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Teaching as a craft: making links between pre-service training and professional practice

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Teaching as a craft: making links between pre-service training and professional practice

Abstract

It is acknowledged in the literature and in professional practice that there are "gaps" between the theory of pre-service teacher education and the realities of classroom practice. The report from the 2002 National Meeting of Professional Educators identified tensions between theory and practice and suggested that teachers were "living these out in everyday learning environments" as a "creative tension" (Cumming, 2002, p. 3). We believe the challenge for teacher educators is to assist beginning teachers in making links between pedagogical theory they have accrued in their pre-service training and practice they are attempting to put into place in their classrooms. From our work with teachers in schools it is apparent that beginning teachers find it difficult to link theory with their practice. This article describes a model of professional learning that greatly assisted one beginning teacher begin to make connections between her pre-service training and the relevance of this training to her classroom practice.

Keywords

making, teaching, practice, training, service, between, craft, professional, pre, links

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Teaching as a craft: Making links between pre-service training and professional practice

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ABSTRACT: It is acknowledged in the literature and in professional practice that there are “gaps” between the theory of pre-service teacher education and the realities of classroom practice. The report from the 2002 National Meeting of Professional Educators identified tensions between theory and practice and suggested that teachers were “living these out in everyday learning environments” as a “creative tension” (Cumming, 2002, p. 3). We believe the challenge for teacher educators is to assist beginning teachers in making links between pedagogical theory they have accrued in their pre-service training and practice they are attempting to put into place in their classrooms. From our work with teachers in schools it is apparent that beginning teachers find it difficult to link theory with their practice. This article describes a model of profession learning that greatly assisted one beginning teacher begin to make connections between her pre-service training and the relevance of this training to her classroom practice.

KEYWORDS: Teacher development; teaching as a craft; mentoring; action research; cognitive coaching; beginning teacher.

Kate, a beginning teacher claimed in an interview with Kervin (in press) “I have not used anything I have learnt at uni...how terrible is that!”

Cole and Knowles (2000, p. 9) claim that there is an unmistakable gap between what teachers are taught in pre-service teacher training and what they are expected to do at the “chalk-face” in the beginnings of their professional experience. Indeed Danielson (1996) goes as far as to question the novice teachers' ability to even manage “over 3000 nontrivial decisions daily” as they begin their teaching career (pp. 2, 5). Moreover Danielson (1996) argues that the move to a classroom teaching position for a beginning teacher is often a jump into the unknown, a matter of survival amid the myriad questions and concerns it presents (p. 5). Such statements challenge teacher educators, be they at university or school level, to consider how such a gap can be reduced and how stronger links can be made between pre-service training and professional practice in order to best support the induction process of beginning teachers as they develop their craft of teaching.

We acknowledge that this is not a new area of research. However, in recent years it has begun to take center stage as governments and bureaucracies focus on quality teaching and the professional knowledge teachers need in order to be “quality teachers” (Danielson, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 2000; Benham Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Nelson, 2002; Stronge, 2002). The basic assumptions of the recent Australian Federal Government report, *Australia's Teachers: Australia's Future* (DEST, 2003:xx) indicate that “high quality teachers make a significant and lasting contribution to young people's lives,” and that “beginning teachers still have much to learn about their *craft* and how to be effective in teaching” (pp. xx, 149, emphasis

added). The report is very comprehensive with a strong emphasis on the induction of beginning teachers and the need for ongoing professional learning for all teachers. It argues that for beginning teachers it is imperative that support is provided so that they can build on their pre-service foundational knowledge as “teaching is a dynamic and lively profession. Initial teacher education cannot be expected to suffice for a whole career or even extended periods” (p. 154).

Just what constitutes quality pre-service training of teachers is in itself an issue that is at the centre of much educational debate (Stronge, 2002). There seems to be an expectation from employers, schools and beginning teachers themselves that pre-service primary teacher training will prepare teachers pedagogically; ensure they have adequate content knowledge across the curriculum areas; and have a repertoire of teaching strategies that will assist students with the aim of increasing student achievement. More than ever, it seems, beginning teachers need to be able to “hit the ground running”. They need to have a sound pedagogical knowledge that goes beyond surviving. For instance the new Model of Pedagogy proposed by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, (2003) expects all its teachers to be able to understand and use pedagogy that has three dimensions: namely “intellectual quality”, “quality learning environment” and “significance” (p. 7).

Pre-service training can provide a great deal of this pedagogical knowledge. However, “as the art and science of teaching, pedagogy is evident both in the activity that takes place in the classrooms ... and in the nature or quality of the tasks set by the teachers to guide and develop student learning” (DET, 2003, p. 4), it becomes crucial to acknowledge that pre-service teacher training or development must not end once a student graduates from tertiary pre-service teacher education. Instead, in alliance with an acceptance that “beginning teachers still have much to learn about their *craft*” as stated above, this training or development must continue into their professional practice.

TEACHING AS A CRAFT

Hoban, (2002) defines the craft of teaching as “... a repertoire of skills or competencies that are accrued over time” (p. 10). Davidson (2003) also talks about the importance of “time” when considering the professional growth of teachers suggesting that “a professional teacher takes time to develop his or her professionalism and expertise” (p. 347). Huberman (1992) advocates that the development of this craft is ongoing and can be the most powerful form of professional development and as such asserts:

...teachers are artisans working primarily alone, with a variety of new and cobbled-together materials, in a personally designed work environment. They gradually develop a repertoire of instructional skills and strategies, corresponding to a progressively denser, more differentiated and well-integrated set of mental schemata; they come to read the instructional situation better and faster, and to respond to it with a greater variety of tools. They develop this repertoire through a somewhat haphazard process of trial and error, usually when one or another segment of the repertoire does not work repeatedly. Somewhere in that cycle they may reach out to peers or even to professional trainers (p. 136).

Huberman's comments above, like many others in the literature, acknowledge that beginning teachers do not leave their pre-service teacher training knowing everything about the profession they are about to enter into. Teaching skills or the craft of teaching are “gradually” acquired, “trial and error” is necessary and teachers need to be supported in their classrooms. Thus, we argue that it is necessary to find a model for beginning teachers’ induction and ongoing professional development that will allow them to gradually acquire their craft through trial and error in a supportive environment.

TOWARDS A MODEL OF INDUCTION OF BEGINNING TEACHERS

Just what constitutes effective teacher development is explored in depth in the literature. However, for the purposes of this article we have chosen a few exemplars that demonstrate the variety. Joyce and Showers (1988) focus on instructional theory and skill development as making up “good” teacher development and advocate a “coaching model” to support such development. Gitlin and Smyth (1989) and Coles and Knowles (2000) take the position that teacher development should involve critical analysis and reflection on action. Danielson (1996) emphasises that teacher development should be concerned with both content knowledge and the development of personal pedagogy (p. 115). Fullan (1991) believes, “teacher education should foster the development and integration of several aspects of teacher effectiveness – technical skill development, critical reflection, inquiry and collaboration” (p. 326). In addition, Darling-Hammond (1997) argues that theory and practice or application cannot be separated from effective teacher development. She suggests,

Teachers learn just as their students do: by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning cannot occur solely in college classrooms divorced from engagement in practice or solely in school classrooms divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice (p. 319).

A common feature among these researchers is that it is necessary to create a balance between the expert input provided and the place and impact of this within the individual teacher's pedagogy. Another commonality is the importance of reflection, sharing, doing, and observing others.

In what follows we want to describe a model of professional learning that evolved from a larger research study that set out to explore “the activities, experiences, processes and people partnerships” as a group of teachers worked towards developing a “balanced writing pedagogy” (Kervin, in press). The grounded theory that emerged from this study, we believe has the potential to serve as a blueprint for the effective induction of beginning teachers so that they begin to link the pedagogical theories of their pre-service training with the practices they experience in their classroom. It is a model that, we believe, can develop the craft of teaching in beginning teachers as was evident for one of the teachers in the larger study.

The methodology used for this larger study was a classic action research design (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). However, as time went by it was necessary to adapt and extend the classic action research model in order to more clearly describe the

support structures that were put in place through the year and the relationship between and among these.

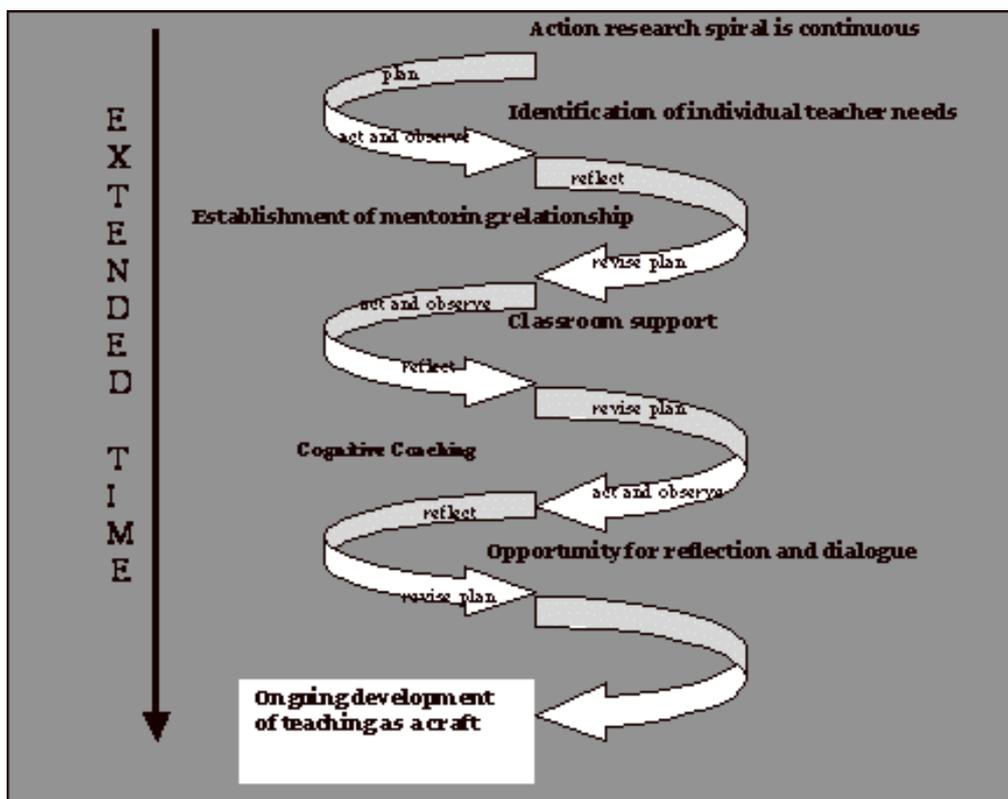


Figure 1. A model for developing teaching as a craft for beginning teachers

This model will be explored through the experiences of a beginning teacher, Kate, who claimed in the early days of the study, “*I have not used anything I have learnt at uni ... how terrible is that!*” (Interview – 14.5.01).

It is important to note that while the model appears top-down, with particular themes identified at key points, in reality many of the aspects of the model began simultaneously. The continuous spiralling of the action research meant that Kate's understanding of the craft of teaching became increasingly more complex. However, in order to describe these components each must be discussed individually.

Kate's background

Kate was a beginning teacher, twenty-nine years of age, who at the time of this study had been casual teaching for some five years before her permanent appointment in the research site school. Although Kate had some teaching experience as a casual teacher, she recalled limited support being offered to her by more experienced teachers and little professional development. She indicated that she had been involved with some school-based opportunities where an “expert” came to the school and ran workshops for the staff. Thus Kate's exposure to professional development or any sort of induction opportunities in her beginning years of teaching seemed random and disjointed if they happened at all. Since this was her first permanent appointment where she had full responsibility as teacher, she was classified in the research site school as a “beginning teacher”.

Action research process

The guiding principles of the action research spiral – plan, act, observe, reflect and revise – that are inherent in this model, characterised the interactions between Kate and her mentor throughout the year (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p. 11). These principles were tailored to meet Kate's specific needs as explained below. The process was continuous and guided all interactions during the year. The process also responded to the changing nature of the mentoring relationship. For instance it was found that it was desirable to introduce “cognitive coaching” part-way through the year.

As Kate and her mentor engaged in the action research process within their mentoring relationship over the year Kate demonstrated an increased understanding of the writing process. While her concern for content was still apparent, her teaching demonstrated increased understanding of the writing process and its interrelationship with other the language modes. Writing and reading were taught together and the episodes within her literacy block became more cohesive and purposeful. Towards the end of the year Kate was also able to articulate these links. She stated, “...reading and writing should be taught and learnt as one, not two separate skills...” (Semi-Structured Interview – 5.12.01)

Kate described this form of professional development as “ongoing”, “challenging” and “thought provoking” (Reflective Journal – 7.5.01; 21.5.01; 10.12.01). These comments support Poetter's (1997) description of action research as promoting “the role of teachers as theory makers because of their intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the classroom leading to teachers taking on new roles as the driving forces for change in schools” (p. 6).

Identification of Kate's needs

Kate's beliefs

Poetter (1997) emphasises the importance of understanding where we, as teachers, have come from as learners. He states, “these foundations are the roots of the thoughts and actions played out” by teachers (p. 13). Therefore time was spent with Kate exploring her pre-existing teacher beliefs. Since the research focus was on developing a balanced writing pedagogy, Kate was asked to reflect on her own learning experiences in writing during her school days. Kate's memories of how she learnt to write included such things as: creative writing lessons; very directed tasks; an emphasis on correct spelling and grammar; writing different drafts with the “good copy” being marked by the teacher; and opportunities to write independently maybe once or twice per week.

Kate's recollections gave initial insight into what Whitehead (2000) refers to as her “individual learning and teaching theory” (p. 92). Whitehead (2000) argues that teachers draw upon their personal learning experiences when teaching, particularly if they don't understand the theory behind the teaching practice. The literature recognises the importance of the influence of the pedagogy one experiences as a learner. Whilst current thinking places an emphasis on reflective practice as a foundation for pre-service teacher education, Kate indicated that she had no recollections of such reflective tasks during her own pre-service teacher training

(Interview – 6.5.01). Kate also acknowledged at this point the limited role that her pre-service training had played in her professional formation. Therefore, the need to explore her teaching practice in light of her own experience became evident.

Kate was very aware of the changes that had occurred in the teaching profession since she had been at school, and also during her five-year spell as a casual teacher. Initially, this was a point of frustration for Kate, as evidenced by one of her journal entries, “*when I was at school it was so much different to today...things have changed drastically even since I began teaching*” (Reflective Journal-2.5.01).

This notion of “change” was a consistent theme throughout Kate's interactions. In her early interactions she demonstrated some resistance to the change that she was faced with. This became evident through her apprehension about developing a “balanced writing pedagogy” for her Kindergarten students and her belief at the time that Kindergarten children were made to “*...learn so much so soon*” (Interview – 14.5.01). Kate's resistance to change seemed to stem from her lack of professional support and feelings of exclusion from appropriate teacher development opportunities which had resulted in her minimal understanding about current literacy practice. Initially Kate demonstrated frustration with the teaching profession and the expectations put on teachers from key “stakeholders” – namely policy, syllabus documents, school expectations, principal leadership and parents. She felt that teachers were “*...in overdrive...having to keep up with all the changes in education*” (Interview – 14.5.01). This attitude seemed to influence her teaching practice as she indicated she felt at a disadvantage in her apparent lack understanding of current literacy practice.

Kate's Classroom Practice

Observations of Kate's classroom teaching practice indicated that her classroom practices were quite erratic. Kate had adopted many resources in her classroom such as a “word wall” and an individual “word ring” for each student made up of a collection of high frequency words. However, she was unable to articulate any real purpose for any of them. It became apparent that these were ideas that she had simply collected from other teachers throughout her professional experience. Hoffman (1998) suggests teachers often draw upon “good ideas” as a response to puzzles they encounter in the classroom. Kate's only justification for a “good idea” in this case was “*I've done it before and it's worked*” (Interview – 14.5.01). Such a comment suggests that at this time Kate did not have a clear understanding of how these “good ideas” related to the writing process and her teaching of it. Kate's pre-service teacher training had not emphasised the role of reflective practice and Kate found it challenging to examine her own practice in this way. Thus Kate had adopted “good ideas” randomly without any real understanding of their value for the writing process. Such a strategy seems to have been in response to the prevalent gaps between her understanding of the theory of teaching writing and the transference of this into her classroom practice.

Discussions with Kate about her pre-service teacher training revealed frustration. Kate's memories of learning about language and the writing process at university included “*...lots of different theories...but limited practical experience*” (Interview – 14.5.01). When asked if she remembered the different theories, she wasn't able to articulate these.

It became evident that Kate's professional development requirements needed to be centred on restructuring her “teacher cognitions”, that is, the beliefs and knowledge that she held (Tillema & Imants, 1995; Smith & Neale, 1989). Kate needed to understand what she was doing and why she was doing it. A crucial part in assisting her with this process was for her to make meaningful links between the input she had received in her tertiary pre-service teacher training and what she was now doing (or could be doing) in the classroom.

Identification of Kate's needs led to setting up structures that would begin the process of bringing together her pre-service theory and classroom practice. It was recognised that Kate required extended time to do this, and to work with a mentor or someone who could support her in her classroom as she engaged in a trial-and-error process to understand, extend and build upon her literacy teaching. (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Danielson, 1996; Huberman, 1992; Gitlin & Smyth, 1989; Joyce & Showers, 1988)

Establishment of the mentoring relationship

Negotiations with the principal led to a one-hour block per week for most of the year to allow a mentor to work with and alongside Kate in her classroom in her literacy block. Additional time was also negotiated so that Kate could write in a reflective journal and engage in dialogue with her mentor about her teaching practice. Time is considered a commodity in schools and it was important that both the principal and Kate trusted that the investment of this time would bring benefits. Often the time for dialogue is seen as “chatting” and thus time wasted. However, as Smith (1993) asserts: “effective communication lies at the heart of effective mentoring” (p. 6). As such, interpersonal and communication skills were deemed imperative to this relationship with real opportunity for listening, problem solving and reflective practice. This time became highly valued by both Kate and the mentor.

The mentor, Lisa, who was chosen to work with Kate was another teacher in the school who had had some six years experience teaching Kindergarten through Grade 2. It had been decided by the principal in discussion with Lisa that she should be released from her class for a few hours each day so that she could not only mentor Kate, but also three other teachers who were all keen to explore and develop a “balanced writing pedagogy”.

The mentoring relationship began with Lisa demonstrating literacy practices in Kate's Kindergarten classroom that reflected understanding of the literature around the teaching of writing (Department of Education and Training, 2000; Crevola & Hill, 1998; Graves, 1994; Painter, 1991; Mooney, 1990; Calkins, 1986) and the syllabus expectations (Board of Studies, 1998). During these times in her classroom the phases of the action research spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and creating a revised plan were used as Lisa demonstrated various teaching practices while Kate observed. As time went by, Kate and Lisa team-taught and then reflected on what each had done. Finally, there were times when Kate taught and Lisa observed. Reflection and discussion followed all these sessions.

Classroom support

The initial plan was to focus on managing the practicalities in Kate's classroom, which essentially involved establishing and maintaining a literacy block with purposeful episodes (Ivey, 2002; Crevola & Hill, 1998; Cambourne & Turbill, 1994). Kate and her mentor engaged in constant dialogue aiming to bring together Kate's own learning experiences, Kate's university training, any professional development she'd been exposed to and the "good ideas" that she'd collected throughout her teaching career. As a result of the constant reflection and future planning Kate began to make some changes to the existing classroom structure as she discovered and developed ways to do things that came about through her increasing understanding.

Cognitive coaching

While the action research process enabled Lisa to support Kate in her classroom as she experimented with and investigated the teaching of writing, this alone did not seem to be enough. The need to explicitly link the theory with the practice soon became evident. Kate demonstrated the need to be extended and challenged about what best supported the students as writers engaging in the writing process. In response to this need Lisa began to provide Kate with relevant readings to support what they were doing in her classroom. These were taken from journals, books and newspapers that were informative about the writing process and indicative of current thinking about how children learn literacy practices. Some were known to have been part of Kate's pre-service courses. Such readings supported the "episodes" that had been introduced into Kate's literacy block, assisted Kate in her employment and evaluation of "good ideas" in her literacy classroom, and addressed issues that became evident in the interactions.

The consistent provision of material to assist Kate in developing her understanding of the writing process and how to teach it was important. However, this process was also concerned with the "...development of attitudes, concerns, beliefs and perceptions" (Baird, 1991, p. 101). This process allows "...individuals [to]construct their own understanding of experiences in a way that is influenced by...cognition and affect, ideas and emotions, percepts and concepts...constructivist processes operate during reflection, leading to enhanced metacognition" (Baird, 1991, p. 111). Thus the process of cognitive coaching, it is argued, enabled Kate's classroom practice to be linked explicitly with the relevant theory to support it.

An example of Kate's developing teaching craft was evident in her concern about the amount of "content" that needed to be taught to her Kindergarten students. Kate's quest to understand the "Kindergarten" component of the New South Wales English K-6 Syllabus and support documents (Board of Studies, 1998), could also be viewed as an attempt to broaden her perceived limited knowledge about the writing process at this point of time and how to teach it in her Kindergarten classroom. One could interpret Kate's understanding of the writing process at this stage as a grade-by-grade development rather than as a continuous process throughout all the school years determined by individual students' developmental abilities.

Cognitive coaching through the reading of articles and subsequent discussion of these articles began to focus Kate on why she did what she did in her classroom practice.

For example, Kate indicated that her reading of Calkins (1986) helped her to identify the characteristics of the writing process as well as understand what these meant for her Kindergarten children. She was now beginning to be able to justify her claims with examples related to content. For example, Kate identified a good writer as “...someone who experiments and takes risks...” then immediately backed this up with “children should be able to spell most high frequency words...” (Reflective Journal – 21.5.01).

As time went on, Kate made a number of connections with the readings that were presented to her. These connections began to move her thinking beyond what she needed to do as a Kindergarten teacher and towards what she needed to do to be a teacher of writing. She also began to recognize that some of the readings given to her, she had read during her pre-service training; only now, she was “getting something out of them”. Kate was now frequently sharing with her mentor aspects of what she read and what she was considering doing in her classroom in response to this. This process enabled Kate to begin to make connections between the theory she had been exposed to in her pre-service teacher training and the implications of this for her teaching practice.

The confidence gained, her growing understanding and the opportunities to share both in and out of the classroom further developed the mentoring relationship. Initially Kate indicated that she had perceived the mentor as the expert – someone to help get her classroom organized and tell her what to do. However, as the year went on and Kate's understanding of what she was doing and why she was doing it increased, she began to develop a strong sense of ownership of the “balanced writing pedagogy” in operation in her classroom. Kate no longer taught “good ideas”; she taught what she believed best enabled children to learn literacy practices from her informed position as a classroom teacher.

Doecke (2003) writes “not all the “knowledge” that practitioners require can be constructed through their own practice” (p. 11). It was clear that “cognitive coaching” was important to build upon Kate's classroom practice which resulted in her being able to more clearly articulate what she was doing and why it was important to her teaching of the writing process.

Opportunities for reflection and dialogue

While these opportunities appear on the model in Figure 1 towards the bottom of the spiral, it is important to point out that there was constant reflection and discussion taking place throughout the period. Possibly a more apt representation might be to have a line down the right hand side of the model to represent this aspect. However it was at this point that Kate's reflective journal entries became more positive. Her entries became celebrations of her achievements rather than simple recounts of what she was doing. Such a change in her entries supports Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso's (1988) report that reflecting upon one's own teaching practice can help teachers “recalibrate” their pedagogy and their own understanding of what they do and why they do it. While Kate had been supported in her classroom to achieve a “balanced writing pedagogy” it was vital that Kate understood the value in doing this and that it became part of her pedagogy and teaching craft rather than just another “good idea” she had adopted in the course of her professional journey.

The use of reflective practice encouraged Kate to reflect on her experience as a literacy teacher, make explicit links between her “individual learning and teaching theory” (Whitehead, 2000) and classroom practice and to also develop the confidence to act upon new learning gained through that reflection.

The notion of “professional maturity” and “pedagogical expertise, understanding and knowledge” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 146) played a key role in the development of Kate's reflective practice throughout the year. Opportunities for Kate to reflect on her teaching and talk through aspects of it within a supportive mentoring relationship enabled her to make explicit links between theory and the practice.

Throughout the year Kate's attitude towards teaching, particularly with respect to literacy, moved through some significant phases. She ultimately demonstrated a confidence and conviction about the teaching of writing that clearly indicated the value of her experiences. She wrote, “*I am a very confident teacher of writing who thrives on modelling and passing onto the children everything I know...it [teaching writing] has become my passion*” (Reflective Journal – 30.7.01).

By the end of the year Kate was aware that the way that she taught children to write had changed significantly. At this time she recognised the importance of teaching children about the various components of the writing process (Reflective Journal – 3.12.01). She expressed an understanding that teaching children writing strategies rather than specific content was more beneficial. Kate's increased understanding of writing as a process (NZ Ministry of Education, 1995; Walshe, 1981) led her to allow her Kindergarten students to engage with all stages involved in the process. This was in contrast to observations made of Kate's teaching earlier in the year. She even provided demonstrations of proofreading as a writing strategy to her children (Interview – 12.11.01)

For Kate's teaching to be as effective as possible, the cognitive components and understanding of teaching practice needed to be made explicit. Kate demonstrated the need for her pre-service teacher training to be linked explicitly to her classroom practice. The opportunities to write in her reflective journal, to share these thoughts with her mentor, indeed, allowed Kate to develop her teaching craft.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Kate believed it was vital for teachers “...to be kept informed of any changes in current teaching practices” (Interview – 12.11.01). Beginning teachers are exposed to significant change when they move from their pre-service training to professional practice, and it is crucial that they are supported through this process.

Darling-Hammond (1997) claims that by integrating theory with practice in teacher development opportunities, teachers are more likely to remember and continue applying what they have learned (p. 322). Professional development and classroom practice need to be addressed within a “partnership” mentality (Lefever-Davis & Heller, 2003). Kate demonstrated the impact of integrating theory and practice through establishing a supportive mentoring relationship, engaging with the action

research process, and investigating the theory through cognitive coaching, all over an extended period of time.

Thus, we suggest that the interaction of the mentoring relationship, classroom support, cognitive coaching and opportunities for reflection and dialogue synergistically create a professional learning model that inducted this young teacher into the teaching profession in such a way that she became more confident about her ability to make decisions about her teaching. Moreover, she not only began to make links with the theory that underpinned her practice, she began to question her practice and seek new theories and practices that might better suit the needs of the children in her care. Kate's experiences, we believe, demonstrate that this model has the potential of inducting young beginning teachers into the profession and allowing them to develop their craft of teaching.

Kate's final comment in her reflective journal is evidence of satisfaction with her professional journey in her beginning year - "...all I can think is that I have done the best job I know how" (Reflective Journal – 10.12.01).

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