"Trying to keep afloat": Early career teaching in an Australian setting

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Teacher preparation requires pre-service teachers to have requisite skills, knowledge and understandings in regards to curriculum planning, preparing and presenting. This paper forms part of a research project Pre-service teacher attitudes and understandings of Music Education, focusing on the Master of Teaching (MTeach) 'Teach For Australia' program (2015-2017). Narrative reflection and interview data is presented as a case study of 'Laura' transitioning from 'student identity to teacher identity', putting theory into practice, 'thinking on her feet', 'looking after self' and 'keeping afloat'. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis as an analytical tool, the findings are discussed in relation to three overarching themes: learning on the job, forming a teacher identity, and showing leadership. Generalisations about other courses/programs or institutions across Australia cannot be made. Limitations of the current study are acknowledged and lessons learnt may impact on teacher education and have implications for future research.

Introduction

To teach is to learn more than twice! — Joseph Joubert

Teaching is a multifaceted profession. Preparing pre-service teachers (PSTs) for the job comes with huge responsibilities and expectations for both PSTs and teaching staff (academics). The teaching profession continues to be challenging and demanding (Parsons, Vaughn, Malloy & Pierczynski, 2017; Humphrey, et al., 2006). Many early career teachers suffer from stress and burnout in their first few years of teaching (Roslan, Ho, Ng & Sambasivan, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Joseph, 2011). It can be argued that PSTs enter the teaching course/program of study with pre-held ideas and beliefs about what teaching may entail. Like novice teachers, PSTs are inclined to apply different understandings and information to confirm or bolster their existing beliefs about teaching (Tillema, 1998). Their past teaching experience is a starting point to increase their knowledge base and beliefs about teaching as they embark on their professional identity (Meirink, Meijer, Verloop & Bergen, 2009). Beliefs about teaching soon come to the fore when PSTs go on placement (practicum/work experience), they are required to act as teachers and not as students (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2008). PSTs then find it challenging putting theory into practice, they have to think on their feet as they shift from student identity to teacher identity (Joseph & Heading, 2010).

While investigating teaching practice in teacher education is 'old hat' (Shaw & Mason, 2015; Allard et al., 2007), teaching concurrently whilst undertaking an initial teacher education (ITE) program is relatively new. This takes its toll on PSTs as they grapple with their personal and professional identity (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014), whilst at the same time acquiring a competent and comprehensive understanding of education policy in core education units (subjects) and curriculum methodology units. This paper points to some of

the difficulties that a short study such as the Teach For Australia (TFA) program offers. It also raises concerns about PSTs being classroom ready while concurrently undertaking an ITE program. The TFA program recruits future leaders into classrooms (Teach for Australia, 2019). They hold a prior qualification in an area of study and are known as Associates (elite graduates). Many stories and reflections have been written by some of the Associates about their experience (see Teach for Australia, 2018). This paper discusses some key challenges, dilemmas and opportunities of how one music TFA Associate ('Laura') transitioned from music student identity to music teacher. It also includes the author's voice as tertiary music educator. Laura granted the author permission to use her name at the time of writing this paper whilst completing the Master of Teaching (MTeach) program in 2017 at Deakin University in Melbourne (Australia). Laura holds a Bachelor of Music (Music Therapy) and a Bachelor of Social Work qualification. As a qualified music therapist and social worker, she plays flute, piano, organ, guitar, and directs a community choir. This paper forms part of the author's wider research project *Pre-service teacher attitudes and understandings of music education* which investigates how pre-service teachers construct their teacher identity.

In Australia, all ITE programs are required to meet higher education graduate learning outcomes and the Australian Professional Standard for Teachers (see AITSL, 2017). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Australian Professional Standard for Teachers; however, AITSL (2017) sets out what teachers need to do and know across four career stages (Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead). They also provide a framework to assist teachers to monitor their learning in relation to their professional objectives and achievements (AITSL, 2017). All ITE are endorsed by the university and professional accreditation bodies: Australian Qualification Framework, Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, and the Victorian Institute of Teaching (AITSL, 2017; Bahr & Mellor, 2016; Knipe, Mills & Garoni, 2016).

Given the expectations set by the above bodies, it is understood that teaching is so much more than just telling (Weinstein, 1989). It is multifarious and requires pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1998), and a range of skills and professional knowledge (Ball, Thames & Phelps, 2008). Professional knowledge is unique to teachers' work, it develops over time. Tertiary educators have the responsibility to model pedagogical content knowledge that includes what to teach and how to teach (Loughran, 2006 cited in Grierson, 2010). They concomitantly develop classroom management skills alongside requisite skills, knowledge and understandings that relate to teaching (curriculum, assessment and reporting) and to schooling (schools, parents, children and the community).

For PSTs trying to understand how the curriculum works, thinking of different ways to teach and assess, can be overwhelming. Understanding themselves with a new-found teacher identity can be confronting and takes time to develop (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017; Mockler, 2011; Akkerman & Meijer 2011; Joseph & Heading, 2010). PSTs draw on their personal experience, professional identity and situated identity to motivate and engage students to champion potential (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Mockler, 2011; Day & Kington, 2008). In doing so, they need good social skills which can be emotionally draining (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017). Nevertheless, they grapple with theory learnt in their program

of study as it does not have ready-made answers to fit into their teaching situations. The notion of a one-size fits all as a solution is not an option (Strangeways, 2015). There are no full proof teaching recipes *per se* to follow. Consequently, it would seem unrealistic that a six-week TFA/MTeach program can sufficiently equip the Associate/PST with the skills needed to teach in disadvantaged schools.

The *Teach For Australia* (TFA) program

The TFA program is a quicker way to obtain a teaching qualification (Knuckey, 2012). It is based on a view that good learners make good teachers and that teaching can be learnt alongside experienced colleagues. Like an apprenticeship model, it supposes that teaching is a set of skills that can be learnt like a trade. This way of learning does not necessarily consider different student needs. The Associate's personal identity versus their professional identity is challenged when they may have had little or no experience encountering students with special needs, or growing up in low socio-economic/ disadvantaged neighbourhoods and or schools (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014). At Deakin University, the TFA program was taught in partnership with a two-year post-graduate MTeach qualification. The Associates were required to teach years 7-12 in disadvantaged schools for two years whilst completing the ITE qualification (Deakin University, 2017b). They undertook a six-week intensive study (lectures, tutorials, practical workshops, group and individual assessments) and one placement before starting as their 0.8 full-time teacher job whilst concurrently completing the MTeach course.

A recent report about the TFA in Australia confirmed that teaching whilst studying is a struggle for many Associates even though they are high achievers (see Dandolo, 2017). During the course of study, Associates worked with a number of mentors from the school, TFA providers and Deakin University. The 'nested support' structure had specific roles to play in the life of the Associate. (Evangelinou-Yianakis, 2019). Research in Australia has shown that mentors do not necessarily provide them with sufficient support (Weldon et al., 2013; Dandolo, 2017). It is beyond the scope of this paper to focus on the 'Teach For All' network around the globe, rather, the author acknowledges that programs may be similar in relation to pre-classroom preparation and support (Cumsille & Fiszbein, 2015).

The TFA teacher training pathway was funded by the Australian Government as an employment-based program. By placing high quality teachers as leaders in classrooms in disadvantaged schools, the assumption was that they would help children achieve their potential. Although this may have been the case because the Associates brought a range of unique skills and experiences to classrooms, teacher unions 'loathed' the program as it placed Associates after a short intensive into a classroom (Balogh, 2017). A very high percentage (80%) of Associates reported that their workloads were very difficult to manage, interestingly 70% of principals said they would have employed a teacher who had expert subject matter knowledge rather than an Associate (Dandolo, 2017). The dilemma the author had as tertiary music educator was how best to prepare Laura for music classroom practice within a six-week intensive before going out to teach at a disadvantaged school as she transitioned from wearing her 'student hat' to a 'teacher hat'. Tertiary music educators are responsible for bridging the theory/practice nexus as many PSTs lack confidence to

teach music at schools particularly in primary schools (Ballantyne et al., 2008; Baldwin & Beauchamp, 2014; Rogers et al., 2008; Munday & Smith, 2010). At the same time, tertiary educatiors are expected to prepare effective teachers for the profession (Mayer et al., 2015).

Music education within the TFA/MTeach course

The TFA/MTeach program comprised 16 units: eight core education units, four Arts Education Discipline Study (Music) units, four other units (such as Leadership, Research, Internship), and 60 days placement (see Deakin University, 2017a). A blended approach to delivering the four Arts Education Discipline Study (Music) units (face to face and online) provided some of the essential knowledge, skills and understanding on how to approach learning and teaching in music classrooms (El-Mowafy, Kuhn & Snow, 2013; Herrington, Schrape & Singh, 2012). The author had the overarching responsibility to prepare the unit material that addressed both student behavioural issues and students with special needs. The first Music unit focused on year 7-10, the second on music pedagogies, composition and musicianship, the third on year 11-12, and the fourth on multicultural music, cultural diversity, special needs and instrumental pedagogy. The teaching units were premised on a constructivist approach to music teaching and learning (Webster, 2011; Wiggins, 2015; Shively, 2015).

Laura's contact with the author began in November 2015 where she undertook the first and second music units as an intensive (12 hours over 2 days). The author and sessional music tutor delivered the units (content and pedagogies) and communicated some classroom management ideas before Laura went on her two-week placement (December 2015). At the start of January 2016, Laura had 6 hours of face to face and online learning before she was appointed at her school. She was the Year 10 mentor teacher, teaching Years 9 and 10 classroom music and also the Years 9-12 instrumental music teacher.

Between February and June 2016, the author and the sessional tutor kept in contact with Laura although she had no MTeach units to complete. She undertook the remaining music units (three and four) online between July and September 2016 with the sessional tutor. The on-campus classes taught by the sessional for those units were recorded and uploaded in the cloud to support all off-campus students. During this time Laura was able to communicate with other MTeach music PSTs in the cloud and became part of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Overall, Associates were supported by their school mentor, TFA Teaching and Learning Advisor, Deakin University School Academic Mentor (SAM), and fellow Associates and alumni whilst undertaking the MTeach program (see Deakin University, 2017b). The author and sessional tutor also supported her.

Method

Ethical approval was granted by Deakin University to undertake the wider study *Pre-service teacher attitudes and understandings of Music Education*. The Plain Language Statement and Consent Form was emailed to Laura inviting her to participate in January 2017 only after she had passed her four Arts Education Discipline Study (Music) units. This qualitative phenomenological study tells of Laura's personal experience which lends itself to

interpretation (McAdams, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Educational case study methodology is commonly used for qualitative research (Stake, 2005; Merriam, 1998; & Yin, 2009). Case study methodology allows for a limited number of individuals in a small geographical area (Zainal, 2007).

Data collection

Drawing on narrative reflection is a way to improve professional practice (Schön, 1987). The author used empirical data (email communication, telephone conversations and a semi-structured interview) to generate meaning out of Laura's experience (Chase, 2005). The author conducted a semi-structured interview with Laura in January 2017. In addition, she made some notes when speaking to Laura. The interviewee also provided a written response to some of the questions asked, for example: What is your role at the school? What did you find challenging at the school and in the MTeach? What were there some of the opportunities? How do you define your teacher identity? The use of narrative or story telling is useful way to represent results and mobilise findings (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013)

Data analysis

Drawing on the data, the author used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse and code the data (Peitkeiwicz & Smith, 2012). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative research methodology that employs phenomenology and interpretation (hermeneutics) to explore the lived experience and perception of the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis involves the participant making meaning of an experience and the researcher making sense of the participant's interpretation known as a double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). From the data gathered, three overarching themes are presented and discussed: learning on the job, forming a teacher identity, and showing leadership. The author sent the paper for Laura to check on the data and interpretations (Creswell, 2009; Loh, 2013). The narrative is reported in first person (Said & Zhang, 2013).

Findings and discussion

Preparing Laura through intensive and online mode was challenging. The sessional music tutor and I had little time to get to know her skills and abilities when initially meeting Laura for a two-day intensive in November 2015. Much content and pedagogical knowledge had to be covered as well as talking about becoming a teacher (Schulman, 1998; Munday & Smith, 2010). Over time I learnt more of Laura's music experiences and offered help in areas where she needed it. Being the only student in the class was a limitation in itself as she was not able to perform with others or have discussions with peers. The sessional tutor prepared excellent weekly notes for Laura. We conversed about her progress across the four Arts Education Discipline Study (Music) units as we were concerned about some of the challenges she faced in regards to, feedback from her supervising teacher, classroom management, and general student issues. Although the supervision aspect was out of our

hands *per se*, we supported her through emails and telephone calls to 'think on her feet' as she began her journey to transition from student to teacher identity.

Learning on the job

Most PSTs find it difficult putting theory into practice because what is learnt at the university 'as student' and what takes place in a classroom 'as teacher' can be very different (Joseph & Heading, 2010; Naylor, Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 2015). Laura was 'fast tracked', it placed a huge responsibility on her to meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017). She needed to meet the 'Graduate' status by the end of her first-year. By the end of her second year, she needed to show that she was Proficient (AITSL, 2017). A tall order in a short space of time when studying and teaching concurrently. When asked: what were some of the challenges undertaking the course? She found that some:

> stem directly from the alternative 'fast-track' pathway …. my journey doesn't follow the traditional teacher-preparation path of a student studying, undertaking supervised professional practice placements with increasing responsibility, and finally entering the professional world as a graduate teacher with a complete set of studies, supervised placements, and two years of classroom resources in their toolbox. After an initial period of very intensive study including a two-week professional practice placement, I stepped into the classroom, simultaneously a salaried (para-professional) teacher with an almost full workload and as a full-time Master of Teaching student with a relentless schedule of study and assessment commitments.

At the end of Laura's first year of teaching and the start of her second (2017), I asked "what did you find really challenging at the school?" She felt "I had no idea what I was walking into" even though "TFA and Deakin had prepared me to step into the classroom, and my music methods units had prepared me to know and understand the music curriculum and design lessons and equipped me pedagogically". As tertiary educator, I also had no idea what Laura would be facing at her school. I had no induction from the TFA in regards to what Laura could expect at the school. Had I known, I or the sessional may have prepared her differently in relation to planning, preparing and presenting lessons (Rogers, et al., 2008). Subsequently the school lacked a teaching program and the music resources were limited. She confirmed:

> I didn't know that students would expect to play instruments in every class; that there weren't enough instruments for 26 students in one class; that I'd have no audio-visual equipment and too few desks. There was nothing in the music program from which I could start as a beginner teacher - no usable scope and sequence, no lesson or unit plans, no established classes at Years 9 or 10. Students had only minimal, if any, experience of music education before Year 9 and many were closed to the vast musical world.

As Laura navigated her way through her teaching in her second year at the school she recognised that teaching and learning is complex. She realised that the success of her lessons had more to do with her "connecting with students in a more therapeutic sense, which had flow-on effects in the classroom". The various roles and responsibilities teachers play within classrooms, putting theory into practice makes the journey thought provoking

(Joseph & Heading, 2010; Naylor, Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 2015). As a classical musician Laura had a resilient attitude; she had her high standards. Her TFA Teaching and Leadership Advisor said she needed to "lower her expectations… and allow myself [herself] to be a student learning on the job", in essence she needed to be kinder to herself (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

Forming a teacher identity

Although Laura had a broad range of music knowledge and experience from her other professional roles, she felt:

> As a beginning teacher, I stepped into a job requiring me to develop every lesson and assessment from scratch. I didn't know what it would feel like to be paid so little to work so hard, or that I would feel so isolated and unsupported.

Forming a teacher identity and teaching under some difficult circumstances was challenging for Laura (Day & Kington, 2008). From my communication with her, it was apparent that the students' behaviour was inexcusable; they tested her 'teacher authority'. She said "students would leave classes if they wanted to, shout across the room or out windows, throw things, refuse to put phones away, or flatly refuse to participate at all". This behaviour would have been humiliating and soul destroying even for an experienced teacher like myself! As her music lecturer I felt helpless as she had signed up for the TFA/MTeach program and had to complete it.

Despite all the trials and tribulations, Laura drew on her previous work as therapist and social worker to inform her teacher identity. It helped her cope with 'looking after self' as she had to win over students who came from very low socio-economic backgrounds. Looking after 'self' proved stressful and emotionally exhausting which led to burnout (Dicke, et al., 2014; Fiorilli, et al., 2017). Often, she questioned whether her teaching was engaging enough for students who came from backgrounds of trauma and/or cyclical disadvantage. She worked hard on "expanding students' musical horizons, opening their ears, minds, and hearts to the vastness [of sound]" In so doing she was "inhabiting a music educator identity, [and] inhabiting my [her] pedagogic identity to becoming a music teacher". Her commitment to the job and her teacher knowledge helped shape her music teacher identity (Hastings, 2010; Clandinin, Downey & Huber, 2009; Meirink, et al., 2009).

By the end of her first year, Laura said she felt "more confident in my [her] music teacher identity – that is, less defensive about my [her] curriculum decisions and lesson designs, which were different in approach to those of my [her] school mentor". Undertaking this study also afforded me the opportunity to gain a better understanding about how Laura shaped her identity as teacher. It also gave me a chance to reflect on whether the four music units effectively prepared her to meet some of the challenges in the classroom (Schön, 1987). Within the TFA program there was little space for me to provide feedback about Laura's general teacher preparation (construction, realisation and reflection). I felt I was not able to fully prepare Laura for the challenges she faced. She had to survive the expectations of her mentor teacher, students and parents.

Showing leadership

Laura strongly felt the need to live up to the identity of music teacher at the school, to prove that she "could do it". Trying to have professional conversations about what to teach and how to teach with her mentor "was not always easy". Nevertheless, she grew in confidence, her leadership skills emerged and she started to design programs that worked for the students (Baldwin & Beauchamp, 2014). As many of her students "had little music education experience and such narrow music experience", her planning had to be "creative and resourceful". It also made her think about the type of teacher she wanted to become. She was not provided with lesson plans to follow at her school. Therefore, she planned lessons and found material that the students were familiar with. Although this was time consuming, it proved worthwhile as she worked from the known to the unknown, showing care for what interested her students (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017). Laura found that many students were not exposed to different genres and styles of music. Because of her strong passion and love of music, Laura firmly believed:

> that music education should enable students to develop a lifelong engagement with music, it should equip them with the knowledge, tools, and skills to engage in music in whichever way they would like to and is meaningful for them.

Laura found she "spent almost every waking minute planning lessons to engage students who had minimal to no music education experience". These students were "years behind expected achievement levels for their stage of schooling". She worked exceedingly hard to motivate and encourage her students as she felt they were "starved of the wonder, and profound beauty and communicative capacity of music". In the same breath, she also felt preparing and teaching lessons at this level "was not sustainable". It had significantly impacted her overall sense of wellbeing (Bloomfield, 2010). At the end of her first school holidays she said "my dog became suddenly unwell and had to be euthanised and I, teetering precariously on the edge of coping, was broken". Laura was vulnerable and emotionally lost at sea. She was desperately needing to look after 'self' as her stress levels were high (Roslan, et al., 2015). Laura was suffering from burnout as she worked in isolation (Joseph, 2011). She felt very unsupported by the mentor at the school.

Notwithstanding all that she had been through, Laura was approached the next year by her principal as he was so impressed by her. He offered her a leadership role at the school. This came about because her "school mentor got a job at another school, and I [she] was asked to take over the music program, which included VET (Vocational Education and Training) music (industry skills in sound production and performance)". While this was a great opportunity, it meant that Laura needed to gain a qualification in VET Training and Assessment which she weighed up against her workload and stress levels and decided not to take up the position. Laura felt that she needed to focus on her second year of teaching by "reflecting on, and consolidating, what I'd [she] learnt in first year". At the end of her first year at the school she concomitantly completed all four Music units and her shift from student identity to teacher identity began to evolve as bearer of music knowledge to facilitator of music learning.

Conclusion

This paper offers two voices, a limitation in itself, hence generalisations to other TFA programs and students cannot be made. Rather, lessons learnt may improve the experience and expectation for all concerned as some of the findings may resonate with other TFA Associates and/ or early career music teachers. The journey of teacher identity continues to evolve for both author (as experienced teacher) and Laura (as novice). As a beginner teacher, Laura faced numerous adjustments as she oscillated between student and teacher identity (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017). She had to quickly learn how to work with children from low socio-economic areas who came from disadvantaged backgrounds, she also had to manage what was expected of her from the school, the mentor, the university, and the TFA program. In addition to these adjustments, she travelled 60 minutes to her job in each direction, four times a week, whilst "keeping afloat" (in her own words).

Albeit Laura was a high achiever, in reality she was an unqualified TFA Associate, learning on the job. She inhabited multiple identities (MTeach student, music teacher/Associate, music therapist and social worker) which helped shape her teacher identity (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017; Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014). Working in isolation and learning how to motivate disengaged students was not easy! Fortuitously she drew on her previous background knowledge by 'chunking' together pedagogical content knowledge which she gathered from her music discipline units in order to 'make meaning' of what to teach and how to teach (Hoban, Loughran & Nielsen, 2011). Laura shared information about her teaching experience through assignments, email and telephone communications with myself and the sessional tutor.

Given the complexity of teaching and studying concurrently, it is recommended that universities offer far more support structures when putting theory into practice for beginner teachers as they prepare to meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017). Offering additional duty of care by peer networks and university staff may help future TFA/MTeach and /or early career teachers feel less "isolated and unsupported… flailing about in the ocean without a single piece of driftwood to grab onto", in the words of Laura. I recommend students undertake workshops prior to their first placement, such as role play with common classroom scenarios. This may help them cope with classroom management concerns, especially in low socio-economic schools. In addition, keeping a reflective diary through their journey may also assist students and other stakeholders (mentor, principal, SAM, lecturers) identify early or potential challenges, dilemmas and opportunities. Extra resources (staff/time), should be made available to students regarding teaching and learning matters as some Associates may require social and /or emotional support during their time at the school. This may require further training for university staff to support these Associates. It is equally important to keep communication between all concerned (TFA, mentor, teachers, lecturers, SAM) transparent in order to help PSTs transition to becoming registered teachers.

At the time of writing this paper Laura moved from her first into her second year of teaching. During that time, she thought deeply about her experiences, beliefs and teacher identity (Parsons, et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, she questioned her job satisfaction and

wondered whether burnout was worth it (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016). In hindsight Laura realised just how much her hard work paid off, she felt far more prepared in her second year. Preparing PSTs is a great responsibility. It takes time; there is no one single direction on the roadmap to becoming a teacher (Bloomfield, 2010; Bahr & Mellow, 2016). Laura never gave up, she survived and completed the TFA/MTeach program with outstanding results. She now works at another school. In time, Laura will swim the crest of the wave as she carves out her own music teacher identity.

Acknowledgement

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