



Bestchance and ACU Practicum Partnership

Summary Report October 2015

An informal partnership arrangement between *bestchance Child Family Care* and ACU was developed in 2015. Specifically the partnership arrangement centred around the placement of ACU pre-service teachers undertaking their 3 – 5 year old placement based upon a cluster model. The cluster model proposed, and adopted, involved placing ACU pre-service teachers in *bestchance Child Family Care* kindergartens as well as an ACU academic conducting a series of two workshops for pre-service teachers and supervising teachers. *Bestchance Child Family Care* selected and approached kindergarten teachers seeking an expression of interest to supervise one or two ACU pre-service teachers. Kindergartens were organised around 'clusters' based upon location. In total there were total of 12 *bestchance Child Family Care* kindergartens and 17 ACU pre-service teachers.

The 'cluster' model proposed acknowledged that stronger partnerships between early childhood centres and the university provides significant benefits for all involved. The rationale behind this was based on research pointing to the significant influence placement has on a pre-service teacher's learning, but at the cost of creating a divide between what is learnt in the university context and what is learnt on placement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Susan Krieg & Jonanovic, 2013). The divide is representative of a long-standing disjuncture between the university and the field whereby limited communication between the two sectors have worked to create a culture of misunderstanding between the work of teacher educators, and the work of teachers in the field (Allen & Peach, 2007). Arising from this are competing discourses constituting what is a "good" pre-service teacher and a "good" supervising teacher, as well as a "good" teacher educator (Bloomfield, 2009). Additionally, the competing discourses have operated to create, and maintain, a theory-practice divide (Britzman, 2003). The dominant narrative arising from this divide is that theory is what pre-service teachers learn in university, whilst practice is what counts when in the field (Britzman, 2003). Pre-service teachers are

exposed to, and required to, make sense of these competing discourses with research showing that pre-service teachers will most likely align their thinking with the field, serving to maintain the theory-practice divide (Howell, Carpenter, & Jones, 2013). Therefore, developing genuine partnerships between the university sector and other educational contexts, such as *bestchance Child Family Care*, is the most efficient and effective way of addressing the long-standing divisions (Jeanne Maree Allen, Howells, & Radford, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Russell & Chapman, 2001). To do this there had to be recognition and acceptance that it meant creating new ways of relating by navigating the various institutional constraints that have contributed to the divide. Finally, the model proposed firmly believed that for any genuine partnership, both teacher educators and supervising teachers had to come together and jointly work with pre-service teachers as they developed their teaching pedagogy.

The content of the two workshops was focused on developing common understandings between the pre-service teacher and the supervising teacher to assist in the development of strong professional relationships. This included sharing goals of both the pre-service teacher and supervising teacher for the placement along with explicit and joint understandings of the expectations of the placement. Key to this work was the development of relationships whereby pre-services teachers could work with their supervising teacher with the support of the university academic but also supervising teachers could draw on the support of the university academic in addressing any questions they had about their supervising/mentoring role. In summary, the content was firmly based on researching demonstrating that where partnerships between the field and the university are developed pre-service teachers are better able to integrate what they are learning in their coursework alongside what they are learning on practicum (Howell et al., 2013)

At the completion of the placement a brief anonymous online survey was conducted with both pre-service teachers and supervising teachers. The online survey had ethics approval with ACU's Human Research Ethics Committee and participation was voluntary. In total 8 of the 12 supervising teachers completed the online survey and 5 of the 17 pre-service teachers completed the online survey. Supervising teachers were asked a range of questions, including seeking information on the level of support they received from the university in supporting them in their mentoring role as well as the benefits of the workshops in their ongoing mentoring role. Additionally supervising teachers who elected to supervise two ACU pre-service teachers were also asked to provide some feedback on the

'paired' model. Pre-service teachers were asked to comment on the contact they had with the university in relation to previous placement experiences and how this impacted on their overall placement experience as well as support structures and quality of supervision.

Overall Supervising Teachers reported on the positive aspects of the partnership arrangement. In particular, all respondents reported that the first workshop held at the start of the placement was a key part in the development of the pre-service teacher-supervising teacher relationship. This was confirmed with comments such as: "Meeting together provided a foundation/base from which to build the relationship between myself and the pre-service teachers – made the collaboration of working together more tangible". It was also noted that it was very beneficial to meet the university academic and being able to clarify placement expectations. The second workshop held half way through the placement was conducted with pre-service teachers and supervising teachers working in their own groups. The overall response from the supervising teachers about this format again was very positive. In particular, it was noted that this provided the chance for supervising teachers to discuss their mentoring role with their peers allowing for ideas and suggestions to be shared. Comments such as: "It provided an opportunity to reflect on our progress as supervising teachers in a setting that was neutral. I liked that we were divided into two groups of mentors and pre-service teachers. My pre-service teacher seemed more focused after the meeting on what they had yet to achieve. There were also more vocal in their appreciation of my efforts on their behalf" and "Chatting with the other educators within the cluster and their experiences with pre-service teachers".

Some key points for further development of the partnership was also provided by the supervising teachers and including noting that holding the second workshop at *bestchance Child Family Care*, as opposed to in a hosting kindergarten as was done for the first workshop, was more beneficial both in terms of location but also that it provided a "neutral" space in which to share ideas. This respondent suggested that if this was to continue then all workshops should be held at *bestchance Child Family Care*. It was also suggested that a third workshop would have been beneficial providing better communication with the university and keeping the students more accountable. Additionally, it was noted that the workshops should have been "compulsory" with this respondent noting her disappointment that at both workshops there were pre-service teachers and supervising teachers who failed to attend.

In relation to the option of supervising two pre-service teachers survey responses would suggest this was received positively, but there is more work to be done in terms of providing supervising teachers with a stronger pedagogical framework behind the model in order to undertake this form of supervision. Comments included: "The pre-service teachers were able to feel more comfortable by having a peer at the kindergarten" and "the two pre-service teachers could support each other, bounce ideas of each other without necessarily relying on me all the time". One respondent openly acknowledged that she was "reluctant with the idea and made the choice to only take on one pre-service teacher", yet went on to comment that "the second workshop opened [her] eyes to the benefits of taking on two after hearing another educator comment on it. Benefits [she thought included] that there is another adult with the children, pre-service teachers can support each other and clarify what to do and requirements etc and there is another pre-service teacher to bring ideas into the discussions". In terms of engaging in professional discussions between pre-service teachers and supervising teachers it was noted by one respondent that the real benefit for her was the ability for the three of them to engage in more robust professional discussions than she would have normally with only one pre-service teacher. This respondent also noted that the other benefit was that her feedback was received more positively for both pre-service teachers were able to hear it, discuss it between themselves, and then come back to her with further questions. It was noted by one respondent that having two pre-service teachers was time consuming noting that she "had to spend double the amount of time supporting the pre-service teachers, going through their paperwork, discussing ideas etc." This respondent also noted difficulty in providing both pre-service teachers time to plan for teaching with the children. It is comments such as these that indicate where further work is needed in terms of providing supervising teachers with a pedagogical framework behind this model, and in particular the strength of team teaching and joint feedback sessions as opposed to individual feedback.

Response rate from the pre-service teachers was low with only 5 of the 17 pre-service teachers involved completing the online survey. Of the five respondents there was mixed feedback with one student noting that her experience was not favourable and noting that her supervising teacher was absent often and when present did not provide support. Of the other four respondents 2 failed to complete the whole survey whilst the other 2 respondents provided some valuable feedback that would indicate they had a positive experience. They both noted and acknowledged the purpose of the workshops in

establishing relationships that then contributed to their learning on placement. One respondent noted: “The contact with ACU through *bestchance Child Family Care* meetings was extremely valuable to my learning during placement. These meetings opened the lines of communication between my ST and I. The resulting relationship that was established was really fantastic. Having contact with both the university and the other ST and PST’s enabled us to become more confident in our progress and handling of the placement period. We were comforted by the common experiences we were sharing with others in the room. The support of Linda was particular invaluable. Both PST’s and ST’s felt connected to the university and thus able to reach out for assistance if needed.” However, as noted the low response rate makes it difficult to draw any conclusions in terms of the pre-service teachers’ experiences with this partnership arrangement. There was a risk with seeking feedback via an online survey for university structures have students completing many surveys evaluating units and teaching and high response rates are generally hard to achieve. However, with the university academic being responsible for the grading of students for this placement unit an online survey was the most convenient form of evaluation for it allowed data to be gathered maintaining ethical requirements that means academics are not able to undertake research with students who they are responsible for the awarding of grades. In the future it would be worth waiting until after grades are finalised and conducting a focus group interview with students to get richer data.

Overall the partnership arrangement has proven to be valuable in address some of the identified research issues in terms of the need for partnership arrangements between universities and the field. It has also surfaced some of the issues that need further work such as how to manage meeting times and spaces for the workshops. Could the workshops have been conducted at a more suitable time that would allow for “compulsory” attendance? Time was an issue both supervising teachers and pre-service teachers for the workshops were held after hours, and therefore, could not be made compulsory. Clearly there is a need for examining sources of funding for partnerships such as this, for this would allow greater flexibility in terms of when and where workshops could be held. The workshops have acted as a key point of contact between the university and the field, and in so doing, acted as a key tool in addressing the university-field/theory-practice divide that research shows pre-service teachers have to navigate. Therefore, this is something that holds the potential for improving the overall quality of the practicum experience for pre-service teacher.

In summary, it is important to acknowledge that *bestchance Child Family Care* has provided the space and time for this partnership arrangement with ACU. Some valuable feedback has been gained, providing information on ways to further improve any further such arrangements. Therefore, without their support this would not have been made possible. If you have any further questions about this report please do not hesitate to contact the academic responsible: Dr Linda Henderson.

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