

Developing the inner teacher: guiding the reflective practice of first year preservice teachers

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ABSTRACT

First year Australian Initial Teacher Education students are at a high risk of not completing their studies, particularly in the transition into their tertiary studies in first year, and then if achieving graduation, many are likely to leave the profession in the early years. While the reasons vary, it is known that early departure from a career in teaching can signal a lack of personal resilience and emotional coping skills. As teacher educators, we aimed to ameliorate this through using an intensively reflective first year course curriculum to assist preservice teachers in developing these essential qualities and skills. Our curriculum adopts a framework of self managed learning and personal growth through immersive reflective practice leading to the development of a *personalised pedagogy of self*. In line with these tenets, our curriculum story unfolds through the reflections of first year preservice teachers and academic staff teaching into this first year course.

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In the beginning

This paper is about preservice teacher development, and more specifically, about prioritising reflection and the self for teacher professional development. In 2014, the Australian Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group published a report *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* finding that, ‘Stakeholders have identified a need for improved support for beginning teachers’ (p. 43) and ‘that both structural and cultural change is needed to strengthen initial teacher education in Australia ... [to] include ... support for preservice teachers to continually reflect on their own practice’ (p. x–xi). In the next few pages, we talk about our actions to support first year preservice teachers to develop an awareness of themselves as learners and themselves as future teaching professionals. Our interest in helping first year preservice teachers in these areas stems from our combined many years of experience as registered teachers, academics in Initial Teacher Education, particularly with first year undergraduate students, and our involvement with many of the aspects that define a First Year Experience in Higher Education (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011).

In our previous work (Donnison, Opreescu, & Penn-Edwards, 2013), we argued for curricula designs that aid students’ transition into the first year of higher education studies by the inclusion of *soft* outcomes, such as the development and evaluation of personal efficacy

and resilience, as well as the expected course appropriate *hard* outcomes. In this paper, we outline the process and results of applying our theory about first year curriculum design to an existing first year Initial Teacher Education course. Our story is predicated on reflection, and as such, it is appropriate to frame the telling of it with the reflections of the students and teaching staff, particularly of Lisa, who facilitated the implementation of Sorrel and Sharn's theoretical and curriculum conceptions and understandings in her classroom.

Introducing the protagonist: Lisa

Lisa: Although I had worked and studied in the field of Education for almost 30 years, in pre-schools, primary schools and international schools (in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Australia, as well as in Kosovo and Montenegro), Aid and Development Education programs in Nauru, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, and worked for the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Vocational and Higher Education programs, it was the first time I had ever worked in a mainstream teacher education program. It was possibly the biggest culture shock of my life. While I had worked cross-culturally all around the world, I had never before encountered a group of students who were as disengaged with their own learning.

While Lisa may lament first year preservice teachers' disengagement from formal academic learning, the 21st century student is very engaged with technology and social media. They are, in the main, tech savvy, connected, focused on immediacy and the sharing of their lives and thoughts through social media. The '5-year plan' of the baby-boomers is almost an anathema to our young adult students as they gravitate towards instantaneous access to *apps* which inform, tell, direct and organise everything from Wikipedia 'facts' to 'How to make money/tie a scarf' to picking the perfect partner from those random strangers within a kilometre's reach. Planning your life can be done through Life Strategy, Goal Tracker or My Effectiveness apps, but as the intrinsic and perhaps unconscious motto of many of our younger students is, 'Don't plan; just live!', it is doubtful that they are the main users of such apps.

Lisa: As a colleague of mine quipped one day, it seemed like the student of today, 'arrives late for lectures carrying a skateboard, checks Facebook and leaves early'. While this was of course not true for all students, and in fact some of them were truly inspirational, there was certainly a large number of students that embodied that description (give or take the skateboard).

What happens to those who choose to enter a profession such as teaching; how does this life of instant gratification fare in a demanding school/work environment? We know that attrition in the first year in higher education in Australia is approximately 21% of the national total of domestic undergraduate students (Department of Education and Training, 2014) and the attrition rate of early career teachers in Australia is alarmingly high. The Australian Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (2014, p. 41) claim that 29% of early career teachers are considering leaving the profession in their first two years, and Paris (2013) suggests that 40% of early career teachers will leave the profession in their first five years. This is a world-wide problem with the United States Department of Education (2015) reporting a five-year study with an attrition rate of 23% for new teachers beginning in 2007–2008. Of some concern, Ingersoll and Merrill (2012, p. 18) cite figures of up to 50% of beginning teachers leaving the profession within 5 years of employment in the American public education system. This attrition not only affects the preservice and beginning teacher involved but has financial and social impact on the schools concerned and on student achievement (United States Department of Education, 2015).

The situation is complex. In 2013, we argued for a ‘re-evaluation of current approaches to first year curriculum design to better support preservice teachers’ ongoing personal and professional development as well as their transition into their academic studies’ (Donnison, Opreescu, & Penn-Edwards, 2013, p. 1) by facilitating their holistic wellbeing, in particular, their personal resilience and self-efficacy as well as their academic progress. This was also the focus of Ripski, LoCasale-Couch and Decker’s (2011) work where they claim that high attrition rates in beginning teachers could be ameliorated by preservice teachers developing better personal and professional resilience during preservice teacher training.

Fundamental to developing personal and professional resilience is having a strong understanding of the self and how one’s self-concept impacts on one’s learning and one’s future professional roles (Ministerial Council on Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2010). Lisa underpinned her implementation of our curriculum approach with the work of Palmer (1998) whose theories and beliefs provided the cornerstone for the re-development of a course to focus on resilience and holistic wellbeing.

Lisa: The most significant thing I felt I had to share, after 30 years in education, was that ‘we teach who we are’. I also knew that in order to do justice to teaching this simple yet paradoxically complex and layered concept, I also had to embody it.

For Lisa, teaching is about relationships and the most important and empowering of these is the relationship teachers have with themselves. Resilient, self-aware teachers with high levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem create classrooms that foster those same qualities and attributes in children.

The heroes: preservice teachers

Palmer (1998) argues that *we teach who we are* and that an integral part of developing into an effective teacher is the development of a Personal Pedagogy of Self (PPS), an expression coined by McIlveen et al. (2011), in that:

Teaching like any truly human activity emerges from one’s inwardness ... As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together... teaching holds a mirror to the soul. (Palmer, 1998, p. 1)

A Personal Pedagogy of Self is about preservice teachers understanding that who they are, is what is really being taught in the classroom. The question most commonly asked by preservice teachers when discussing *good teaching* is the *What* question, for example, ‘What will we teach?’ Further deliberations bring forth the *How* question, such as, ‘How will we teach it?’ Occasionally, preservice teachers may delve deeper and ask the *Why* question, that is, ‘Why are we teaching this or that?’ Rarely, if ever, do they ask the *Who* question which is at the heart of teaching, ‘Who is the self that teaches?’ (Palmer, 1998, p. 2).

Lisa: It was important to emphasise to the students at the start of this course that this is the process we are wanting students to take part in and this is what we are doing to support them in making this transition so that they are becoming a teacher with a personalised pedagogy of self rather than just learning the what and how of teaching.

Palmer’s (1998) emphasis on self-reflection and self-awareness provided a sound framework for enacting our curriculum approach to the first year in higher education; one that is characterised by soft as well as standard hard outcomes.

The story continues: implementation of a soft outcomes curriculum

To realise our goal of implementing a soft outcomes curriculum for preservice teachers' personal and professional development, we needed a first year, first semester course that offered opportunities for preservice students to observe their intended professional workplace, allowed enough time and scope for the inception of an authentic personal pedagogy and was facilitated by academics who were experienced school teachers. We were fortunate in being able to revise such a course, *Professional Learning: Building Community Connections*, a core first semester course with a 2014 cohort of 160 preservice primary education students at a regional Queensland university. We gained university ethics permission to gather information and feedback from volunteer enrolled students and teaching staff with the usual caveats regarding participation, privacy and anonymity; numbers have been used for participants' quotations.

Prior to 2014, *Professional Learning: Building Community Connections* was about first year preservice teachers seeing themselves as part of, and building professional connections within, the primary school context. This course is in the first semester of the Bachelor of Primary Education which is the third largest program offered at the Queensland university with approximately 300 students enrolled. Students in this program were accepted with a statewide rank of down to the 15th band (of 25 bands), that is, one of the lower entry scores for higher education programs. Over half of the students (56%) were identified as mature age (non-school leavers) with 52% being the first in their family to enter higher education.

Coursework comprised forty hours face to face and 10 days of Supervised Professional Experience (SPE) in a primary school. The revised course broadened the focus to include community building with firstly, one's self and secondly with the university community and the school and classroom community.

Lisa: There is a strong focus on community being something that we have to build within ourselves if we want to create and participate in it, in our work and life. Students need to be drivers not passengers or spectators in their learning/teaching journey.

We believed that through incorporating a PPS lens, the course, being developmental, would encourage students to *engage* with their studies as it has an explicit career orientation and to be *responsible* for their own learning and development, as well as assist them in their *transition* into higher education studies. We believed that this course could also provide a foundation for first year students to start the transition process of becoming a teacher, where making a transition is more than just making a change because 'there is the emergence of a new sense of yourself, some new reality you're dealing with, some new idea that is moving you forward' (Bridges, 2004, p. 98). A broader aim would be to enhance the retention of students throughout the program.

The long hard journey takes place: reflect, reflect, reflect

The development of a Professional Development Action Plan (PDAP) linked to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Graduate) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2015) underpinned the revised course *Professional Learning: Building Community Connections*. Reflective practice and the assessment as the foundation for developing and evaluating soft outcomes (resilience, wellbeing, coping skills, self-efficacy and awareness) were embedded in the curriculum rather than being a *bolt-on*.

Lisa: It appeared upon discussion with colleagues that despite the fact that self-reflection and reflective writing is an integral part of all learning and assessment through the four year Primary Education degree, students were not really being taught how to do it. To this end, the course was refined so that students were immersed in reflective thinking, writing and practice from the first day of the first semester of their first year in their higher education degree ... the first assessment task in the new iteration of the course, was to write a reflective journal entry based on a range of experiences, tests, surveys and resources.

The course may well have been renamed: Reflect, Reflect, Reflect! From the first day of class, the first year students were viewed and addressed as developing teaching professionals to frame the content. The course topics included reflection as part of the teaching/learning cycle; metaphors of teaching; teachers as self-nurturers; the Reflective Practice Cycle; critical reflection; reflecting on teaching beliefs, assumptions, and values; and ethics, values and professionalism reflecting on what this means for a teacher/beginning teacher, as well as what it means for the students as individuals. The course was designed around four key reflective questions:

Self Evaluation: Where am I now? A guided reflection on current personal and professional skills, knowledge, interests, strengths and areas for improvement based on existing self-knowledge, past experience, and results from tools such as Myers Briggs, Enneagram, DISC, OCEAN, and Communication Styles.

Goals: Where do I want to be? Creating a vision (written and visual description of the teacher I want to be and am becoming) and setting goals.

Action Planning: How will I get there and what resources will I need? What/who do I need to help me get there? Students are introduced to all available strategies and opportunities for achieving goals, including Supervised Professional Experience, Wider Field Experience (in schools, self sourced professional development, or working with children in some capacity), academic skills courses, mentors, resources, experiences and online courses.

Evaluation: How will I know that I am there? Students are introduced to the modelling of and practice in developing measurable indicators of achievement with regards to goals.

Lisa: All of this was new for many of the students. Some felt that doing the degree was their plan and that by showing up (or not) and completing their assessment tasks they would emerge at the end with all the tools they needed to be a teacher. The fact that they needed to know themselves, to understand what they were bringing to the classroom and to have a vision of the teacher they wanted to be when they graduated was a completely foreign concept. It was as if becoming a teacher was something that would be done to them and that they would be a passenger in the journey, rather than being a co-creator in the journey and destination.

It was made clear to the students from the outset of the course that, rather than this being a course where the academics would *teach* and the students would *learn*, it would be a process of learning and teaching together. The academics also participated, reflected and shared in classroom teaching/learning experiences.

Lisa: We are all in this together. I and the other tutors all did the tests and surveys and shared our findings, I did the assessment tasks and the students assessed me, I had my own PDAP [Professional Development Action Plan] so that they saw from the beginning that I was a learner/teacher as were they and that we were learning from and teaching each other ... lots of hands on activities with mixed groups in tutorials and lectures using a wide range of YouTube clips, quotes, readings, case studies etc. Our credo was 'We are all in this together. My success is tied up in your success'.

The course included opportunities in class for students to practise their reflection using strategies that could be used in primary classrooms (For example, Think Pair Share, Hot Seat,

Heads and Tails, Jigsaws, Peer Teaching), as well as reflective teaching strategies (e.g. Y chart, PMI, Six Thinking Hats, Checklist) that the preservice teacher could use on themselves or with children.

The assessment of the course learning outcomes, a 750 word *Reflection on a Literacy and Numeracy Diagnostic Test* and a 1500 word *Professional Development Action Plan*, was relatively simple; however, the intent of the course was that substantive intrapersonal learning was undertaken during class time.

Lisa: When I explained the assessment task in detail, I was often asked ... is that it?

Students' initial perceptions of the apparent simplicity of the course were soon altered when it became clear that because all learning built on the growing understanding of self, and much of the learning was done in lectures and tutorials in a highly scaffolded way, where students had to reflect and share with others, it was important that students committed to full attendance.

Following the trail: measuring the success

It was obvious that staff observations would provide useful data, however the journey as experienced by the students was our key aim. The research questions which guided the gathering of data in this course were largely pragmatic:

- Can the development of soft outcomes (i.e. resilience, wellbeing, coping skills, self-efficacy and awareness) be effectively embedded in a first year course? (Donnison, Penn-Edwards, & Albion, 2014, pp. 4, 5).
- How useful is it in practice to enable students to form a pedagogy of self for their personal fulfillment, their transition into university studies, and their introduction into a professional role?

To assess whether the revised course effectively assisted students in their development of a personal pedagogy of self, data were collected from three sources: (i) the usual online course evaluation undertaken at the end of semester to which 24% responded (i.e. 32 students); (ii) voluntary quantitative responses to a written questionnaire of 10 questions completed online in class with 35 respondents (30% response rate) and (iii) voluntary participation in focus groups comprising 10% of the cohort.

The end of the trail: the data

We present the data under these two research questions.

Can the development of soft outcomes (i.e. resilience, wellbeing, coping skills, self-efficacy and awareness) be effectively embedded in a first year course?

It is clear that the course design with its embedded soft outcomes assisted the preservice teachers to assess their personal and professional strengths and areas for improvement; develop confidence in setting personal and professional goals and creating personal and professional development action plans; and to self-reflect.

Student questionnaire post-course responses showed that their confidence in assessing their personal and professional strengths and identifying areas for personal improvement strongly improved such that: 31% who were 'slightly confident' pre-course fell to 6%

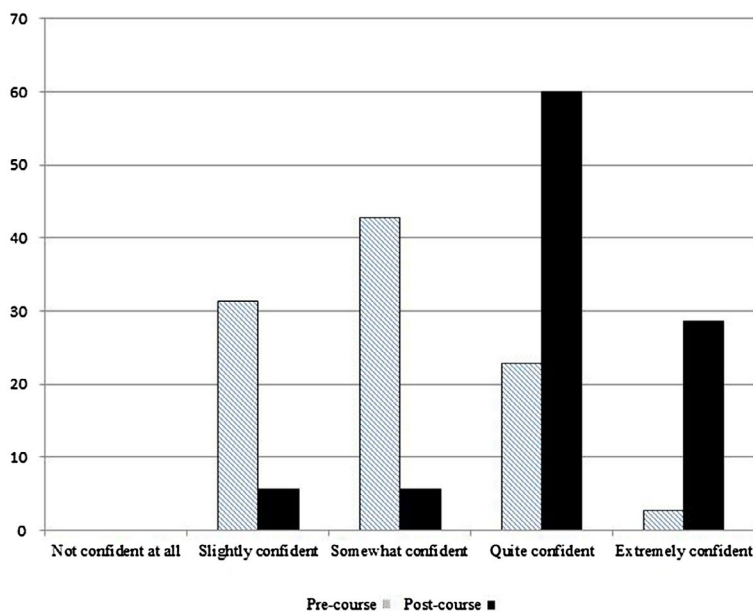


Figure 1. Students' confidence in assessing personal and professional strengths and areas for improvement (%).

post-course; 43% 'somewhat confident' pre-course also dropped to 6%; 23% who were 'quite confident' pre-course remarkably became 60% post-course; and 3% 'extremely confident' were joined by another 26% (Figure 1).

Focus group data also revealed the students' increased confidence to assess their personal and professional strengths and areas for improvement:

... having to actually think about ... what do I really need to do to become the teacher I want to be? ... I really want to get more knowledge on how to manage behavior, how to approach and teach special education students and I really feel that it would be extremely beneficial to go to rural and remote areas and get that experience there and I didn't previously think that I would need to do that as part of my goals but being in this course has definitely opened my eyes as to well where do I want to be? (S17)

Yeah the amount of awareness I have of some of my weaknesses has changed ... completely changed in my personal life too. (S10)

... We're not going to be good at everything but just the ability to recognise the weakness and make a plan so then we don't just [go], 'I've got all these weaknesses I don't know how to do this, I don't know how to do that', but the ability to make a plan and go through with that plan and know what to do to overcome that. I think that was really helpful the whole action planning thing. (S13)

Similarly, the preservice teachers felt more confident with setting short-, medium- and long-term personal and professional development goals such that: the 11% who admitted to being 'not confident at all' pre-course all gained confidence with none rating themselves as this post-course; 34% who were 'slightly confident' pre-course fell to 6% post-course; the 26% of students who tentatively expressed feeling 'somewhat confident' pre-course dropped to 17%; the 20% who were 'quite confident' pre-course more than doubled to 57%

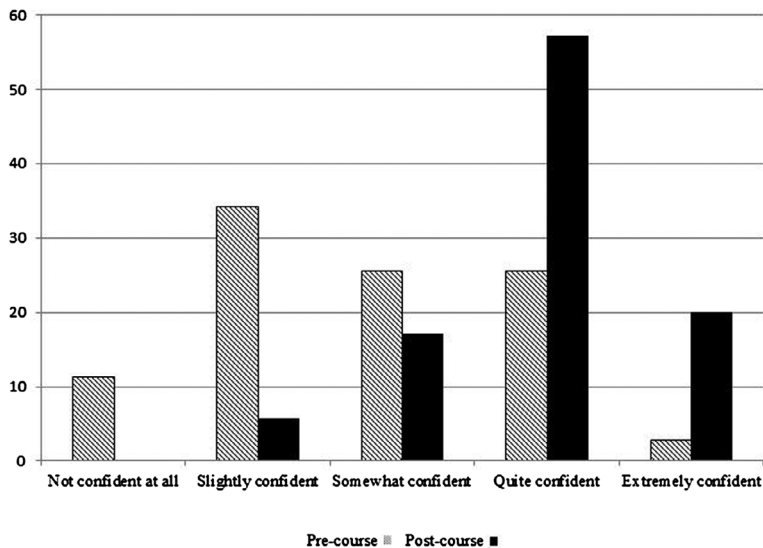


Figure 2. Confidence in setting short-, medium- and long-term personal and professional development goals (%).

post-course; and the 3% rating themselves as 'extremely confident' were joined by another 17% (Figure 2).

This confidence was also evident in the focus group interviews with students noting how the course enabled them to identify the type of teacher they wanted to be and how they were going to achieve that goal:

This course enabled me to start to really set some goals as to how I'm going to get to become that teacher [I want to be]... For the first time I sort of really had to think about, OK, I know I want to be a teacher at the end, but what sort of teacher is that, what's that looking like and how am I actually to get there. (S16)

I reflect quite a lot and I'm very much a you know, follow the whole what have I done, what am I thinking, what am I going to do next, but ... when we actually went through and figured out actual goals, I'm not much of an actual goal setter person and especially with weaknesses, one of mine was communication and with the templates and action plan instead of worrying so much about this is a weakness of mine it actually gave me a method of thinking ok how can I actually address this? And for me that was really powerful. (S13)

The reflection and goal setting in this course helped a lot ... you know you've got a weakness but when you sit there and think about it and how you want to improve to become this better teacher ... you've got a goal you want to reach that step ... [which] lead[s] to graduation and then you're going to be a teacher. (S2)

Rating their confidence with developing a personal and professional development action plan showed an even more positive post-course with: the 26% who admitted to being 'not confident at all' pre-course and 29% who were 'slightly confident' pre-course falling to 3% 'slightly confident' post-course; the 29% of students who tentatively expressed feeling 'somewhat confident' pre-course increased to 31%; as did the 17% who were 'quite confident' pre-course more than doubling to 51% post-course; no students had felt 'extremely confident' pre-course but 14% did post-course (Figure 3).

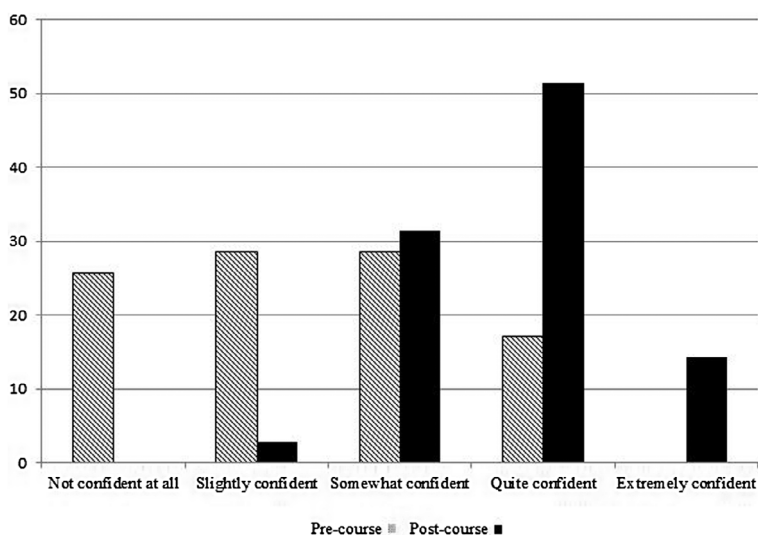


Figure 3. Confidence in developing a personal and professional development action plan (%).

Finally, the data reveal that the critical soft outcome of self-reflection was definitely enabled in the course redesign. The rating of students' perceived level of improvement of self-reflection skills showed a steadily growing achievement: 3% 'not at all'; 6% 'a little bit'; 26% 'noticeably'; 32% 'quite a lot'; and 35% 'significantly' (Figure 4).

The following quotes epitomise the journey of self-reflection that many students underwent during the course:

For the first five weeks I thought that this course was a complete waste of time ... I struggled at the start with all the reflections and ... I just wanted just to leave ... I don't know what I got out of this course regarding teaching but what I got out of this course learning about 'me' is huge

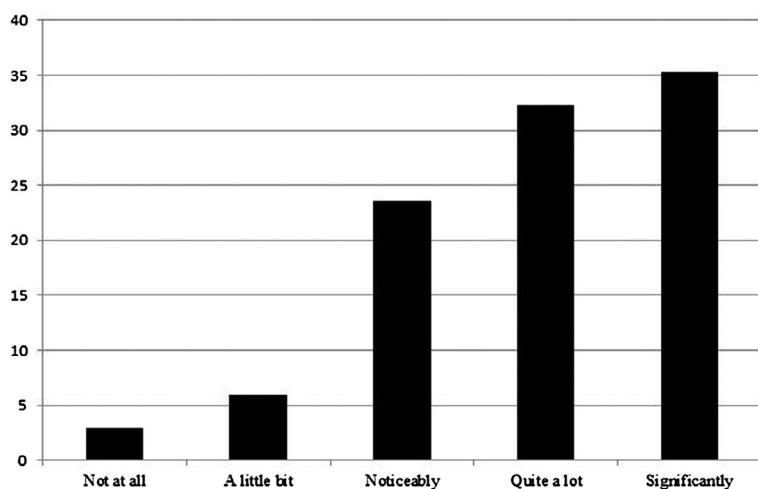


Figure 4. Perceived level of improvement of self-reflection skills (%).

... for me it's about reconnecting, I don't want to use buzz words, but reconnecting with me and that's what I will take out of this course. And when they talk about you can't teach unless you know yourself and you teach from yourself and all that that's really quite true ... (S1)

I think it forced me to really look at myself and I thought I knew myself fairly well, but the way that we had to do it through the tutorial activities and what she did in lectures and assessments you had to really be able to pinpoint where you are right now and what sort of person you are and what sort of learner you are and communicator ... For me that was really quite powerful... (S16)

Our second research focus asked, *How useful is it, in practice, to enable students to form a pedagogy of self for their personal fulfillment, their transition into university studies, and their introduction into a professional role?*

It is clear from the quantitative and qualitative data that the preservice teachers benefitted from forming a neophyte personal pedagogy of self and that this aided the students in developing a sense of purpose and vocation. Lizzio (2006) notes that a sense of purpose, amongst other senses, is a strong indicator of student retention. Students in this course found that it renewed their motivation for studying to be a teacher:

For me this was my third attempt at Uni ... because we learnt all this and now we can apply it through the prac I felt like it was the motivation to keep on going and yeah I said to the tutor ... I feel like I found myself again, like it just feels right. (S4)

... last year I did all this reflecting and all this goal setting and that's why I came to the decision to enrol in uni and do primary school teaching so I don't necessarily think I learnt anything new in this course it just confirmed everything that I felt I already knew so it was kind of giving me that justification so to speak. (S14)

The end arises: some final thoughts

Our measures to support first year preservice teachers in their transition to university and into their future professional roles were successful. We suggest that four key elements were critical to achieving this success.

Firstly, choosing a first year, first semester course as the vehicle for our strategies was a conscious and targeted decision and was based on our understanding of the first year experience and the central role that the five senses of success (Lizzio, 2006) plays in successful transition and engagement in studies. Success for learning, for graduation and for transition to one's profession must be strategically planned for from the first day of a student's admission into higher education.

Secondly, we believe that a Personal Pedagogy of Self marries well with Lizzio's five senses of success, especially for pre-service teachers. Lizzio's (2006) five senses of success are a sense of connectedness, purpose, capability, resourcefulness and a sense of academic culture.

Redesigning and restructuring *Professional Learning: Building Community Connections* to include a PPS lens characterised by the critical tool of reflection has ensured that the preservice teachers have a sense of connectedness with themselves and their future profession, a sense of capability and awareness of their strengths, and a stronger sense of purpose and resourcefulness. Undoubtedly, the redesigned course has empowered the preservice teachers to set goals, develop coping skills, self-reflect and build resilience. There is a clear acknowledgement by the students that the strategies assisted their transition in terms of connecting with their future professional selves and in aiding them in their transition, 'I would say that they structured it perfect

to what stage we're at, as first year students we need that structure' and 'it's like the perfect transition to Uni life because it's very structured and detailed as to exactly what you need to write and it's like ok, this is what I need to do' (S11).

Thirdly, students must be encouraged and supported through their professional and personal learning journey and one of the most important aspects to achieving this is the teacher. In this case, Lisa's commitment to her students' professional development, her transparency, her willingness to be vulnerable, and to teach who she is were key to the success of the course and to the empowerment of these neophyte professionals. She embodied a Personal Pedagogy of Self and is in consonance with Palmer (1998, p. 10) who said:

Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this 'I' who teaches, without which I have no sense of the 'Thou' who learns.

Fourthly, the relationship that students developed with themselves was critical. The constant focus on and immersion in reflective practice, within a bounded and supportive environment, enabled them to find a safe space to look at the self that they would be taking into the classroom well beyond their first practicum. Becoming aware of the importance of respecting and nourishing this relationship with their selves early in their career, will potentially serve them for the rest of their teaching lives:

As important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve ... is having insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching ... becomes (Palmer, 1998, p. 4).

In this way, the title of the course *Professional Learning: Building Community Connections* had started to take on a new meaning. The previous existence of the course had defined the community connections as those connections that existed within a school context. However, it became evident in the new iteration that the community being built was not only externally but also within each of the students as they built connections between who they are and the teacher they wanted to become.

Postscript

Although our story is that of a specific group of students and staff, we have identified four key elements that would form the starting point of a model for course development to address one of the points raised by the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group in *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (2014) that is, aiding preservice teachers to 'reflect on their own practice' (pp. x, xi). Immersing first year preservice teachers in reflective practices and providing a supportive framework for them to establish a Personal Pedagogy of Self not only assists their development and effectiveness as future teaching professionals but may also contribute to first year engagement and completion rates in higher education.

We intend to *revisit* the students from this course as they make their journey through their studies and into the teaching profession and from their experiences we aim to (i) develop a model of Reflective Immersion practices for implementation with programs of Teacher Education; not only for first year students but applicable across the 4 years of their degree, and to (ii) explore the role that this process has played in contributing to the retention of first year students in higher education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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