers as a teaching pair and as individuals. As per the university expectations, associate teachers were also told that they would be required at the end of practicum to write a report on each student teacher.

Prior to practicum, participants met twice with the researcher and were introduced to their teaching partners. Time was provided for the partners to get to know each other because after only a few weeks of lectures these student teachers had not yet established a wide network of friends. The participants did not know their assigned teaching partner beforehand. Following this first meeting they were provided with strategies for supporting their teaching partner and for giving feedback. These strategies included such things as helping their teaching partner to give out or collect children's work and/or resources. Suggestions for planning and sharing teaching ideas were demonstrated and the benefits of cooperative teaching were highlighted.

Participants were encouraged to plan, teach, and reflect on their lessons together. It was anticipated that with feedback and guidance from their teaching

partner, participants would more easily identify the steps they may need to take to encourage children's learning, achieve individual teaching goals and address some of the requirements of the GTS. The 'support' student teacher was encouraged to observe their teaching partner as lessons were introduced and to assist (if asked) during classroom activities. Each partnership decided on individual roles for cooperative teaching sessions which often depended on the focus of the current lesson and personal interests or expertise.

A list of straightforward teaching techniques and skills to observe (e.g., using open ended questions, using children's names etc.) was provided and a sticky message pad and a notebook were given to record feedback and advice. Participants were encouraged to bring this notebook to their individual interview, as they would be asked to talk about what they learned about their own teaching from their teaching partner's feedback and advice.

Data was collected from a focus group interview held at the school at the end of practicum, and semi-structured individual interviews arranged when participants returned to their university lectures. The researcher recorded each interview and the data was transcribed for analysis. The interviews provided participants with an opportunity to discuss events as they experience them and to introduce other topics of interest [13] [14]. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed participant responses, which helped the researcher understand from each participant's point of view their unique experiences [13] [14] [15]. These open-ended questions also allowed participants to contribute more easily because they understood that there was not one expected answer, rather a range of responses was appreciated. This approach also contributed to a qualitative inquiry because as Paton [15] found, there is opportunity for participants' ideas to influence the focus and/or direction of the research.

As the randomly selected cohort consisted of mixed gender partnerships, there was a likelihood of added depth in the data collected. Participants may have conceivably benefited from their interview sessions, as many of the opinions and expectations discussed clarified the views of the teaching profession to which they intend to join.

Qualitative data provides insight into participants' experiences from their perspective [15]. Data from the focus group interview and the individual interviews was combined. There were two stages of data analysis; the first stage was a description of participants' experiences and the second was their interpretation. Data was read and reread to reflect on the meaning. The themes that emerged from the data were closely linked to participants' voices, the topic and data.

4. Results

All eight participants reported that they were nervous on their first day at school but already knowing their teaching partner made this initial experience tolerable. Sandy described having a teaching partner she knew as an opportunity to "warm" her into practicum. Although John explained that it took the pressure off him having someone else at the same stage as he was in his class, his first teaching experience was particularly frightening when he found that his vision went blurry as he stood in front of the class.

The opportunity to meet teaching partners before practicum meant that participants knew one other person in the classroom with whom they felt comfortable. Sandy confirmed that this was "one less scary thing" for her to worry about. Participants described their partnerships as having a positive grounding because they felt like they were partners in a school group; they shared transport and knew the other student teachers in the staffroom. They reported that their associate and the children treated them as a pair but they also received individual attention and support.

Participants highlighted the opportunity the paired partnership provided to share responsibility, plan together and support each other. Sandy described paired practicum as a positive experience for her because her partner was always there to give her feedback. If things went wrong in a lesson her partner would tell her that it was all right and remind her that after all it was her first time teaching. She found this support was helpful and improved her confidence for teaching the next lesson.

The giving and receiving of constructive criticism was found to be important for developing professional knowledge and professional practice because a participant's advice was often used to improve the next lesson. However, participants found that they tended to provide more positive feedback than negative comments. They acknowledged that negative aspects of a lesson were always presented in a helpful way, such as a suggestion for something to work on rather than identifying what went badly. Simon asked his partner Jill directly what he could have done to improve his lesson. They had decided early on in the practicum to give honest feedback to each other so that they knew how to improve their teaching or management skills. Jill and Simon also talked together about ideas and approaches to further develop and enhance lessons because they worked closely during the planning and reflection stages. Simon also found that before school when his partner gave him quick feedback about his lesson it gave him a boost to his confidence about teaching.

When one student teacher was introducing a lesson their partner would sit down and write

feedback on sticky messages or in the notebook. Participants were all aware that feedback from their teaching partner was different from their associate. Simon summarized other participants' views about receiving feedback when he described this guidance from a partner as helpful for confidence building while their associate's advice gave them more specific comments about their planning and teaching. Associate's oral feedback directly after a lesson was appreciated but any written feedback was limited to only one or two lessons during the practicum. When an associate's written feedback was provided it was more detailed than a partner's feedback. However, participants found that this feedback from their teaching partner was a useful reference for them to read again later and perhaps include ideas or suggestions in the next lesson.

Feedback from his partner meant more to Paul because as first-year student teachers they were the same status and Beth's perspective was "with younger eyes". Some of the feedback topics teaching partners received focused on their reading aloud skills, their questioning, being prepared with resources, giving praise and following routines such as asking the children to put up their hands when they wanted to contribute. Jackie and John found that when they watched each other teach there were ideas to apply later in their own teaching, and in some cases there were experiences or strategies that they would definitely try to avoid. Sandy appreciated receiving her partner's feedback because she wanted to know how to improve her teaching. Paul was in agreement with this experience and described his partner's advice as very helpful because when he tried out her ideas in his next lesson they usually worked out successfully.

Beth found that working together with her partner was helpful because they both had different ideas to share. Learning from a partner's successes and challenges also allowed Beth and Sandy the opportunity to document effective teaching techniques and ideas to use later in their own planning. John also reported that he got some good ideas from observing his associate and teaching partner which he also applied in his own lessons. He concluded that after observing other teachers he would continue to improve his teaching skills.

Taking turns to lead cooperative lessons was a trade-off Beth and Paul organized in response to recognizing strengths one student teacher had in a particular curriculum area. Paul acknowledged that partners also had different experience in terms of attending different university introductory classes in aspects of the curriculum and they organized their teaching accordingly. He learnt about other curriculum areas from Beth which he found to be helpful for his teaching.

In general, participants each taught one of two linked lessons while Sandy and Tim taught each

lesson together with one person taking responsibility for the introduction and conclusion while the other taught the main body of the lesson. Partners tended to take the lead in the planning of the lesson they introduced but both contributed ideas for each lesson. They all helped each other with planning and were open to merging ideas to make their cooperative lessons more successful. They tended to reflect on the lesson immediately after and were keen to receive this feedback from their partner. During the evenings, participants often used social networking to work on planning.

John described the advantages for planning, feedback and support from his teaching partner as "having someone to lean on" while Sandy agreed that her partner Tim was always there to help her. Tim (from a rural background) reported that he often "helped the strays" while Sandy was teaching a lesson. He emphasized that he "let her have her time teaching" and only moved around the classroom when the children were working independently. Participants all found that their partner's informal support with behavior management was helpful. They reported that straightforward techniques such as standing in close proximity to children who were off task would mean they refocused on the lesson once they became aware of the student teacher's presence. In this way, the student teacher teaching the lesson was not interrupted by the children or by their partner speaking. All participants concluded that there was more individual help available for children in the classroom as a result of having the associate teacher and two student teachers ready to provide assistance.

Sandy however, was the only participant to identify advantages for the children's learning from their cooperative teaching approach. More individual children were helped during their cooperative lessons and Sandy found that the learning was likely to be seamless. She explained that children's ideas were gathered in the first lesson then used and developed by her teaching partner in the second lesson and vice versa. Sandy and Tim found that this process was helpful for their planning purposes and developing their individual teaching skills. After these cooperative lessons Sandy and Tim reflected together on their teaching experiences, the children's learning and were also able to set themselves further appropriate teaching goals.

Participants predicted no obvious disadvantages to a paired practicum, nor did they think that there could perhaps be difficulties working with someone who had a different personality to them. Quite perceptively, Sandy reported that "if you are going to be a teacher you're going to have to get used to every kind of person - you've got to get over it".

4.1. Analysis of findings

All eight participants were positive about their paired practicum experiences. They reported benefits from working closely with their teaching partner and valued the support and guidance they received.

In preparation for this study and the practicum the researcher held a briefing meeting with the associate teachers at School A. This was a recommendation in several studies [2] [3] [4] [6], and it proved to be helpful as all participants reported that they were treated as a pair by their associates and the children. At the same time, student teachers also received feedback from their associate about individual lessons. After practicum the associate teachers informally reported that the cooperative teaching approach provided the children with a more continuous educational experience. They also recognized benefits for the student teachers in terms of the ways they supported each other and learnt cooperative skills, which would likely contribute to the foundation needed for their future teaching careers. Overall, associates were impressed with the teaching covered and professional interactions of their first-year student teachers.

Participants accepted the paired practicum as the norm due mostly to current school organization where there can often be a number of teacher support personnel working in each classroom. They reported that it was a more supportive approach to have a teaching partner although they were eager in their second year to be placed in a classroom on their own. This is in line with Smith [11] who reported that a non-assessing teaching partner was supportive and less threatening. However, participants in both studies were in agreement that they found it easier to learn from their teaching partner than their more experienced and skillful associate teacher. The same perspective was highlighted by Wilkins et al. [8] and Nokes et al. [9] when they concluded that peer feedback encourages student teachers (in time and with support) to collaborate with each other and to develop the ability to reflect on their own teaching and children's learning.

In common with participants in other research [2] [8] [9] [10], teaching partners also reported that they received guidance from each other about alternative ways to improve their teaching. Participants noted as Wilson and Edwards [10] found that having someone of equal status supporting them was helpful as they were at a similar stage in their teaching careers and the advice provided was from a judgment free perspective. They not only learned from their own teaching experiences, but also from the successes and challenges faced by their teaching partner. This was in line with other studies [8] [10] [11] who reported that when participants developed trust in each other they were often keen to take greater risks to try different teaching strategies and activities in

their lessons. Participants in the present study would firmly agree with McKerr, Stanton and Turner [7] that their paired teaching experience benefitted from two different perspectives, especially when they were planning and sharing ideas. This cooperative experience would not occur during a solo placement where student teachers would tend to work alone on planning tasks. Participants described their colleagues currently placed at other schools as working solo although they were also placed as pairs. Participants reported that they believed that they were better prepared than their colleagues because they attended two meetings before practicum and spent time getting to know their teaching partner. They also described a more positive start because they understood the expectations for practicum, knew about partner planning, teaching together and the benefits from giving each other feedback.

Receiving emotional support and empathy, as Sorensen et al. [3] and Wilson and Edwards [10] reported, was also described as a benefit by participants in this study. They appreciated the contribution their partner made to their wellbeing, confidence and classroom teaching. The sharing of ideas and advice about how to improve their teaching techniques added to the information and feedback already provided by their associate teacher. This was similar to the comments from a participant in Bowen's and Roth's [12] study who described how helpful it was receiving compliments and criticism from a teaching partner. When this participant's class teacher suggested he write his advice down, both student teachers found that as a result they were more confident evaluating and improving their own professional practice [12]. Providing a small notebook and a message pad for participants in the present study encouraged them to continue recording feedback and advice for a range of lessons planned and taught across the curriculum. The receiving of feedback and suggestions for improvement from a teaching partner proved to be a helpful and a positive experience for all participants.

Unlike participants in the study by Nokes et al. [9], the first-year student teachers did not report that planning together was more time-consuming. In contrast, they found that planning time for them was often halved. Their follow-up lesson was further developed and improved because of the two sets of ideas, their teaching experiences and the knowledge gained from the first session to draw upon. A major difference between the contexts for the two studies was the length of time for practicum with two weeks against a 15-week placement. It is likely that over this extended period of time participants in the present study may well have found cooperative teaching to be challenging in terms of finding planning time to work together. Using social media, emails, etc., as participants in the present study found, would hopefully solve some of the difficulties

of finding face-to-face brainstorming and planning time.

In common with Nokes et al. [9], Sandy was aware that the learning for children was improved and far richer as a result of having two student teachers in the classroom. The benefits also for student teachers sharing ideas during future practicum placements will be a valuable experience to build upon. This will lead, as Nokes et al. [9] found, to an opportunity for newly qualified teachers to contribute more readily to a team in a school and seek and participate in opportunities for collaboration. This in turn will ensure better outcomes for children as teachers would likely benefit from involvement in a collegial learning environment.

Unlike other studies [6] [7] [8] [11], participants were not partnered using specific criteria such as academic ability, gender, interests or study address location, or asked to select their own teaching partner. Fortunately, there were no areas for concern within the four partnerships in terms of difficulties sustaining a professional relationship. However, the length of their practicum was only two weeks whereas in other studies [7] [8] [9], [11] [12], school placements were often for a much longer period. It may have been conceivable that because this practicum was a short time for student teachers to work together, any partnership difficulties had not yet developed. Participants also did not disclose any competitive behavior from their teaching partner which some participants in other studies [7] [11] [12]) found had distracted them from their teaching focus and their opportunity to experience a positive practicum.

The placing of pairs in classrooms was a new initiative in other research contexts [3] [6] [7] [11]), so there were often some difficulties to overcome from school-based mentors and student teachers themselves who may have been resistant to change or preferred the existing model of one student teacher per class. At the University of Otago it is the norm to be placed in pairs during the first-year so in contrast to other studies [3] [6] [7] [11]), associate teachers, student teachers and university lecturers were already familiar with and accepting of the paired practicum approach.

The use of a cooperative teaching model where the planning and teaching sessions were shared or where student teachers took turns teaching the first of two linked sessions reflected the work of Smith [11]. Students selected an approach similar to the objective Nokes et al. [9] and Bowen and Roth [12] declared for allowing participants a choice about what best suited their partnership and the content they were teaching for a particular topic and lesson. All participants in the present study found this freedom to be valuable and were unaware until after practicum that other partnerships had arranged their

teaching in a different manner to them. Unlike Smith's [11] study, there were no firm guidelines given to the student teachers, rather suggestions and possibilities were discussed during the briefing meetings (student teacher and associates) as to the different ways to organize and sustain a teaching partnership. The intention for future paired placements would be to also follow Smith's [11] recommendation that although student teachers can support each other and give feedback, this experience should not replace the critical role an associate teacher plays in an initial teacher education program. Wilkins et al. [8] emphasized one further requirement, describing the university lecturers' observation and feedback process also as essential for student teachers to receive during their professional experiences at schools. In this research, however, all participants agreed that it would have been more stressful having their university lecturer formally observe them teaching the class during this, their first practicum. They predicted that lecturer feedback during their November practicum and in their following two years of school placements would be valuable.

5. Conclusion

According to participants the cooperative teaching approach resulted in improved planning and teaching because teaching partners shared ideas, resources and teaching delivery. When the student teachers alternated leading and supporting roles they noted that children in their class had a rich educational experience and received more individual support. Student teachers benefitted from collegial support and were developing cooperative skills which will help them achieve aspects of the GTS. Currently, in the New Zealand context, qualified teachers can be involved in peer appraisal in their schools and beginning teachers (after securing their first teaching post) are mentored by a more experienced teacher for two years. Therefore, providing first-year student teachers with the opportunity to work cooperatively with a partner will hopefully give them an early experience to build on and develop throughout their teaching careers.

There are likely benefits resulting from the involvement of lecturers from other academic papers (within the teaching program) including the teaching of teamwork strategies and cooperative skills to first-year student teachers. This process, as Walsh and Wilkins [6] reported, can provide student teachers with ample opportunities to learn (before their first practicum) about how to facilitate a paired partnership and ways to cooperate as they learn and teach together. They will also learn skills suitable for them to use when they work together on paired or group tasks during academic classes. Early notification of practicum partners with the

suggestion that students contact and meet each other would further support preparation for practicum placement.

The purpose of this research was to explore the current paired practicum organization at the University of Otago, and to investigate an approach to encourage first-year student teachers to cooperate with each other to plan, teach, reflect and give feedback to enhance their overall practicum experience. From the participants' perspective and their associate teachers' informal comments, the practicum was a positive experience for all involved. The student teachers felt comfortable working cooperatively with their teaching partner; they were supported, gave valuable feedback, taught and learnt together which all contributed to enhancing their practicum experience. It would, however, be helpful for the university to consider adopting alternative approaches, such as cooperative teaching, in order to maximize the opportunities a paired practicum offers associates, children, school management and student teachers. In their future careers student teachers will be better prepared to join their professional learning community, will likely be more confident lifelong learners and able to take an active role in their school's peer appraisal process.

5.1. Limitations

This study was a very small sample of mixed gender partnerships with the student teachers placed at one school. Same gender partnerships may present different experiences.

Associate teachers, although briefed about the paired practicum in this research, were not interviewed to obtain data from their perspectives.

Due to the relative inexperience of the first-year student teachers some of the feedback given to their partner may have been misleading.

5.2. Future Research

It would be worthwhile to examine the experiences of more first-year student teachers placed in a wider range of contexts. This would include a Years 1-6 school, a Years 7-8 intermediate school, and a Years 1-6 normal school (closely linked to the initial teacher education program).

Encouraging all first-year student teachers to meet their teaching partner and spend time getting to know them before practicum is likely to help with first day nerves and the building of a professional partnership. It would also be useful to encourage other visiting lecturers to encourage first-year students to find ways to cooperate with and support their teaching partner.

Providing a more structured briefing for all first-year student teachers would be helpful in fully preparing for this first practicum. Information about

the benefits of a paired placement and discussion about student teacher experiences while on a paired practicum could also be included in this session.

6. References

- [1] Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- [2] A. Ovens, A. (2004) 'Using Peer Coaching and Action Research to Structure the Practicum: An Analysis of Student Teacher Perceptions', *Journal of Physical Education New Zealand*, 37, pp. 45-60.
- [3] P. Sorenson, L. Hoult, C. Philpot, and W. Katene, Peer Learning in Initial Teacher Education (ITE): The Use of Subject Pairing in School Experience Placements as a Strategy for Professional Learning', Paper presented at the Annual Conference of British Educational Research Association, University of Exeter, 12-14 September 2002.
- [4] H. Borko, and V. Mayfield, (1995) 'The Roles of the Cooperating Teacher and University Supervisor in Learning to Reach', *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 11, pp. 501-518.
- [5] R.V. Bullough, J. Young, J.R. Birrell, D.C. Clark, M.W. Egan, I. Erickson, M. Frankovich, J. Brunetti and M. Welling (2003) 'Teaching With a Peer: A Comparison of Two Models of Student Teaching', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19, pp. 57-73.
- [6] K. Walsh and L. Elmslie, (2005) 'Practicum Pairs: An Alternative For First Field Experience in Early Childhood Teacher Education', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 33 (1), pp.5-21.
- [7] L. McKerr, J. Stanton and G. Turner, (2010) 'Two heads are better than one! A study of collaborative working in initial teacher training'. Paper presented at the IASK International Conference Teaching and Learning, Seville, Spain, November 29-1 December.
- [8] E.A. Wilkins, E-K Shin, J. Ainsworth, (2009) 'The Effects of Peer Feedback Practices with Elementary Education Teacher Candidates', *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Spring, pp. 79-93.
- [9] J.D. Nokes, R.V. Bullough, W.M. Egan, J.R. Birrell and J.M. Hansen, (2008) 'The Paired-Placement of Student Teachers: An Alternative to Traditional Placements in Secondary Schools', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, pp. 2168-2177.
- [10] P. Wilson and J-A. Edwards, (2009) 'Paired ITE Teaching Placements: Implications for Partnership Development', In Joubert (Ed.), *Proceedings of the British Society for Research into Learning Mathematics*, 29, (2), 82-87.
- [11] J.D.N. Smith, (2004) 'Developing Paired Teaching Placements', *Educational Action Research*, 12(1), pp. 99-125.
- [12] G.M. Bowen and W-M. Roth, (2002) 'Student Teachers' Perceptions of their Paired Practicum Placement Experiences', *Journal of Teaching & Learning*, 2(1), pp. 21-37.

[13] Glesne, C. (2006) *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston.

[14] Maykut, P., and R. Morehouse (1994) *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic Guide*, RoutledgeFalmer, London.

[15] Paton, M. (2002) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.