The Curtin Coaches: Benefits of an outreach tutoring program for first year pre-service teachers. A Practice Report

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Abstract

The Curtin Coaches program represents a dynamic outreach opportunity for pre-service teachers enrolled in their first year of study at Curtin University to engage with school-aged students as classroom tutors. Research has shown that cross-age tutoring experiences in schools can benefit both the students receiving support and those who tutor, particularly in settings where individuals are engaging in community support work. According to program feedback, participants were able to develop a range of profession-related skills such as relationship building and gain new knowledge such as understanding how students learn. These competencies are salient as they align with the newly implemented standards for graduate teachers. Understanding the benefits such outreach programs bring pre-service teachers is vital as the future of HEPPP funded programs such as the Curtin Coaches is uncertain but the importance of Work Integrated Learning is increasing.

The Curtin Coaches Program

The Curtin Coaches Program is an outreach tutoring service for public primary and secondary schools in the Perth, Australia, metropolitan area which rate low on the ICSEA (index of community socio-educational disadvantage) scale and have a significant gap in students who test well in NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) but fail to take up tertiary level studies post-graduation. The program is funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP, 2014) prompted by the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) recommendations for Australian Higher Education. Recently the Gonski Report (Gonski et al., 2011) identified a need for additional support in the classroom for students who struggle or who are not meeting their expected potential, particularly among students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds. In response to these needs the Curtin Coaches Program has been designed to be a mutually beneficial outreach program. Partner schools receive no-cost in-class support from enthusiastic individuals who have chosen education as their intended career and those tertiary students participating in the program gain valuable educative experiences as a result of the involvement.

Selected coaches work in a number of partnership schools for two to five hours per week on a paid basis to deliver bespoke academic tutoring for identified students. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to engage with profession-related experiences, such as programs like Curtin Coaches which provide them with practical teaching and learning degree-related opportunities. Established in 2010, more than 100 (second to fourth year) pre-service teachers have completed the program. Previously focusing on secondary schools in 2013 the program coordinator facilitated partnerships between two primary schools and as a pilot program, nine first year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students were recruited to conduct paid work in the two schools as classroom tutors.

Benefits of tutoring programs

Tutoring has a long and venerable history. Gordon, Morgan, Ponticell and O'Malley (2004), in a research review related to tutoring, revealed more than 300 books and 7000 academic articles indicating that "tutoring procedures appear to produce positive effects on **both** [emphasis added] students and tutors" (p. 62). This review found that the consistently reported positive effects of tutoring included achievement, affective measures of self-esteem, and intrinsic interest in the subject matter being taught. Results from numerous cross-age and peer-tutoring studies conducted with learners across the life span have also yielded positive findings. They sum up these findings, noting, "it appears that tutoring offers a powerful technique for enhancing student learning across a wide sample of different types of students and content areas" (p. 62). This finding has been reinforced by a meta-analysis of effects of tutoring style programs (Lauer et al., 2006) and other research (Rothman & Henderson, 2011).

The Curtin Coaches Program provides tutoring services to schools in predominantly low socio-economic areas or where students come from traditionally marginalised groups. This outreach focus means that at least in part, the experiences of those participating as

Coaches comprise a form of "service-learning" which is "an alternate learning space in which pre-service teachers can enhance their multicultural awareness through community work with marginalised and disadvantaged groups" (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; cited in Tatebe, 2013, p. 244).

When pre-service teachers are given opportunities for observing and applying understandings about teaching and learning in real educational contexts, significant professional development can result (McIntyre, Byrd & Foxx, 1996). Regular feedback from Coaches has shown that working in schools as a paid employee of the university has resulted in a number of benefits as pre-service teacher students are able to gain skills and knowledge in their chosen profession in an environment that is distinct from the university classroom or formal practicum placement. Brennan Kemmis and Ahern (2011) define "practicum" as usually being "a supervised activity where a novice is placed in the workplace and mentored through a set of experiences that will hopefully equip them to enter the profession. The practicum is generally assessed" (p. 211). Such assessed practical learning experiences in schools can be an especially stressful time as students encounter the realities of teaching (Gardner, 2011).

Although school settings may provide opportunities for learning, there can also be tensions as students navigate between the three worlds of the teacher education preparation course, the school and the real world of their past experiences (Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008). Programs like the Curtin Coaches may assist students in navigating these different "worlds" and, with no course-related assessments, align with Ure's

(2009) finding, that "the amount of time spent by preservice teachers in school settings influences their confidence and ability to relate theory to practice" (p. 15). Brennan Kemmis and Ahern (2011) note that there exists diverse "traditions, processes and agents, situated in different contexts, forming practice in different ways" (p. 211) and in some countries such as Singapore where community service hours are and embedded in courses (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

Evaluation of the program

Participants in the pilot program were nine pre-service teachers in two Perth metropolitan Primary schools. They spent an average of 41 hours with a classroom teacher over the duration of the program. Feedback regarding the program was requested from all participants using quantitative (5 point Likert scale) and qualitative (free response) items at the completion of the pilot program. An example of a quantitative item was: "Rate your experience of the program from 1 (not true of me) to 5 (true of me) for the statement: *I developed a deeper understanding of educational issues*." An example of a qualitative item was: "Please comment on the following: *The best thing about being involved with the Curtin Coaches Program was…*" Seven out of the nine coaches responded to the survey, which was administered online through the Survey Monkey web tool. An existing five dimensional framework developed by McLoughlin and Maslak (2003) was used as a basis for analysing the outcomes of the pilot program for first years.

Findings of the program

Results are organised around the five dimensions of McLoughlin and Maslak (2003). Each dimension is explained,

percentages from the quantitative items are provided, and examples of comments from the qualitative items are presented.

Dimension 1: Developing understanding about school students

Learning to teach means that prospective teachers begin to see the world through a professional educators eyes while they struggle to reconcile the feelings and experiences they have had as students. The tutors learned about their students in general, as well as why and how teachers connect with students in order to encourage growth (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003, p. 271).

- One hundred percent of Coaches enjoyed supporting students, felt they interacted well with them and gained a greater understanding of individual student learning;

- 86% of Coaches felt they "made a difference" to students learning; and

- 67% assisted students with their sense of self-worth and motivation to learn.

Getting hands on experience with different children, and being able to make a difference was the best thing about the program.

Helping and observing different students learning was the best thing about the program.

Dimension 2: Developing technical pedagogical skills

Tutors believed that the variety of strategies they used to communicate with students, to instruct and assess them, and to manage the classroom environment

had greatly increased (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003, p. 274).

- Seventy-one percent gained greater understanding of their course's conceptual material;

- 83% helped students engage with lessons and apply the knowledge learnt; and

- 67% assisted students with communicating ideas, numeracy skills and social awareness.

The best thing about the program was being able to provide help to the students and interact with them, interact with class teachers to find out more about future career opportunities, education syllabus/system, teaching challenges and so on.

It was important to relate questions to real life events as the students are able to relate more to these and understand what concepts are being asked to them.

Dimension 3: Developing relationships with colleagues in school settings

Tutoring programs presented the prospective teachers with opportunities to spend time in school settings, to interact with teachers and administrators, and to learn from their university mentors. These opportunities were believed to contribute greatly to their professional development (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003, p. 275-276).

- One hundred percent gained greater insight into the inner workings of a school environment.

I believe this program is a fantastic way for first year students in particular to experience the school environment and put all of the theory learnt over the course of the

year or semester into practice. It is also a great way to begin to build up a teaching portfolio of activities and teaching ideas.

Gaining experience in the classroom environment working with and alongside experienced teachers was the best thing about the program.

Dimension 4: Developing more sophisticated understandings of the teaching and learning process

Tutors realised deeper complexities in the teaching/learning process while engaged in the tutoring programs was directly related to their growth as reflective practitioners (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003, p. 278).

- One hundred percent felt being involved in the program added value to their degree; and

- 67% helped students engage with the curriculum through expansion on ideas and using examples.

  Over the course of the program I found that observing and working with different students of different abilities widened my view and understanding of classroom dynamics and challenges.

  I found that throughout the program it was not so much about children not understanding the work they were presented, but about their perception of their ability to learn.

Dimension 5: Developing a reflective practice

Tutors indicated that they had grown in their ability to reflect on the teaching-learning process (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003, p. 278).

- Seventy-one percent clarified possible future educational and career plans

I had to learn to adapt to what the student wanted to do and make the lessons more student-centered, focusing on his interests to keep him engaged.

I found this program to be a great experience, one I will never forget and it has helped me build my skills to become a teacher.

Discussion

Although the sample size of this pilot program was small (n=9) the results are significant in terms of justifying building such programs into the structure of universities beyond the limited funding available (i.e. though HEPPP) as well as the national priority for authentic Work Integrated Learning (e.g. http://acen.edu.au/2014Conference/). Most (71%) Coaches felt they developed more empathy for students who face challenges in school, which aligns with the notion that this experience can be considered as service-learning. This is a very positive finding as research shows that empathy is a key factor in developing teachers, and combined with communication skills can aid their ability to affect both the emotional and academic lives of students (Cain, 2008; McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003). Similar benefits to those from service learning programs were also found in this pilot program such as strengthening academic learning, developing personal, communication and critical thinking skills, stronger commitment to teaching as a profession, and a greater awareness of the need to adapt instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners (Malone, Jones & Stallings, 2002; Tatebe, 2013).

The results also mirror those of McLoughlin and Maslak (2003) where small group tutoring fostered "the ability to pay more attention to how to interact with, and learn from, particular students" (p. 280). It is clear that authentic co-curricular programs like the Curtin Coaches, which encourage pre-service teachers to experience learning in schools beyond their normal course structure result in numerous positive professional outcomes as outlined in previous research. This includes building confidence (Ure, 2009), learning skills in situations without the stress of being assessed (Gardner, 2011) and, significantly for first year students, beginning to understand the complex work of teaching in an authentic setting (McIntyre et al., 1996). The findings discussed in this report also align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014), which outline what graduate teachers should know and be able to do. For example, they clearly align with Standard 1 (Know students and how they learn, para. 1), Standard 4 (Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments, para. 7) and Standard 7 (Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community, para. 12).

The goal now will be to embed and expand types of opportunities, like the Curtin Coaches Program into teacher preparation programs, so pre-service teachers can demonstrate the skills required by the nationally accredited standards while directly supporting their future career direction and employment opportunities. With this in mind, the question remains: How do small-scale university-run outreach programs like the Curtin Coaches Program evolve into sustainable and long-term projects? Should university project coordinators look to the successful, large scale volunteering programs such as Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (www.aimementoring.com) for answers? AIME provides university mentors with an opportunity to "make a difference" and "give back" in a meaningful way by linking them with Indigenous high school students, encouraging opportunity and access to university pathways. It is results-focused and markets the outcomes and the culture of "making a difference" very well using corporate sponsors, celebrities, music, social media and high profile events. It also gives university students opportunities to build relationships with like-minded peers and form new social connections (both online and face-to-face). This vibrant and dynamic image works very well and is something university students are clearly attracted to. Should we seek to "market" the benefits outlined in this Practice Report in better ways that speak to pre-service teachers in a language that they will listen to? Does there need to be "cultural shift" in which students completing community-orientated degrees such as teaching see volunteer experience as a natural/essential/required element of their course? Such conversations, with accompanying research, are vital and universities need to learn from each other and from the growing private/not-for-profit sector to find sustainable success in this sector.

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