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Talking About Teaching: A professional development
group for preservice secondary teachers

A three-paper thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

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by

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Abstract

As teaching is a highly complex activity, so too is learning to teach. One pedagogy which has been shown to promote teacher learning is the use of small group discussion. This thesis examines the experiences of seven preservice secondary teachers at a New Zealand university who met weekly during their second practicum to discuss their experiences at their placement schools. Individual interviews conducted with five of the participants revealed that students felt positively about the weekly meetings. The preservice teachers appreciated 1) being able to hear about the experiences of other preservice teachers 2) tell others about their teaching 3) being able to seek advice and potential solutions to problems 4) the sense of personal connection and emotional support they gained during the weekly sessions. The students reported that the weekly meetings allowed them to think about their teaching from the perspective of others, and gave them time to reflect about their experiences while on practicum. This study situates these findings within the literature on initial teacher education and offers suggestions for future research using this pedagogy.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Teacher Education may be seen as a complex, contested field of study and practice. At very few points since it emerged as a recognizable activity, have there been periods when it “was not being critiqued, studied, rethought, reformed, and, often, excoriated” (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Ideas of what knowledge, skills and attitudes prospective teachers need to acquire and/or develop are varied and are inextricably intertwined with ideas about student learning, the nature of schools and teaching and the role of education in our society. Research in teacher education is therefore an inherently contentious enterprise, in which teacher education has “the honor of being simultaneously the worst problem and the best solution in education” (Fullan 1993 in Cameron & Baker, 2004, p. 1). However, despite these epistemological and conceptual tensions, the past few decades have seen Teacher Education emerge as an identifiable field of study, with a growing knowledge base of how preservice teachers acquire the knowledge, skills and aptitudes required for successful teaching.

There is nonetheless increasingly strong evidence to support the contention that well conceived and applied teaching practices have a highly positive impact on pupil learning (Alton-Lee, 2006; Banskford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). Preservice teacher education is a first, and crucial opportunity for prospective teachers to learn to teach in ways that best promote and support favorable classroom practices and outcomes. The growing body of research concerning the knowledge, skills and aptitudes which make quality teaching possible, and hence the development of appropriate curriculum and teaching methods for initial teacher education, has only within the past half-century quite become a widely recognized field of study and practice (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005).

Yet, even within the present educational research community there is considerable debate on the specific objectives, knowledge base and teaching methodologies that appear to be most appropriate for initial teacher education. On one hand, this can be explained by the great variation among conceptions of what it means to be an effective teacher. However, even when there is a broad consensus of what the desirable outcome of teacher education should be,

significant challenges exist in developing programmes to support preservice teacher development.

Broadly speaking, teacher education has been traditionally undervalued and has suffered from relatively low status and funding when compared to other professional education (Cameron & Baker, 2004). In recent years there have been concerted attempts by teacher educators and policy makers to shift the aims of teacher preparation from fairly narrow, skill-based “teacher training” to a broader conception of “teacher education,” which views teaching as a “learned profession” (Snook, 2000). Teacher education is not only expected to prepare aspiring teachers for their first years in the classroom, but also to impart the skills of inquiry and self-reflection required for continued improvement in teaching (Loughran, 2006; Toomey et al., 2005).

Despite the complexity of the knowledge, skills and aptitudes to be developed, there is pressure for programmes of teacher education to be as short and cost-effective as possible. In New Zealand, as in many other countries, prospective teachers can opt for one-year programmes conducted subsequent to completion of a Bachelor’s degree rather than (generally three- or four-year) “concurrent” or “conjoint” programmes in which education courses are taken alongside courses in subject matter. There is little evidence in the research to support the effectiveness of one programme format over the other, but limited time and high student numbers clearly pose a significant challenge to teacher educators within the current post-secondary teaching environment (Rivers, 2006).

Although some countries have long had highly standardized national standards or policies of teacher education, New Zealand’s graduating standards for teacher education are very new, introduced in 2007 (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007a) after four large-scale studies which reviewed the state of preservice teaching in New Zealand (see Rivers, 2006, for review). Although New Zealand’s post-secondary legislation allows for teacher education to be delivered by a wide variety of institutions, programmes of secondary teacher education in practice fall into a fairly narrow range of formats. All require, and place much importance on teaching experience in schools, in New Zealand termed *practica*, placements and/or sections interchangeably.

Despite the recognition of the practicum as an extremely valuable component of teacher education, it has frequently been the subject of criticism. A central critique is that whilst on the practicum, preservice teachers may be limited to teaching in the ways either modeled by, or acceptable to, the associate teacher (Haigh & Ward, 2004). Other authors have noted that the practicum is often a period of high stress for preservice teachers, as they attempt to master both classroom management and the curricular requirements (e.g., Fives, Hammana, & Olivarez, 2006; Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, & Silins, 2000). Other authors have traced the way in which the practicum, and then the first year of teaching requires teachers to abandon philosophical ideas, and thus to accept a new reality of teaching (e.g., Long, 2004; Shkedi & Laron, 2004).

The Graduate Diploma of Teaching - Secondary (GradDipT) offered by the University of Waikato is an example of a one-year post-graduate teacher education programme. Described by the university as “founded on established and contemporary research, policies and practices,” its graduates are expected to:

- understand the New Zealand National Curriculum and have a knowledge base relevant to the subjects and sector in which they teach;
- understand teaching and learning theories and processes and be able to justify, critique, and evaluate their teaching practice with rigour;
- understand and be able to use appropriate teaching techniques, including effective planning and preparation, managing and organising, assessing and evaluating, and recording; and
- understand the social, cultural, economic, political, historical and technological contexts of education and their impact on educational practice.

University of Waikato, Graduate Diploma in Teaching, Graduate Profile (2004)

In order to meet these complex, multi-faceted learning goals, aspiring teachers must complete six university papers as well as two seven-week practica in local secondary schools. This programme structure is common in Western countries and the role of the practicum within larger programmes of teacher

education has been the subject of many studies and opinion pieces (e.g., Clift & Brady, 2005; Schulz, 2005).

Studies undertaken by college- and university-based teacher educators have often focused on the perceived difficulty or reluctance of preservice teachers to make use of learning theories and teaching techniques espoused during their coursework, and view preservice teachers as requiring support to navigate beyond status quo practices (Haigh & Ward, 2004; Long, 2004). University-based programmes have often emphasized the importance of grounding practice in educational theory and philosophy as well as developing some version of “reflective practice” (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007; Timperley, Black, Rubie, Stavert, & Taylor-Patel, 2000). However, this can be somewhat challenging for school-based associates who, despite considerable educational expertise, may lack exposure to the discourse and content of recent educational research (A. Clarke, 2006).

Many researchers and policy-makers have therefore argued for greater collaboration between schools and teacher educators in mentoring preservice teachers (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Haigh & Ward, 2004; Strathdee, 2007). Yet relatively little research effort has been expended to understand the secondary practicum in the New Zealand context (Cameron & Baker, 2004; Hoben, 2007). To address this gap, as well as to improve local practice, staff within the Department of Professional Studies at the University of Waikato have made the practicum a focus of recent research.

This thesis investigates the earliest phase of a larger project: The Theorizing of Practice in the Practicum Research and Development Study. This study saw the creation of a weekly meeting that brought together a small group of preservice teachers, their associate teachers, and a university-based teacher educator during the students’ second seven-week practicum.

The creation of the on-going weekly meetings (which in this thesis I will call the “discussion group”) draws support from research highlighting the benefits of conversation as a vehicle for both preservice and inservice teacher development (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001; Oliphant, 2003). As teacher development programmes based on “one-shot” workshops given by outside experts are being recognized as having limited effectiveness in bringing about changes in classroom practice, the benefits of longer-term projects are increasingly being acknowledged

(Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). In particular, programmes which allow teachers to share and discuss anecdotes from their classroom have been shown to support teachers in implementing new curricula and pedagogies (B. Bell, 2005a; Clark, 2001b; Shank, 2006).

A weekly meeting group for preservice teachers struck me as a valuable opportunity for GradDipT students to gain insight into their practice and to provide each other with support, both professional and personal. As a one-time associate teacher, and earlier, a preservice teacher, I wished to follow the progress of this discussion group initiative in its first year.

In narrowing my research, I decided to focus on the experiences of the student teachers, and their thoughts and feelings about the weekly group.

More specifically the aims of my research were:

- To explore and describe the experiences of GradDipT – Secondary students who participate in this weekly discussion group during their practicum.
- To identify elements of participating in the discussion group that were beneficial from the perspective of the students, as well as ways in which they feel the group could be improved.
- To link the experiences of students within this group to current understandings of effective pedagogies in teacher education.

In order to meet these objectives, I attended the weekly discussion group, and invited the preservice teacher participants to take part in semi-structured, informal interviews to discuss their experiences of the group. This thesis presents my findings and is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** presents a review of recent literature concerning the knowledge base for teaching and teacher education programmes. It focuses on the use of shared anecdotes and group discussion to support teacher learning, when learning is viewed from a socio-cultural perspective.
- **Chapter Three** outlines the qualitative methodology that guides this study, and the methods used to generate and analyze data.

- **Chapter Four** presents the data generated during the interviews conducted with five of the students who participated in the first discussion group of the Theorizing of Practice on Practicum Research and Development Project.
- **Chapter Five** situates the results of the previous chapter within current scholarship on teacher development and preservice teacher education.
- **Chapter Six** concludes with a restatement of my argument: that an ongoing small discussion group during the practicum is a highly promising pedagogy to support preservice teacher learning.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A key aspect of research in teacher education is the ongoing investigation of the pedagogies used in preservice teacher education programmes to support the learning of aspiring teaching.

Within this aspect of pedagogies for teacher education, current research addresses:

- teacher knowledges for teaching (2.2)
- theorizing the learning of preservice teachers (2.3)
- the practicum as a pedagogical site (2.4)
- the small group discussion as a pedagogy and learning activity (2.5)

The literature reviewed under these four heading is linked by the idea that effective pedagogies for initial teacher education are based on thorough understanding of not only *what* aspiring teachers need to learn, but also *how* this learning takes place. The chapter concludes with a review of projects that share similarities with the pedagogy explored in this study: a discussion group during the practicum.

2.2 Teacher Knowledges for Teaching

2.2.1 A Complex knowledge base

Understanding what teachers know, and how student teachers can construct this knowledge, is a central goal for teacher education research. However, the question of what knowledge, skills and aptitudes are required for teaching, and how they can best be developed is complex and involves multiple layers of knowledge about teaching and learning. The process of navigating layers of knowledge in teacher education was likened by Guyton (2000) to playing with nested dolls. A central layer of knowledge in teacher education involves pupils – how they learn and what they need to know. Another layer deals with teachers, and what knowledge they require for teaching. These layers interact within further layers of knowledge concerning schools, universities and the broader society where teacher education takes place. Various communities of research have emerged within teacher education, and the body of literature

concerning preservice teacher education reflects an interdisciplinary field with a variety of epistemological stances and research methodologies.

However, despite the complexity of the knowledge base underlying teaching, McLaughlin (2002) suggests that researchers must attempt to “move beyond treating knowledge as a generic concept” if they are to develop models of knowledge and learning that will be useful to teachers and teacher educators and policy makers. Teacher educators must have a deep understanding of teaching in order to be able to “theorize practice” in ways that inspire students of teaching to “go beyond their initial expectations of learning the script, or developing a recipe, for how to teach” (Loughran, 2006, p. 14).

In their chapter in the 2001 *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Munby, Russell, & Martin view the central challenge in theorizing teacher knowledge as rooted in different ideas about “what counts” as professional knowledge and how this knowledge is conceptualized.

The first difficulty with understanding teacher knowledge involves the fact that there are a multitude of ways to understand knowledge and learning within the academic research community. Researchers from different theoretical backgrounds often have conflicting ways of depicting and describing teacher knowledge, which has also resulted in a complex array of concepts and terminology (McGee & Penlington, 2001; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001).

Munby et. al. (2001)’s second caution about teacher knowledge is that the study of what teachers know (and of what perspective teachers need to learn) is mired in tension between “the academy of research” and “the professional field of teaching.” Historically, universities, colleges of teacher education and schools have functioned in relative isolation. Educational theory has been viewed to be the domain of colleges and universities, with schools being the domain of the skills related to practice. However, university-based researchers have increasingly begun to recognize ways in which teachers understand their own practice, and are increasingly interested in understanding teachers’ understanding of their own work. Greater acceptance of “action-research” and “self-study” methodologies has increased the contributions of student teachers, teacher advisors and supervising lecturers to the teaching education literature (Loughran, 2004a, 2004b; Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006). However, continued collaboration

between the staff of postsecondary institutions and the staff of schools is critical in closing this “theory-practice” gap.

The third tension underlying an understanding of teacher knowledge is that teaching takes place in a highly complex, highly contextual environment. Reaching generalizations to explain elements of teaching practice is difficult at best, and often highly contentious. Teachers are not always able to explain elements of their teaching practice, nor can these elements easily be observed by outsiders (Munby et al., 2001). Yet, teacher educators and educational policymakers must arrive at working definitions of what prospective teachers should learn, and what opportunities teacher education should provide. However, despite these three challenges, significant progress has been made in recent decades in conceptualizing the knowledge base for teaching, and in understanding how teachers draw on this knowledge in practice.

2.2.2 Pedagogical content knowledge

One approach to understanding teacher knowledge has been a focus on understanding what practicing teachers know, often based on studies of so called “expert teachers.” An important framework was put forth by Shulman (1987), who proposed that effective teachers draw upon seven distinct categories of knowledge: 1) content knowledge (i.e., knowledge of subject area) 2) general pedagogical knowledge (i.e., general teaching techniques) 3) curriculum knowledge 4) pedagogical content knowledge (explained below) 5) knowledge of learners and their characteristics 6) knowledge of educational contexts 7) knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values. And, although the seven categories have been elaborated upon, expanded, regrouped and debated within subsequent literature, they provide an important starting point in the conceptualization of teacher knowledge.

The idea of pedagogical content knowledge, in particular, has been of extreme interest to teacher educators (Grossman, Schoenfeld & Lee, 2005). Pedagogical content knowledge goes beyond a deep knowledge of content and pedagogy to the way in which the two interact. Pedagogical content knowledge allows educators to provide “ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Grossman, Schoenfeld, & Lee (2005) argue that the development of pedagogical knowledge is a central

concern for teacher educators. Programmes of teacher education need to provide opportunities for aspiring teachers to reason in such a way that they can “anticipate and respond to typical student patterns of understanding and misunderstanding” (p. 201) in ways that facilitate pupil learning.

2.2.3 Knowledge-in-practice

Another important perspective influencing current understanding of the knowledge in teaching was proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999). The authors reviewed teacher learning by questioning not only what knowledge is important, but also by whom it is generated, and in what situations it is used. Cochran-Smith and Lytle distinguish three different conceptions of the knowledge associated with teaching: “knowledge-*for*-practice”, “knowledge-*of*-practice” and “knowledge-*in*-practice.”

“Knowledge-*for*-practice” is defined as the formal knowledge and theory generated by university- or college-based researchers and theorists who study teaching. It incorporates Shulman’s seven categories, including pedagogical content knowledge, when this knowledge has been distilled and described by researchers studying teachers. This formal knowledge base generally plays a significant role in university courses in teacher education as preservice teachers are introduced to theories of learning and best practices from the research literature. However, if this knowledge is to improve pupil learning, preservice teachers must learn in such a way that this knowledge will translate into classroom practice, a problem which Mary Kennedy (1999) termed the “problem of enactment.”

Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s second conception of knowledge in teaching is “knowledge-*of*-practice,” which they describe as what competent teachers know “as it is expressed or embedded in the artistry of practice, in teachers’ reflections on practice, in teachers’ practical inquiries, and/or in teachers’ narrative accounts of practice” (p. 262). In this conception of knowledge, teachers are not passive recipients of knowledge, but generators of knowledge about teaching practice. Similar to the idea of “practical knowledge” or Grimmet & McKinnon’s (1992) “craft knowledge,” this knowledge is often tacit, but may be made explicit by teachers when they reflect on their practice or conduct inquiry into their own practice in classrooms. A persistent challenge in teacher education thereby

becomes how best to help preservice teachers access their associates', as well as their own, emerging knowledge-in-practice. Collaborative action-research (e.g., Burbank & Kauchak, 2003), self-study (Loughran, 2004b), autobiography (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) have all been suggested as vehicles for promoting such thinking, although this type of activity may be challenging for preservice teachers accustomed to the transmissive teaching format of university coursework (Loughran, 2006).

The third and final type of teacher knowledge in Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) typology is "knowledge-in-practice." Rooted in a view of learning as a socio-cultural process, this conception rejects the idea that there exist two distinct kinds of knowledge for teaching, one produced via research, the other produced by practice and/or reflection on practice. Knowledge-in-practice is collaboratively constructed in local and broader communities by teachers, students and others interested in education. It goes beyond the duality of knower and known to also include social and political agendas, and as such is inherently progressive. Cochran-Smith and Lytle posit that knowledge-in-practice does not make the same distinctions between expert teachers, on the one hand, and novice or less competent teachers, and suggests that *all* teachers participate in communities in which knowledge is constructed.

This third conception, knowledge-in-practice, reflects renewed interest in the research community about the socio-cultural nature of teacher learning (Leach & Scott, 2003; Vasquez, 2006). Some of the interest in social aspects of teachers' knowledge has been attributed to renewed interest in the writings of Lev Vygotsky (Moll, 2001). Although debate about the nature and applicability of Vygotsky's work to teaching are beyond the scope of this review, researchers have used his writings to explore the way in which human thought develops in a social context, where individuals learn through the mediation of others (Higgins & McDonald, 2008; Solomon & Perkins, 1998; Vasquez, 2006). Vygotsky's writings about the central role of language in human learning have been used to support discussion- and conversation-based learning such as the project explored in this thesis (B. Bell, 2005b; Brown, 2007; Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Romano, 2008).

In short, current understandings of the knowledge base for teaching suggest practicing teachers draw on diverse types and sources of knowledge for

teaching. This knowledge is complex, rooted in both practice and theory. It encompasses both individual learning, as well as learning situated in educational contexts of practice. Understanding how preservice teachers begin the construction of this knowledge base, and what pedagogies best support this process is an important focus of research in initial teacher education as will be explored in the next section of this review.

2.3 Theorizing the Learning of Preservice Teachers

2.3.1 Multiple understandings

Much like the field of teacher knowledge discussed in the previous section, the body of research informing preservice teacher learning reflects a wide variety of conceptions about the nature of knowledge, learning, and the aims of teacher education. For example, within the research literature the process of preservice teacher has been conceptualized in many ways, including as an acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005), a process of uncovering and reconstructing prior beliefs about teaching and learning (Ethell & McMeniman, 2002), a process of transformation of the self (Britzman, 2003; Friedman, 2006), as well as a progressive acculturation into wider educational communities (Assoncao Flores, 2001; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006).

As far back as the 1960s, the study of teacher learning was expanded beyond behaviourist or information processing models of individual teacher learning to recognize the role of context in teachers' work (McGee & Penlington, 2001). Studies in the socialization of teachers examined topics such as the stresses experienced by student teachers in the classroom and the relationships of important others: teachers, parents and administrators (Lacey, 1995). This tradition gave rise to research which has focused on the importance of student teachers' personal agendas, aspirations and their role in the culture of schools. Lortie's (1975) "Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study" introduced the often-quoted "apprenticeship of observation" to describe the knowledge that prospective teachers bring to their studies based on the many years they spent as pupils observing their own classroom teachers.

2.3.2 Constructivist views of preservice teacher learning

One important body of research in preservice teacher learning is the literature concerning preservice teacher beliefs. Within the last several decades researchers have recognized that prospective teachers bring a wide variety of knowledge, experiences and values with them as they begin programmes of teacher education (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). This resulted in a shift within the research literature from a strong focus on what future teachers should know and how they should be taught, to considering what they already know and how new knowledge is constructed during preservice education and during their teaching careers.

The body of literature about student teachers' beliefs over the course of their programmes of teacher education has become extensive. Ethell & McMeniman (2002) include a review of studies suggesting that these prior beliefs (images, preconceptions, perspectives, world images) of teaching and learners may be tenacious and resistant to aligning with theories presented in their programmes of teacher education. However, constructivist programmes of teacher education have argued that pre-existing knowledge should and can be a basis for personal reflection and learning. Pre-existing beliefs should be viewed as a resource that can be the basis for learningful reflection.

Based on longitudinal studies of students during their programmes of teacher education, various researchers have developed generalized models of learning to teach. In their recent review of research describing teacher learning, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005) describe various "stage theories" that propose that teachers pass through a sequence of identifiable stages as they become more experienced. For example, Berliner (1986, 1994) devised a progression from novice teachers (characterized as "very rational, relatively inflexible, and tend[ing] to conform to whatever rules and procedures they were told to follow") through to advanced beginners and competent teachers, with a small number of teachers eventually reaching the status of experts.

Another frequently cited model of learning to teach was proposed by Kagan (1992) who reviewed 40 studies of learning. Her review also outlined a progressive series of phases, in which preservice teacher thinking shifts outwards from a pre-occupation with self to a focus on tasks and teaching situations, and eventually to consideration of the impact of their teaching on students. Although

this study is frequently cited, it is also subject to considerable debate (e.g., Burn, Hagger, Mutton, & Everton, 2003; Wideen et al., 1998).

Theoretical and research-based critiques of learning-to-teach as a linear type process are generally based on the fact that learning to teach is a highly personal experience. Generalized models of learning to teach may provide some guidance to associate teachers and teacher educators; however, case studies of individual preservice teachers suggest that teachers can show great variety in their development (Burn et al., 2003). Such “bit by bit” models often reduce teaching to a mechanistic enterprise, ignoring the “personal judgments” made by student teachers in the complex environment of the classroom (Hoban, 2004). Authors such as Britzman (2003) and Evans (2002) have also critiqued the simplicity of such generalized models, noting the multiple sources on which individual preservice teachers may draw in the creation of a “teaching self.”

In short, as Hammerness et al. (2005) suggest, it may be time to look beyond “what beginning teachers ‘can’ and ‘cannot’ do” to understand what types of pedagogies best support teacher learning, in particular during initial teacher education programmes (p. 383). These include recent initiatives which go beyond researching the learning of individual preservice teachers to understand how knowledge develops in communities.

2.3.3 Sociocultural understandings

A third recent view of learning that informs pedagogies in initial teacher education is that learning is a sociocultural activity, best understood when we expand to consider “more than the cognitive processes within an individual brain” (Fenwick, 2001, p. 34). In this view, learning occurs when individuals interact with others in their social environment, acquiring not only propositional knowledge and skills but also “the ideas, language, values and dispositions of the social group” (Vasquez, 2006, p. 36). Authors such as John (2006), Blom & tenDam (2006) and Glazer & Hannafin (2006) argue that because teaching is highly context-dependent, the process of becoming a teacher can be viewed as learning to participate in the social and cultural practices of schools.

Researchers and practitioners within teacher education have also looked to the work of Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, whose work on “communities of practice” provide a model for those interested in knowledge creation in social

contexts (Smith, 2003). In their 1991 book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Lave and Wenger contend that human beings learn through participation in a variety of ‘communities of practice.’ These communities are “created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise” (Wenger, 1998, p. 45) and possess a shared repertoire of resources (ideas, practices, routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, etc.) that members have developed to record the accumulated knowledge of the community.

Researchers in preservice teacher education have used “communities of practice” and related models to understand preservice teacher learning in communities. For example, communities of practice have been a useful conceptual tool for those seeking to understand learning and educational institutions in terms of social practice (Burn et al., 2003). Groups of learners such as school classes, teacher education cohorts, and communities of teachers (within schools, professional development groups and informal networks) have been created and/or steered under the banner of “communities of learners,” “communities of inquiry,” and “communities of practice” (Shulman & Shulman, 2004) including those in which communication occurs online (see Lai, Pratt, Anderson, & Stigter, 2006 for a recent review). Along with more formally recognized groups, communities of practice also arise spontaneously and informally within schools, universities and colleges of education when people meet to share and create ideas around a common learning interest.

One such community of practice is the school community in which a student teacher does his or her practicum. In socio-cultural models of learning communities, new members (in this case preservice teachers) are often viewed as being on the peripheries of the learning community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). However, through interaction with teachers and other members of the educational community, new teachers progress to greater and more complex degrees of engagement (Assoncao Flores, 2001). Some authors have focused on the new knowledge and practices that preservice teachers may bring to school communities, and suggest that as Wenger (1998)’s “new blood” (p. 45), they have a crucial function of bringing new knowledge, and stimulating new learning in school communities (Kiraz, 2004).

In short, sociocultural views of learning have underpinned much recent research in teacher education and are particularly relevant when considering the practicum, a crucial site of learning for prospective teachers.

2.4 The Practicum as a Site of Learning

2.4.1 The role of the practicum in preservice teacher education

At the turn of the twentieth century, teacher education in New Zealand consisted exclusively of school-based training for future elementary teachers. Prospective secondary school teachers generally conducted universities studies, and did not experience classroom teaching until after they were employed (Alcorn, 1998; 2000). As elementary school preparation shifted towards colleges of education and universities, preparation for secondary school teachers has included a greater proportion of time in schools, in the form of school visits and teaching practica (Snook, 2000). At present, all New Zealand secondary teacher education programmes must include a minimum of 14 weeks of practicum experience (Rivers, 2006). And research has shown that although the practicum is often viewed by perspective teachers as highly valuable, if not the most valuable part of their programme, it can also be a time of constraints, contradictions and stress (Cameron & Baker, 2004; McGee, 1996; Partington, 1997).

The relationship between school-based and university-based knowledge and practices is a central issue underlying the practicum. One persistent critique of the practicum is that the universities function as the place where knowledge is acquired by prospective teachers, and the schools become the “child banks” where this knowledge can be applied and practiced. Alternately, the teaching practica may be viewed by student teachers as the more legitimate source of knowledge about the schools, and in the extreme, students and associate teachers may view theory- or research-based university knowledge as irrelevant. The literature is rich with proposals of ways in which the field experience may result in better preparation for prospective teachers as well as professional development for teachers. However, preservice teacher learning during the practicum is still poorly understood. The idea that universities are the place student teachers acquire knowledge and schools are the place where student teacher practice or apply their

learning has been discarded, but assumptions about whose knowledge is most relevant for teacher education continue to be contentious (Gore & Gitlin, 2004).

2.4.2 Preservice teachers

Research on the experience of the preservice teachers on practicum can be explored from both a local and international perspective. Within the institutional setting, studies at the University of Waikato have focused almost exclusively on students preparing for primary teaching (e.g., Ferrier-Kerr, 2004; Lang, 1996; McGee, Oliver, & Carstensen, 1994). Ferrier-Kerr's (2004) work, arising out of her Master's study explored the experiences of four preservice teachers and their associates found that the preservice teachers highly valued being able to forge professional relationships with their associates based on collaboration and feelings of personal connectedness. Similarly, McGee et al. (1994)'s findings also emphasized that preservice teachers place considerable importance on their practicum experiences, viewing the time to experience "real teaching" and possibly forge connections that might lead to employment. Although McGee et al. found most students reported positive experiences, strained relationships with their associates placed a considerable strain on some. One problem reported by preservice teachers relevant to my study is that some preservice teachers reported feeling very busy during their practica and felt that their university assignments presented an additional, and stressful, demand on their time. Preservice teachers also reported feeling the need to conform to the teaching styles of their associates and/or schools (see also McGee, 1996), even if these were not aligned with their values or pedagogies learned during coursework.

In international studies, preservice teachers have similarly been reported to say that they receive different, and sometimes conflicting, information from their university lecturers and their classroom-based supervising teachers (Clift & Brady, 2005; Wideen et al., 1998). These two large-scale reviews suggest that despite efforts to integrate preservice teacher learning during the practicum and coursework, many preservice teachers continue to struggle with integrating various sources of learning while on practicum.

2.4.3 Associate teachers

Increasing collaboration and communication between associate teachers and university-teacher educators has been proposed by many researchers as a key way of addressing concerns raised about the practicum in the above section (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Hoban, 2004; Wilkin & Sankey, 1994). This often requires addressing the roles and/or responsibilities (both mandated and perceived) of the associate teacher, supervising lecturer and others (school principals, university liaison staff, etc.) during the practicum.

Clarke (1997, 2001, 2006) and others have studied the way in which associate teachers differ in their approaches to mentoring students. In his 1997 review of the literature, he places conceptions of the work of practicum advisors (i.e., associate teachers) along a continuum. At one end of the continuum of associate teachers is the practicum supervisor as “classroom placeholder,” in which the associate teacher’s role is to vacate their teaching position, which places students in a “sink or swim” position. The most common models of associate teaching, according to Clarke, position school staff as “supervisors” whose task is to “oversee” the work of student teachers, observing, documenting and reporting their progress according to the university’s ordinance.

At the other end of the continuum, Clarke suggests that associates can (and should) be viewed as teacher educators with a crucial role in “coaching” the students. For him, this involves working side-by-side and also engaging in self-critique, rather than solely providing feedback to the student. As such, associate teaching becomes an important means of professional development for both student and associate, a benefit that has been reported in more recent research by Beck & Kosnik (2002) and Kiraz (2004).

This view of associate teacher as “coach” is similar to that advocated by Tobin & Roth (2005) who proposes a model of “coteaching” in which dialogue between associate teacher and student allows both to gain a deeper understanding of their practice. Similarly, Burbank & Kauchak (2003) propose a model based on “collaborative action research.” Both preservice and inservice teachers reported that this model armed them with an effective tool to improve their teaching. However, Beck & Kosnick (2002) remind the reader that even preservice-inservice teacher relationships based on collaboration involve an

inherent hierarchy, particularly when the classroom teacher is involved in the evaluation of the preservice teacher.

Sanders, Dowson, & Sinclair (2005) caution the reader that although descriptions of the theoretical roles of the associate teacher are common in the literature, there may be divergence between this literature and “what associate teachers actually do.” They conducted an in-depth case study involving four aspiring New Zealand primary teachers and their associate teachers and found that the bulk of their observation and interview data could be characterized as associate teachers acting in the following roles well-documented in the literature: 1) Planner (of preservice teachers’ teaching experiences or discussion of classroom planning), 2) Modeler (of teaching experiences) or 3) Evaluator (of preservice teachers). They added an additional category of interactions to their framework to encompass interactions that characterize associate teachers acting as: 4) Friend. They found some, but considerably limited evidence of associate teachers acting in three other capacities described in the literature concerning mentoring: associates acting as 5) Professional Peer 6) Counselor and 7) Conferencer.

Another critique of many studies using the “role” as a conceptual base is that it does not adequately capture the dynamic, multi-faceted and interactive nature of human relations. Authors such as Bullough & Draper (2004) and Brown (2007) have questioned the epistemology and methodology of many current approaches to studying practicum interactions. Both Bullough & Draper (2004) suggest that “positioning theory,” which emphasizes the discursive nature of interactions, is a superior starting point. Individuals are seen as speakers who “position themselves and are positioned by others” resulting in changes in their understanding and their actions (p.408).

However, the most obvious critique of research involving the practicum, is simply that not enough information has been gathered to reach the generalizations outlined. Studies of preservice-associate dyads (Sanders et al., 2005) and also of triads that include a trained mentor, lecturer or supervisor generally involve case studies of very limited numbers of participants (four or less in all studies reviewed). Conclusions based on survey data (or multi-method approaches) are generally flagged by their authors as tentative, due to the difficulty in capturing the complex practicum experiences of students in this manner (Lang, 2001;

Sanders et al., 2005). Cameron & Baker (2004), in the context of a review of New Zealand research, suggest that the “the complex, triadic relationship of the student teacher, the associate teacher and the teacher educator” requires more in-depth, evidence-based research. This appears to be true on an international scale as well.

In summary, although there is no lack of suggestions about how the practicum *should* influence teacher learning, research is necessary on an institutional, national and international scale to determine how pedagogies of teacher education in the practicum be best developed. Despite conceptual and practical tensions, research suggests the practicum has the potential to be the site of tremendous professional development for preservice teachers and, potentially, their associate teachers and university lecturers.

2.5 A Discussion-based Professional Group During the Practicum

2.5.1 Talk and discussion in teacher education

Talk and discussion have long been recognized as powerful tools for learning. The value of retelling lived events as a means of making meaning from experience has been recognized from a wide range of disciplines including psychology (e.g., J. Bruner, 1986; Erickson, 1975) philosophy (e.g., Ricoeur, 1984; MacIntyre, 1981), anthropology (E. Bruner, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989), psychoanalysis (e.g., Schafer, 1981; Spence, 1982) and counseling (e.g., Smith, 2001; White & Epston, 1990) (in McDrury & Alterio, 2002).

When learning is viewed as a socio-cultural practice, language plays a crucial role in learning. Knowledge is not only socially constructed through talk, but also talk and discussion are viewed as ways of knowing in and of themselves. (e.g., Moll, 2001; Solomon & Perkins, 1998; Wertsch, 1985). Talk in this sense “is not the casual chat of hallways or lunchrooms” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 280) but rather a form of sustained collaborative discussion in which knowledge is collaboratively constructed over time (see also Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006).

Within teacher education, many authors have described communities or groups created to foster teacher learning. In reviewing the literature, Oliphant (2003) notes that such groups have been described as “teachers’ learning

cooperatives,” “teachers’ networks,” “collegial support groups,” “personal effectiveness groups,” “teacher development groups,” “teacher study groups,” “teacher support groups,” “curriculum teams,” “learning collectives.” To this list I add “conversation groups” (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001), “collaborative dialogue groups,” (Hamre & Oyler, 2004) “new teacher groups” (Rogers & Babinski, 2002) as well as the many groups conceptualized as “communities of inquiry” (e.g., Farr Darling, 2001) and “communities of practice” (see Hammersley, 2005 for review). Some of the groups described in the literature are voluntary groups, where teachers have chosen to come together regularly to support each other in acquiring or gaining confidence with a new pedagogical approach, curriculum area, skill or other areas of professional growth. Other groups are mandated by schools or governments. However, what all of these groups share is a focus on discussing one’s teaching experience as a vehicle for improving one’s teaching practice.

2.5.2 Benefits of teacher talk

But what makes getting together to talk about one’s practice such a powerful pedagogy for professional learning and change? Clark (2001a) presents the collective realizations that he and his colleagues reached about the value of discussion in professional learning via the ten discussion-based projects that culminated in the publication of *Talking Shop: Authentic Conversation and Teacher Learning* (Clark, 2001b). He organizes those realizations under the following six headings: The Articulation of implicit theories and beliefs; Perspective taking; Developing a sense of personal and professional authority; Reviving hope and relational connection; Reaffirmation of ideals and commitments; Developing specific techniques and solutions to problems; Learning how to engage with students in learning conversations. Each of these is discussed in turn.

The Articulation of implicit theories and beliefs

Clark’s (2001a) first example of the benefit of participation in a conversation group is that teachers report that they are able to express and articulate their beliefs “with others who understand the challenges of being a good teacher in an uncertain time” (p.174). Although teacher conversation groups may

vary widely in terms of their composition, structure, history and objectives, as participants get to know and care about each other, conditions develop in which participants can articulate the fundamental beliefs, assumptions and personal knowledge that underlie their classroom practice.

Likewise, teachers who participated in the Learning in Science Projects at the University of Waikato shared that the programme gave them the opportunity for valuable reflection. One participant expressed the view that the weekly two-hour meetings (which consisted of both sharing of teaching anecdotes and workshop activities) allowed the opportunity to “crystallize views into words” (Bell & Gilbert, 1996, p. 105). The teacher commented that “it is not until you actually start thinking about it” that he/she was able to express the views that “come through in the actions or the behaviour that you do.”

The importance of recognizing and articulating underlying beliefs about students, schools and learning has been an important objective for many programmes of teacher education internationally. Numerous studies have documented the use of reflective writing and small-group discussion to help prospective teachers to become aware of their often-unconsciously held ideas (e.g., Ethell & McMeniman, 2002). Researchers working from critical perspectives have often emphasized the importance of uncovering cultural bias and prejudice (Gallavan, 2005; Long, 2004; Whipp, 2003), whereas other authors have examined the way in which preservice teachers’ pre-existing ideas influence their understanding of teaching and learning (Hammerness et al., 2005; Wideen et al., 1998).

Perspective taking

In addition to recognizing and developing a vocabulary to discuss their teaching, learning-oriented conversation groups offer participants opportunities to examine their beliefs from the perspectives of others. Participants in successful discussion groups for teachers say that group membership helps expand their perspective about the pedagogical and personal challenges they face. Conversation allows teachers to “see the world through the eyes of others” (Clark, 2001a). In some cases the differences in perspective may initially be significant. Rust & Orland (2001), describe a group of Arab and Jewish teachers, who despite living and working in very different circumstances, got together to develop their

abilities as mentors. Differences in culture, age and level of mentoring experience created contrasts that helped fuel discussion among participants.

Developing a sense of personal and professional authority

Another benefit stressed by teachers who participate in forms of conversation-based professional development is that they become “more confident and articulate” (Clark, 2001a). Similarly, in Bell & Gilbert’s work with Science teachers, many teachers expressed “feeling better about [themselves] as a teacher” (1996, p. 72). Experimenting with new teaching techniques, and discussing the results gave teachers a greater sense of personal and professional agency, which fueled further development.

This increasing personal and professional confidence has been noted to be particularly important for beginning teachers who may feel marginalized within their schools, and discouraged by high workload and/or the initial failures that can accompany learning to teach (Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Rust & Orland, 2001).

Reviving hope and relational connection: An antidote to isolation

When interviewed, members of teaching discussion groups frequently mention emotional support as being one of the most valuable benefits of participation. Isolation in teaching is often particularly difficult for new teachers, who are struggling to find personal and professional support in their schools. A first year teacher in a group described by Long (2004) commented that: “we [beginning teachers] have to walk alone a lot of times. We’re out there with no sense of direction.... We should have to meet at least once a month for the first semester of school to complete our [teacher education] program” (p. 148).

Some teacher discussion groups, not only those for beginning teachers, have emotional support among their stated objectives (Oliphant, 2003; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). However, even in groups formed around a particular topic such as creating student-centred learning environments (Passman & Duran-Klenclo, 2002), mathematics curriculum reform (Cennamo, 1998) or developing mentoring skills (Rust & Orland, 2001), teachers often discuss how participation in a group gives them a greater sense of community, or interconnectedness with others.

However, depending on the aims of the group and of its individual members, the sharing of emotional concerns may not always lead to renewed

hope. The “quasi-therapeutic salve” provided by members can find the groups becoming a place of “unproductive complaint” rather than action (Swindler, 2001).

Reaffirmation of ideals and commitments

Conversation, when seen as an act of storytelling, often requires narrators to portray themselves as the protagonist (Swindler, 2001). Swindler suggests that in becoming “heroes of our own tales,” the sharing of classroom incidents allows teachers to reaffirm the values that guide their teaching. A common observation among teacher educators working from a critical standpoint is that beginning teachers, who leave their programmes of teacher education deeply committed to teaching “against the grain,” quickly develop classroom practices characteristic of status-quo practices that may not align with their earlier commitments (Long, 2004). The discussion group described by Long allowed newly-certified teachers to reflect on their “convictions, hopes, plans and expectations” during their first two years of teaching.

The process of reaffirming commitments can be pushed along by the “caring confrontation” available in the group setting (Corey & Corey, 2002, p. 235). It has been noted within counseling psychology that educational groups can provide the conditions necessary for group members to “examine discrepancies between what they say and do”, thus making participants more “aware of potentials that are dormant” (Corey & Corey, 2002, p. 235). However, in the same way that sharing concerns can lead to feelings of empowerment and renewed hope, or the opposite feelings of frustration and powerlessness, “caring confrontation” is not without risks. Discussion groups need to discuss “the degree to which personal problems will be addressed (if at all)” (Oliphant, 2003). A high level of trust is necessary for participants to discuss the values that underlie their teaching, and to allow them to commit to teaching in new ways (Clark & Florio-Ruane, 2001).

Developing specific techniques and solutions to problems

Proponents of teacher groups argue that participation helps members to solve problems related to their practice. On a most basic level, many teacher

discussion groups allow participants to describe classroom challenges to their peers and seek suggestions about potential solutions.

However, giving advice when it is not wanted can also be a potential source of conflict within a discussion group (Clark, 2001a). Some authors suggest that groups should adopt a specific format for story-telling, with fixed types of questioning at predetermined points in the narrative (McDrury & Alterio, 2002). Other authors have noted that teachers themselves often generally indicate when they are seeking feedback. For example, Bell and Gilbert (1996) describe the way in which experienced teachers often give a “response cue” at the end of an anecdote to indicate the reason they shared the anecdote and type of feedback they are interested in receiving (if any).

Learning how to engage with students in learning conversations

The final benefit of teacher discussion groups described by Clark (2001a) is that participants become better able to create opportunities for conversational learning within their classrooms. When teachers experience powerful learning opportunities within a group setting, they often report that this influences their ability to create opportunities for learning communities within their classroom. This is similar to the philosophical argument put forth by both Northfield and Gunstone (1997) and Loughran (2006) that teacher educators must “practice what they preach.” They argue strongly that programmes of teacher education should model the types of teaching and learning that they advocate. If cooperative- and/or community-based learning is advocated by programmes of teacher education, these should be reflected in the pedagogies used by teacher educators.

In short, substantial evidence suggests that teachers getting together to discuss their practice can make a significant contribution to their learning. This appears to be true for preservice teachers as well, as will be discussed in the following sections.

2.5.3 Learning communities in preservice teacher education

Various initiatives have explored the use of talk and discussion in community as a pedagogy to foster preservice teacher learning during the practicum. I have grouped such initiatives into four broad categories for the

purpose of this review: cohort grouping, the use of peer coaching, web-supported initiatives, and face-to-face discussion groups. Each will be reviewed in turn.

The organization of preservice teacher education programmes around cohorts has been an important pedagogy that has been implemented within many programmes of teacher education internationally to provide opportunities for long-term group learning (Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000). In reviewing the international literature, Koeppen et al. (2000) note that the definition of cohorts varies somewhat, from programmes in which students complete all of their courses and practica together, to somewhat looser definitions in which one or more classes are conducted in smaller groupings. Farr Darling (2001) studied the conceptions of “community” and “inquiry” amongst 26 Canadian preservice teachers in a one-year teacher education programme who elected to be members of a cohort focussed on the ideal of building a community of inquiry. The cohort took classes together, participated in a variety of community events, and conducted their practica together in smaller groups at local schools. She found that students were able to engage in meaningful discussion about practice, although at times they interpreted the “community” element of the programme to imply that providing personal support might be more important than the necessity to challenge each others’ thinking, as was envisaged in the “community of inquiry” model. Similarly, Beck & Kosnick (2001) and Hansen & Jorgensen (2003) report increased preservice teacher engagement in their studies in cohort-based programmes in the United States and New Zealand respectively.

In an interesting New Zealand case, Carpenter (2005) describes an alternative practicum for secondary preservice teachers at the Auckland College of Education. A group of 12 preservice secondary teachers were placed together at a large urban high school during their first practicum. Student teachers participated in traditional practice teaching with their curriculum-area associates for three and a half days per week. The remaining third of their time was spent activities relating to the whole school, which included presentations by school staff members, and the shadowing of individual teachers or students, all of which were followed by “reflective group activities.” Although there were some concerns among preservice teachers about the reduced time spent in one’s curriculum area, the teacher educator received positive feedback about this initiative, including weekly group discussions, including that students appreciated being able to “talk about problems and positives” and take “time [...] to stand back and see the bigger picture” (p.18).

The value of peer coaching as a pedagogy during the practicum has been investigated by researchers including Bullough et al. (2003) and Ovens (2004). In the first study, preservice elementary teachers were placed in pairs and matched with an associate teacher. This arrangement was viewed as highly positive by the preservice teachers as they were able to engage in on-going conversations about their classroom teaching. In fact, the preservice teachers reported that they felt their pupils “learned more, and more quickly” (p. 16). One pair of students felt that even the associate benefited, as the group of three promoted a stronger degree of collaboration than the traditional grouping of one student teacher and one associate teacher. Ovens (2004) reported on the reactions of 12 preservice physical education teachers who participated in a practicum where peer coaching was a mandated activity. Participants appreciated “the relaxed, supportive and non-hierarchical nature” of feedback received from their peers (p. 48). The practice encouraged what Ovens called “active dialogue and reflection,” which were valued in addition to the regular feedback of visiting lecturers and associate teachers.

The use of online or web-facilitated learning as pedagogies in teacher education is a third and very rapidly expanding body of research about the use of talk and discussion while on practicum. The focus of many studies is often to ascertain whether online discussion fostered some measure of reflective practice (Ben-Peretz & Kupferberg, 2007; Levin, He, & Robbins, 2006; MaKinster, Barab, Harwood, & Andersen., 2006; Whipp, 2003). In an interesting variation on this type of research, Delfino & Persico (2007) compared the results of case discussion in conventional face-to-face group discussions, in a written analysis and in an online discussion. Each of these had advantages, prompting a call for further research.

In a final study which shares similarity with the project I researched, Hamre & Oyer (2004) described a voluntary “collaborative inquiry group” focused on inclusive practices in education. The inquiry group took the form of weekly meetings for the small group of preservice teachers (comprised of eight participants) and two of their teacher educators. The preservice teachers in this group were enrolled in an American preservice teacher education programme that involved two days of practicum placement each week. Thus, each week, the students had new experiences from the previous week’s time in the school to share. This article reports on the content of conversations that took place in the fourth year of the inquiry group programme, which consisted of seven “loosely

facilitated” one-hour meetings whose agenda was set at the beginning of each session by the students themselves. For the authors, one of the greatest surprises in analysing the content of the weekly sessions was the degree to which the elementary and intermediate preservice teachers in the inquiry group wanted to discuss educational philosophy, policy and issues relating to equity. There was very little discussion about day-to-day managerial concerns and a focus on the larger issues affecting equity in education.

In addition to the authors’ finding that a voluntary study group to discuss issues during the practicum is a feasible and fruitful undertaking, Hamre & Oyler’s (2004) discussion of their motivations as teacher educators is also relevant to the establishment of the current project at the University of Waikato. In particular, Hamre & Oyler’s contention that a collaborative inquiry group can be *both* a form of pedagogy (as these preservice teachers learn via collaborative dialogue) *and* a form of research (as the teacher educators learned from the collective talk) lends strong support to the formation of the group described in the following chapters.

To conclude, significant research evidence exists to support the idea that learning to teach is a complex enterprise. Preservice teachers begin programmes of teacher education with ideas about teaching and learning they have gleaned from their own time as pupils, and these ideas are reconstructed during university coursework and time spent in schools. The practicum is an extremely important site of preservice teacher learning, as teacher candidates learn from their own experiences, and in interactions with the pupils, peers, associate teachers and lecturers. Sociocultural theory recognizes that learning is highly contextualized, and unfortunately relatively little research exists about the secondary practicum in New Zealand. However, international research into the practicum suggests that preservice teachers strongly benefit from opportunities to reflect on their learning and that group discussion with peers is a powerful pedagogy for teacher learning.

This thesis examines the pilot year of a research project investigating the secondary practicum at the University of Waikato. This study describes and theorises the experiences of a group of seven preservice teachers who took part in a weekly professional development group during their practicum. The following chapter (**Chapter 3 – Methods**) outlines the way in which my study investigated

the weekly discussion group project, from the perspective of the preservice teachers who participated.

Chapter 3 – Research Methods

3.1 Introduction

In this project, I had the opportunity to take a closer look at the beginning stages of a multi-year project, focusing on how preservice secondary teachers theorize their practice while on practicum. As a “project within a project” my research strategy needed to be concordant with the objectives of the larger research group, but also with my personal priorities as a researcher.

Influenced by a variety of discourses within contemporary qualitative research, the design of this study has an exploratory aim, and emergent design. In keeping with Jones (2002)’s reminder that a frank and honest description of one’s methodology is an ethical imperative for qualitative researchers, I have attempted to provide the reader with a chapter that recounts not only how and when, but also why I made key methodological decisions, as well as how these decisions relate to my priorities as a researcher. The chapter includes a discussion of:

- the research context and embedded nature of this project (3.2)
- personal and ethical priorities, methodology and research focus (3.3)
- the methods followed for participant selection and generation of data (3.4)
- a recounting and clarification of the analysis and representation of the data (3.5)

3.2 Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 The context

The “Theorizing of Practice on Practicum Research and Development Project” was an on-going, multi-researcher research and professional development venture within the Professional Studies in Education department at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. The project aimed to better understand the way in which preservice and associate teachers theorize their practice with an overall goal of supporting teachers to develop pedagogical practices that encourage student learning (see Appendix A).

The research questions addressed within the Theorizing of Practice on Practicum project were:

1. What are the views of the university-based teacher educators, associate teachers and preservice teachers on current teacher education practices during the practicum?
2. In what ways can the teacher education practices in the practicum be developed to better mentor and coach the preservice teachers?
3. In what ways can we theorize the teacher education practices of the three partners in the practicum?

Bell (2006)

Two pedagogical practices were targeted as learning objectives for the preservice teachers and their cooperating teachers: taking into account pupil thinking, and the use of formative assessment of pupil learning (see Appendix A).

In 2004, as part of this larger project, a group of ten preservice teachers enrolled in the Graduate Diploma of Teaching - Secondary and their cooperating teachers were invited to participate in a series of weekly discussion-based professional development meetings during the seven-week secondary practicum (Appendix B & C). It was intended that these weekly sessions would provide information about the two targeted pedagogies (taking into account pupil thinking and formative assessment) and also allow time for the participants to tell anecdotes about their experiences using these pedagogies (Bell, 1994; B. Bell, 2005b).

At the point at which I became involved in this larger research project, the weekly meetings were in the initial planning stage. I was initially drawn to the project by the idea that convening a group during the practicum could be a possible antidote to the isolation and frustration that I experienced during my own practica, at the University of Ottawa, in Canada. Since then I have also had the opportunity to act as an associate teacher, and the idea of meeting with other associate and preservice teachers struck me as a valuable learning opportunity for both parties.

In designing my investigation of this weekly group, I needed to make sure that my research was congruent with the long-term aims of the larger project as well as with my own ethical and intellectual priorities. I felt it important that my study of the professional development group in its first year should generate findings that would help contribute to the long-term success of the project.

My specific research aims were to:

- explore and describe the experiences of DipTchg – Secondary students who participate the professional development group during their practicum.
- identify elements of participation that were helpful/beneficial from the perspective of the students.
- and, possibly, to propose ways in which such discussion groups could be improved.

3.2.2 Research paradigm

Recent research based on poststructural and feminist traditions has highlighted the need to be aware of one’s subjective position within education research, and reflexivity has become a hallmark of validity within a variety of discourses in qualitative research (Greenbank, 2003). Whereas the researcher’s observational stance can be viewed as a potential source of “contamination” of the object of study (van Manen, 1999), it has also been described more neutrally. Wideen et al. (1998) remind readers that *all* research is conducted “using a particular lens,” and that rather than being a source of contamination, this lens “has a bearing on what is seen, recognized as significant, and ultimately reported” (p. 131). Researchers communicate their underlying ideas about valid research by positioning themselves within a research community of shared understandings, priorities and socio-linguistic discourse (Morine-Dershimer, 2001).

The research community to which I belonged as an undergraduate student in Canada was one that valued the positivist, empiric research traditions of the natural sciences. My conception of my role as a researcher was one of being bound to understand the most-accepted scientific theories, and to do my best to prepare and analyze data according to the techniques which would yield the most accurate, precise and replicable results.

However, my ideas of valid research were expanded considerably by the coursework leading up to this MEd thesis. I took an interdisciplinary approach, completing five papers in five different departments of the School of Education - each course underlain by differing perspectives about the nature of knowledge and research as well as differing conceptions of teaching, learning and the purposes of

education. I have attempted to outline how, when and why my research may have been influenced by different traditions within educational research.

This study is grounded in an interpretive worldview and takes as its starting point the assertion that education is an inherently social activity. Teachers and students are constantly engaged in the construction of personal meaning within a rich context of “ideas, thoughts, beliefs and values” that are provided by the social and cultural environment in which they live (Radnor, 2001, p. 3). As such, my study is rooted in interpretive methodology, and seeks to understand a particular situation (a weekly professional development group) from the standpoint of its participants (the preservice teachers) (Schram, 2003).

Within this worldview, social reality is created in a local context, and is made possible by the use of shared cultural tools and traditions, including language (Willis, 2007). Language is thus the “*modus operandi*” of interpretive research, and allows the researcher to understand the reality shared with the participants (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). In-depth individual interviews, group discussion and observation of the weekly sessions were used as knowledge sources to reconstruct the preservice teachers’ experiences of participation in the professional development group.

As a qualitative study which views reality as socially-constructed, this study is guided by ideas of “trustworthiness” and “authenticity” as markers of quality research (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005 for recent discussion of the controversies surrounding validity in qualitative research). In practical terms, establishing trustworthiness required establishing a relationship of trust and rapport with the preservice teacher participants, and being engaged with them over a prolonged period of time (three months) (Shenton, 2004). Data were collected using established methods and involved using multiple methods over time, yielding a degree of triangulation of the data (where triangulation is viewed as a process of gaining depth, rather than necessarily obtaining “convergence on a fixed point”) (Seale, 1999, p. 474).

In this project I have also attempted to develop a reflexive attitude (with reflexivity defined by Guba & Lincoln (2005) as a “process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher”). As I proceeded with research, I reflected in writing about ethical issues, research decisions, and emerging ideas. These “researcher

experience memos” (Maxwell, 1996, in Schram, 2003, p. 33) have guided my writing in the remainder of this chapter.

3.2.3 Ethical principles

Conducting social research requires a deep commitment to ethical practice. As research in a university setting, this project was bound by the institution’s Human Research Ethics Regulations, which requires researchers to anticipate, and minimize any potential physical and/or emotional harm to participants, and to ensure that participants understand and accept any remaining risks (University of Waikato, 2004). Yet, authors writing from a variety of traditions within qualitative research have argued that ethical research must go beyond simple ideas of “not harming” participants (Christians, 2005; Welland & Pugsley, 2002).

For example, authors writing from a variety of feminist standpoints have challenged researchers to develop more egalitarian relationships and suggest that “human care” should underlie all research decisions (Christians, 2005). Yet developing this “connectedness” and degree of intimacy in qualitative research raises other ethical issues (Pugsley & Welland, 2002). As participants are asked to reflect on their own experiences, in-depth interviews always have the potential to bring troubling thoughts and emotions to light (White, 2002). Also, as a closer relationship is developed, participants in a study may feel a greater degree of responsibility for providing the researcher with “good” data, and may commit more time and effort to participation than research conducted in a more detached manner.

From a practical standpoint, this research project was underlain by a recognition that the practicum is generally a very busy, and often stressful time for prospective teachers. Successful completion of the practicum is of prime importance to preservice teachers, as it is required for completion of the GradDipT, and also as relationships developed during the practicum may lead to future employment. My wish to explore their experiences in depth needed to be balanced with a recognition of the time involved.

The participants in this study were part of a complex network of relationships, both within the weekly professional development group and the GradDipT programme more generally. I wished to engage in honest, open dialogue, which respected these relationships with other preservice teachers, associate teachers and university staff. As the interviews were an opportunity for participants “to reflect on their own identity,” I was aware that this critical

examination of self, and multiple relationships had the potential to bring troubling thoughts and emotions to light (White, 2002, p. 142). Although I hoped to create a relationship of honesty and openness with participants, I was also cautious not to pressure participants in such a way as make them feel they were in a confessional, or that the outcome of my research was resting entirely on their individual contribution.

Decisions about how to proceed with data collection, analysis and writing were also informed by my commitment to ethical practice. For example, the practice of returning to participants with findings at various stages of research, as well as increasing the validity of results, has been argued to be a key practice to avoid misrepresentation of participants. However, the need to seek participant input must be balanced with a recognition that this practice may require a significant time commitment from participants, for whom the validity of findings and representation may, or may not, be of critical importance (White, 2002).

In practical terms, my research proposal was approved by the School of Education's Ethics Committee before I contacted the participants in this study. As well as the theoretical elements addressed in the preceding paragraphs, my proposal outlined for the committee the ways in which I would ensure that my research would be in line with both the University of Waikato's "Human Ethics Regulations" (University of Waikato, 2004) and the New Zealand Association of Research in Education Ethical Guidelines (NZARE, 1998).

A first key ethical principal was that the participants in this study were required to give "informed consent," which according to Christians (2005) relies on two basic principles. First, that participants agree voluntarily, without any form of coercion, to participate; and second, that this decision is based on "full and open information" (p. 144). To ensure that this aim was met, a letter explaining the aims and objectives of my research was both mailed to participants in advance of our first meeting and discussed in person (see Appendix C – Letter to Participants) prior to my receiving consent in writing (see Appendix D – Research Consent Form).

In keeping with the University and NZARE guidelines (NZARE, 1998; University of Waikato, 2004), the letter to participants also clarified that participants had a right to withdraw from the research. The letter provided contact information for two people outside of the research project who could be spoken to in case of concerns about my research. Participants were assured that their

participation in the study was confidential, and that only myself and my supervisor would have access to the transcripts of their interviews, which would be destroyed at the conclusion of my research.

3.3 Generation of Data

3.3.1 Selection of participants

The seven participants in the weekly practicum professional development meetings were part of a group of ten who were invited, along with their associates, to participate by the group's university professor facilitator (see Appendix A & B – Letters of Invitation). These preservice teachers were selected by the university's "Secondary Practicum Coordinator" based on two criteria. The first, was that all preservice teachers who were invited to participate were deemed to have had successful first practica, based on their evaluations by supervising lecturers and associate teachers. Specifically, the Practicum Coordinator was asked to select preservice teachers who "had developed good classroom management skills" during their first practica and who were judged to be "not-at-risk" of incompleting their second practica. Also, only preservice teachers within the city limits in which the meetings took place were invited to participate. Both the selection of "successful" students, as well as limiting participation to teaching within easy traveling distance of the groups' meeting place were attempts to ensure that the time and effort of participation were least likely to endanger successful completion of the preservice secondary teachers' second practicum.

The group of preservice teachers selected by the Practicum Coordinator were drawn from different subject areas, and ranged in age from 22 to 43. Although three of the ten students invited to participate were male, only one accepted, such that the weekly meeting group consisted of six female preservice teachers and one male. Four of the seven participants were married with children. Six of the seven had careers prior to entering into the GradDipT-Secondary programmes, one had graduated from her undergraduate degree the year before. Six of the seven participants had Bachelor's degrees, with the seventh having had equivalent experience in the skilled trades. Three of the participants had completed Honours degrees, and a fourth had completed a Masters Degree.

All seven participants in the discussion group were made aware of the possibility of participating in one-on-one interviews regarding their experiences of

the weekly group meetings in the letter which invited their participation in the larger project. They were asked to delete the following sentence “I also agree to having my name forwarded to MEd research student, Emily Gesner, who will contact me herself, regarding her research” if they did not wish to be contacted.

Of the seven members of the weekly group, five consented to having me contact them. These participants were sent a letter inviting them to participate in an interview prior to, during, and after their participation in the weekly meetings (see Letter to Participants – Appendix C). In keeping with the University’s of Waikato’s “Human Ethics Regulations” (University of Waikato, 2004) and the NZARE Ethical Guidelines (NZARE, 1998), the letter outlined in appropriate language the objectives of my research, the way in which data would be handled and contact information for two people outside of the research project who could be spoken to in case of concerns about my research. Each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym, listed in the table below.

Pseudonym	Age	Curriculum Area(s)	Interviewed
Jenny	27	English and German	twice (before the beginning of-, and after the completion of the six-week discussion group)
Gabrielle	25	Graphics and Technology	twice (as above)
Janice	39	Social Studies and English	twice (as above)
Michael	40s	Graphics and Technology	twice (as above)
Karen	22	Drama and Mathematics	once (after the completion of the six-week discussion group project)
Susan	40s	Science and Mathematics	not interviewed
Maria	30s	Social Studies and English	not interviewed

Table 1 – Participants

3.3.2 Participant observation

One important decision that needed to be made early in this research project was whether I did or did not attend the weekly meetings, and if so, what form of observation and/or participation I would engage in during the sessions. I hoped to work within an interpretive framework, and to study the group from the perspective of its preservice teacher participants. Early in the planning process I

questioned whether not attending, and conducting detailed interviews with the students *about* their experiences, would be the best approach to understanding how the students perceived the weekly sessions.

I reasoned that attending would lead to giving primacy to the preservice teachers' interpretations of events. That said, in the end, I decided to attend the weekly sessions in order to:

- gain greater familiarity with the research context
- develop a better knowledge of and potentially deeper level of trust with the preservice teachers
- gather observations of the group that would give another perspective/source of data to support the validity of my findings and satisfy my intellectual curiosity

During the first group meeting I attempted to keep a running record of my observations. However, this practice was politely deemed distracting by the group's facilitator and I shifted to a less zealous practice of making notes after each session about who had attended, the various topics that had been discussed, and my observation of group dynamics. In practice, these notes were relatively brief (up to two hand-written pages) and recorded in point form. When quoted or discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis, my field notes are referenced by session number (1-6) such that FieldNotes/Session4 refers to my written notes recorded at the completion of the fourth of the weekly sessions.

3.3.3 Individual interviews

In order to access individual preservice teachers' individual experiences of participation in the weekly professional development meetings, I conducted individual in-depth interviews with the group's participants. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the interviews were guided by naturalistic, qualitative methodology and had a loose, flexible structure to allow participants to describe their own perspectives of the discussion group, and also for me to cover topics of interest based on my observations of the group, and review of the literature.

My study design had called for three interviews, one prior to the beginning of the weekly meetings (to gain some familiarity with the participants as well as gain informed consent), one at the midpoint of the project (to hear early impressions), and one after the discussion group's conclusion (to hear about the

final weeks of the group, and final reflection about it). However, due to late selection of the groups' participants, the first two interviews were combined. Thus, four students were interviewed during the week following the second meeting of the professional development group (i.e., during the third week of their practicum) as well as after the final session of the professional development of the group (i.e., at the completion of their practicum). A fifth student offered to be interviewed later in the project, and was interviewed once, at the conclusion of the project.

All preservice teachers who had agreed to participate in my research were initially contacted by phone or by email (depending on the contact information they had provided). During this pre-interview contact I briefly introduced myself and my research, and arranged the timing and location of the interview. In keeping with the ethical priority of reducing the stress and time commitment involved in the interview process, interviewees were given the choice of time and location for the interview. Concordant with my intentions of conducting interviews in a naturalistic social setting, interviews took place at the preservice teachers' schools, at the university and in a local coffee-shop, all locations that provided adequate privacy given the topic, and a suitably low level of distraction. Interviews varied in length from between approximately half-an-hour to just over an hour.

By the time I first met individually with the preservice teachers I had both introduced myself (as a Masters student and Canadian intermediate teacher interested in the discussion group project). I had also situated myself within the larger group as an interested listener/observer (and the maker of coffee), but I did not participate in the group discussion. As can be seen in Appendix E – Interview Guides, my interview guides consisted of topic headings, with either potential questions or point form subheadings. In practice, these scripted questions were very rarely used.

The first interview with participants consisted of these following general themes:

- 1) Introducing myself, my research and gaining informed consent
- 2) Getting to know the participant (“Tell me about yourself”)
- 3) General thoughts about the practicum (past practicum and current)
- 4) Experience of the discussion group so far
- 5) Thanks and recapitulation of informed consent, including right to withdraw, and timing of next interview

The second interview (post-interview) was generally similar to the first, although with two main differences. First, I was on much more familiar terms with the participants. Along with the first interview, I had had considerable opportunity to converse informally with the participants before and after the weekly meetings. This is reflected in a more informal language usage (and more laughter) on the transcripts.

A second important difference from the first interview is that although I began with open-ended general questions about the discussion group generally, I then returned to a checklist of topics about which I hoped to elicit information. Some of these questions were pragmatic questions about what I termed “logistics” to provide feedback for future years (e.g., group length, duration, size etc. see Appendix E – Interview Guides), as well as issues raised in the previous interviews.

- 1) Opening/Warm-Up (e.g., how was practicum?)
- 2) The Weekly Discussion Group (general impressions, pros & cons)
- 3) Return to checklist of “logistics” topics (interviewer-led questioning)
- 4) Thanks, review of right to withdraw, and my contact information

3.3.4 Group evaluation

One unexpected source of data about the preservice teachers’ experiences of the practicum discussion group was a group oral evaluation which occurred at the conclusion of the last weekly meeting. The group’s facilitator asked the participants “Tell me about the value of this [the weekly meetings] for you.” A short (~5 minute) discussion about the benefits of the project ensued. This session of the group had been audiotaped by the group’s facilitator, and this portion was made available to me for transcription and analysis.

Six of the seven participants were present during this session (i.e., all but Janice), and each briefly shared with the group what they felt were the benefits of having participated in the weekly sessions. Data from this short discussion were

transcribed using the same protocol as the individual interviews. The data was also colour-coded using the same scheme as the interviews and were assigned the abbreviation GroupEval. For example, Michael's comments during this brief discussion can be recognized by the reader by the following reference: (Michael/GroupEval).

The opinions shared during this short discussion were congruent with those shared with me during individual interviews. Although there is debate within the literature about the degree to which "triangulation" is an appropriate term, or concept within a qualitative worldview (Bloor, 1997), I take this similarity between data collected in different situations and at different times to lend credibility to my data.

3.4 Analysis & Representation

3.4.1 Initial considerations

The analysis of qualitative data has been subject to intense scrutiny and debate, and has, over the past decades evolved into a "vast field" of research and practice (Atkinson & Delamont, 2005, p. 821). In preparing for this phase of research (and indeed during and after), I read a variety of perspectives on analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, many presenting variations of "grounded theory" methodology (Charmaz, 2002, 2005) but also those grounded in narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, 2002; Gudmundsdottir, 2001; Moen, 2006) and poststructural traditions (Britzman, 2003; Parker, 1997).

With regards to the pragmatic elements of analysis (the how to rather than why), I again compared approaches of making sense of qualitative data. They range from those that are highly prescriptive (e.g., Charmaz, 2002, 2005; LeCompte, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 2001) to those advocating the need to intuitively develop personalized methods of data analysis (e.g., Schostak, 2002).

3.4.2 From interview to text

A first step in studying the results of my interviews was the process of transcription, which, on the advice of authors such as Bell (2005) I began as soon as possible after the interviews. As I began transcribing, I made notes in my research journal of potential themes, "surprises" and ideas I might follow up on in future interviews. I was keenly aware of Gee & Green's (1998) reminder that "any speech data can be transcribed in more or less detailed ways such that we get

a continuum of possible transcripts ranging from very detailed (what linguists call “narrow”) to much less detailed (what linguists call ‘broad’)” (p. 168).

Therefore, during transcription I was frequently challenged to decide what elements of speech to transcribe and why. My initial transcripts were very detailed in terms of recording speech markers such as pauses, and false-starts (see detailed symbols in Appendix G – Second Letter to Participants). I felt this method allowed me to better “hear” the voices of the preservice teachers, and thereby stay as close to their meaning as possible. However, with successive interviews the need for this level of detail decreased, as I gained familiarity with the participants, and I relied on two other techniques to stay “close” to participants’ meaning.

A first tool I devised to help me retain the individual nature of the participants’ responses was to select a colour and font for the interview of each of the participants. In addition each segment was labeled by interview time (medial - 1 or final - 2) such that Gabrielle/Int1 refers to data gathered during my first interview with Gabrielle, and Michael/Int2 indicates that data is derived from Michael’s second interview. As I digitally cut, pasted, rearranged and wrote-up findings, I maintained the colour scheme, which allowed me to “hear” the voices of the participants. Also, it allowed me to see the degree to which I was allowing each of the preservice teachers approximately equal voice in the final text. Secondly, I made digital audio recordings of all interviews, which I stored on the computer on which I did the bulk of the transcription, analysis and writing. This allowed me to replay segments both to clarify meaning, but also to return to the emphasis and tone of the experiences that were shared with me.

Although the transcripts were read and reread over the course of the transcription and rough notes made, the bulk of analysis occurred subsequent to completion of the weekly meetings. I used a variety of techniques, guided by Jones’ (2002) advice that the appropriate system of analysis is simply “the one that produces themes and findings that convey a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” in relation to the theoretical and ethical priorities underlying the research.

3.4.3 Coding

The first phase of the coding involved what Wellington & Sczcerbinsky (2007, p. 101) term “immersing” myself in the data. It was clear that the data would need to be subdivided to deal with the large volume before meaningful analysis could continue. The five broad themes I used to subdivide the data were:

- 1) The Practicum (preservice teachers’ experiences of, and thoughts/beliefs about)
- 2) The Discussion Group (as above)
- 3) The University (experiences of DipT coursework, focus, curriculum...)
- 4) Life Story (biography, past experiences outside first three categories)
- 5) Research (description of project, informed consent, scheduling)

I broke the text down into units of single sentences to short paragraphs by highlighting in the margin of print copies. This procedure was conducted for all transcripts as well as all notes in my research journal (i.e., “field notes”) created after the weekly meetings, notes made during transcription as well as thoughts jotted down “at random” (in class, upon waking up, in conversation about other topics etc.).

All data associated with the second category “The Discussion Group” were assembled in a large word processing file (since no license for NVivo was in the end available). At this point I needed to decide whether to proceed first by coding/categorizing inductively from the data (i.e., using categories generated from the data) or looking again at categories generated *a priori*.

I began by aggregating this data under set headings which had been part of the “Logistics” part of the interviews. For each topic relating to Logistics (Group Size; Group Composition/Make-up; Timing (Length/Duration); Style of Facilitation; Books & Handouts), I read each transcript and aggregated the relevant text in a word-processing file.

Within these pre-determined categories I reviewed the data for “commonalities, differences, patterns and structures” between participants (Seidel & Kelle, 1995, in Basit, 2003). I made multiple copies of many portions of text, juxtaposing them to reflect on similarities and differences. In some cases I arranged text units sequentially to show what I felt to be continuum of opinion. For example, in the category of facilitation, one participant felt the amount of guidance and direction given to the conversation by the facilitator was “just right

... allowing us to all go off on tangents” (Janice/Int2); whereas another participant thought that in later sessions the level of facilitation was good but “the [level] needs to be *much* more than in the beginning... to get us into it quicker” (Gabrielle/Int2). A third preservice teacher would have preferred for the facilitator to be “in strong control” (Jenny/Int2). I began writing preliminary notes about my observations made, progressively shaping them into the “Logistics” section in the following chapter (Chapter 4 - Results).

The second type of analysis I conducted was a more inductive process, influenced by Grounded Theory methods (Basit, 2003; Charmaz, 2002, 2005; LeCompte, 2000). I began reading through the “Discussion Group” data looking for themes. I examined what was *frequently* said as well as that which was said with *emphasis* by individual participants (Gibbs, 2002; LeCompte, 2000). I arrived at a series of themes, which were progressively grouped and subdivided to best explain the study’s main question of what the participants found beneficial about participation.

3.4.4 Presentation of findings to participants

Returning to members of the research project to check findings has become common practice within a variety of traditions in social science research (Denscombe, 2007; Johnson, 2002; Pole & Morrison, 2003). McAlpine, Weston and Beauchamp (2002) discuss the relative merits of meeting with participants individually versus as a group (which they term a “debriefing colloquium”). They suggest that the dialog generated in a group setting is an important advantage to consulting a group when the subject is not overly personal or private.

I met with the students as a group over lunch to present and discuss my analysis to date, approximately five weeks after the conclusion of the weekly meetings. During this colloquium I presented the group with a written summary of my analysis (Appendix F – Draft Findings). Formatting this framework was helpful in clarifying my analysis, and provided a starting point for discussion. To allow for individual comments, I formatted this written summary with adequate space to write comments or clarification. I also audiotaped and subsequently transcribed the preservice teachers’ discussion of my findings.

At the conclusion of the colloquium, the preservice teachers were each given a copy of the transcript of the “Oral Evaluation” held at the end of the last

session, a copy of my preliminary analysis sheet, and, if applicable, transcripts of their interviews. This was accompanied by a letter thanking participants and giving contact information in case they wanted to provide clarification, or ask me not to include particular information (see Appendix G – Second Letter to Participants).

3.4.5 Writing & representation

The issue of how to present the findings of qualitative studies has been the subject of close scrutiny and debate within the academic research community as researchers have debated ways to make qualitative research findings public (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Schostak, 2006). Authors writing from a variety of theoretical positions have brought attention to the value-laden decisions that are made during the writing process and the role of language in constructing social reality (Jones, 2002; Richardson, 2004).

The ethical qualitative researcher is challenged to present results “as fairly, clearly, and coherently as possible” in keeping with the underlying framework and purpose of the study (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007, p. 104). The chief challenge in my writing of the following chapter (Chapter 4 – Results) was in how, when and why to include the ‘voices’ of the preservice teachers I had interviewed. In keeping with my focus on the experiences of the students from “their perspective” (to the degree this is possible) I wished to include verbatim accounts beyond what Wellington & Szczerbinski, (2007 p.104) term “‘sound bite’-style” quotes in an endeavour to provide what Maykut & Morehouse term “rich description” (Maykut & Morehouse, 2001, p. 47). The use of pseudonyms greatly improved the coherence of the text.

As discussed previously in this chapter, in reading the interview data I attempted to note where participants shared similar views, where their ideas diverged, and when their views were unexpected (from my perspective). I have kept this format in my writing, providing illustrative quotes that I feel express common experiences, as well as examples of divergent and unexpected results.

In reading the following chapter (**Chapter 4 – Results**), the reader is reminded of the following codes used to identify the source of data. The data is discussed in light of current research in teacher education in the subsequent chapter (**Chapter 5 Discussion**).

Source of data	Abbreviated as
Transcript of first individual interview (held before first meeting of group)	Int1 (e.g., Jenny/Int1)
Transcript of second individual interview (held after the final session of the group)	Int2 (e.g., Michael/Int2)
Field notes recorded at the conclusion of each of the weekly sessions	FieldNotes (e.g., FieldNotes/Session4)
Transcript of the Group evaluative discussion that occurred at the end of the final weekly session	GroupEval (e.g. Gabrielle/GroupEval)
Transcript of the discussion which occurred during the feedback session held six weeks after final session of the discussion group	OralFeedback (e.g. Karen/OralFeedback)
Feedback written by participants on the “Draft Findings” sheet (Appendix F – Draft Findings) during the feedback session	WrittenFeedback (e.g., Janice/WrittenFeedback)

Table 2 - Summary of Data Sources

Chapter 4 – Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the experiences of the preservice teachers who participated in a weekly professional development group during their second practicum. The chapter includes qualitative data gathered from:

- individual interviews with five of seven students who took part in the professional development group
- a group oral evaluation involving all participants held at the conclusion of the final weekly meeting
- my own observations of the weekly sessions
- a feedback session during which I presented my findings to the participants

The data are reported thematically under the following headings:

- expectations of participation (4.2)
- experiences of participation (4.3)
- thoughts about logistics (e.g., group size, timing, resources) (4.4)

4.2 Expectations of Participation

The first interview, scheduled before the first meeting of the group, provided an opportunity for me to introduce myself to the participants, explain my interest in the discussion group and obtain informed consent. I asked each of the four interviewees (Janice, Jenny, Gabrielle and Michael; a fifth participant, Karen, was interviewed once, at the conclusion of the group) about their hopes for the discussion group.

Although the four preservice teachers had received the same letter of introduction to the discussion group (Appendix A – Invitation Letter) they expressed differing levels of knowledge about the upcoming project, from one participant who “hadn’t really read” the facilitator’s introduction letter, to another participant who had discussed the project with the facilitator at some length.

The participants expressed different reasons for choosing to take part in the weekly discussion group. The idea of gaining advice and solving problems was a recurring theme for Janice, who had high hopes that the discussion group would allow group members to get advice and suggestions from each other. She said:

I'm hoping when we all go there on Thursday nights and say "Oh, my god I can't do this with this class" someone will turn around and say "Oh, I've had the same problem and if you try this way, or if you try that way" [...] [I'm] hoping that when we all go on Thursday nights and I sit there and say "Look, this isn't working and that isn't working and I've tried this... and even though you've said this pedagogy is gonna work, it's not! [I'm hoping] that we can have feedback with each other... and that we can learn. And when I'm doing something majorly wrong somebody can say "Try this, or try that" or "Do this, or don't do that." So, that's my main thing – thinking that we're all going to help each other. Oh my god, I hope it will work! (Janice/Int1)

Jenny also told me about being interested in what others had to say, although more out of "curiosity," than from a pragmatic standpoint. She said: "I think, honestly... by talking" and that the project also appealed to her:

from a point of hearing what everyone else is saying... It's really good just to pick up on their ideas and what they're thinking and experiencing, and then just talking and reflecting. So, actually... [the group] will make me think more about what I'm doing rather than: "Ok, I'm standing up in front of the class, this is what I'll get through today, I've got to try and make it coherent"... Of actually, getting more in-depth, beyond pure survival level thinking at this stage (Jenny/Int1).

The idea that the group might cultivate a more "in-depth level of thinking" was also very important to Gabrielle, who spoke at length about the value of "theory" for her. Although she found the group of student teachers with whom she had been placed during her first practicum "supportive," she "couldn't find people" who were interested in discussing theory:

A couple of times with the student teachers that were [at the same school], I tried talking about theory... they kind of went: "Ugh, I don't know" ... It was like they were saying "That's not relevant because we're out in

schools now” kind of thing. And, for me, everything related [to the theories explored in coursework] (Gabrielle/Int1).

Gabrielle questioned whether the discussion group would “go beyond” the type of conversations she had had during her last practicum and in university classes afterwards.

I think [the discussion group’s] going to be really interesting. I’m wondering whether it’s going to be the same as it was for me in the first practicum and I’m going to feel like I did [on first practicum]...Because I often feel like I theorize too much... and I analyze too much for people. And I have to be quiet and just go: “OK” and be thinking a bit at that level. Ya, and I found myself doing that all the time in classes when we spoke about what we did [on practicum]. Ya, just methods really, and class behaviour. [...] For me, I kind of wanted to talk about why we did something and how we could improve it and ideas around that (Gabrielle/Int1).

When I asked Michael why he opted to participate, his reply had less to do with perceived personal benefit than the other interviewees. He explained to me that the university lecturer convening the group had always been “most helpful” and viewed that if she thought the project was “worthwhile” he would “take her word for that” (Michael/Int1). He viewed the potential to contribute to the research as the most important reason for participating “The way I like look at it I consider myself fortunate that I can do this whole programme. So if I can help develop it, or give some feedback that’s- Why not?” When I asked further about whether he thought participation might benefit him, he said he could see the potential for participation to allow him “to maximize this practicum... just to get more out of it. To stay focussed. [And not] get too carried away with the flow” (Michael/Int1).

4.3 Benefits of Participation

During the second interview held with participants, I opened the conversation by asking the participants about their current practica. With the exception of Janice, the four students reported that their practica were going well. When the conversation shifted to the discussion group I allowed the participants to guide the conversation, occasionally asking about observations I had made, and

only at the end going back and inquiring about any of the “logistics” that hadn’t been mentioned.

The participants interviewed individually indicated that they valued the discussion group because it offered an opportunity for: 1) Getting together 2) Listening to others 3) Telling their stories 4) Thinking/Reflection. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

4.3.1 Getting together

After one of the Thursday afternoon sessions, as I was chatting informally with three of the participants, one student joked: “I confess, I just come for the social element” (FieldNotes/Session3). Although this was said in jest, to interrupt a conversation with a more serious tone, it was clear to me as an observer that the participants enjoyed seeing each other each week. This idea of a social element is woven throughout the participants’ interviews, although rarely stated outright. When they talked about what they enjoyed, repeated ideas were expressed more in terms of the linked activities of: getting together, listening to the practicum experiences of others, telling others about their own stories and having a chance to think/reflect.

4.3.2 Listening to others

When describing what they liked about having participated, the students talked first and foremost about how much they enjoyed listening/hearing about the practicum experiences of others.

Michael, for example, used the word “interesting” repeatedly during his interview to describe the discussion group, and said that although he didn’t feel the group had had an impact on his teaching over the practicum, it had been “really nice to hear the experiences” of others and to hear about different schools and teaching in different subject areas (Michael/Int2).

What I did enjoy about [the discussion group] was also getting the feedback: “Like, how [are] you doing? How’s it going?” ... In general, if you’re on practicum and you see another student, you just want to see How’s it going? How’s that school? What do they do at school? How’re the kids? How’re the teachers? Just finding out through that person about the school. What they like about it etcetera (Michael/Int2).

When asked about what she felt was the most important benefit for her of participating in the group, Karen answered: “listening to people’s stories and then relating them”; “thinking about what I’d do in that situation” (Karen/Int2). Similarly, Jenny said that after someone had shared a classroom problem, she really liked “trying to nut it out yourself and thinking: “Ooo, so what would I do?” (Jenny/Int2).

Listening to their coursemates’ anecdotes also allowed people to pick up ideas. Gabrielle commented: “I love those moments in which something just clicks and you go: ‘Oh, I’ve got to do that!’” (Gabrielle/Int2). Janice said that she thought it was “awesome” the way the group “bounced ideas around” and she told me that she had made a file of jot notes of ideas she had heard (Janice/Int2).

Students also enjoyed hearing about others’ experiences because it allowed them to feel that their problems weren’t unique, which I dubbed the “same boat” feeling during analysis. In Janice’s words:

You suddenly find out “Ah! I’m not the only person!” ... We thought we had problems in our classes for certain things. It was nice to see how somebody else had to handle that... when they’ve got a totally different subject area, and even different groups of kids (Janice/Int2).

Michael expressed a similar viewpoint, finding it good to know that even the strong students chosen for the discussion group were not immune to managerial problems.

A good thing is to hear that all of us had managerial problems at a certain stage. And all of us overcame them, did not particularly enjoy [them], but it’s part of life and you learn to live with them. And, so that’s good. That you know all the other [student teachers] do really well, but they still have these problems as well (Michael/Int2).

4.3.3 Telling their stories

The preservice teachers involved in this project strongly valued the opportunity to recount their classroom experiences during the weekly meetings.

Jenny, for example, said that she found talking about a problem “definitely clarifies what I’m thinking” and “sometimes confirms the way that I think I would solve a problem” (Jenny/Int2).

All of the students commented at some point in their interview that the group could be a source of “support.” Michael felt that by the time the group had reached the last few sessions “everyone was supportive of each other” (Michael/Int2). Gabrielle clarified that, although it wasn’t something she had needed during her second practicum, it was important that the group could provide “personal support” (Gabrielle/Int2). Janice returned several times during her interview to how supportive the group had been. She commented that the group provided “so much support. I mean, we’ve *all* been there for each other,” which she thought had “brought [the group] closer together” (Janice/Int2).

Telling others about challenging situations was a particularly important source of support for Janice, who told the group about the frustrations of working with her associate teacher. Not only did she find the associate’s teaching methods inappropriate, but she also had a very strained personal relationship. Given her stressful practicum, she viewed the discussion group “like a help group” and exclaimed: “It just kept me sane” (Janice/Int2).

Sometimes I felt *so down* about this teacher... Just to be able to talk to somebody and them to say to me that... “You’re going to be fine. You’ll do it your own way when you start.” Just that support. Really, really made a difference. *Really* made a difference. [...] “At one point I was ready to walk out [i.e., quit her practicum]. I was quite sure that if I hadn’t had everybody there to moan to I- ... I don’t know what I would have done (Janice/Int2).

As well as receiving moral support Janice appreciated how, after recounting a problem to the group, the group allowed (and sometimes encouraged) her to “see things from a different perspective,” telling her to “calm down, take a deep breath. Take a step back, and think of it from this point of view.” She likened it to the expression “a set of new eyes.” Another fact she felt made the project “invaluable” was that, after telling about their difficulties, “everybody else [would] turn around and say: ‘You could have tried this’ ‘Try this next time.’ ” (Janice/Int2).

This possibility for the group to tackle individual problems, and then offer suggestions or advice was also raised by Jenny who recalled how:

In the discussion group some days it was like: “This is how learning -,” “This is how my teacher’s-,” or “I have problems with -,” and everyone helped. And I think that was really good. Or, “My associate did it this way” because [Gabrielle] had one problem with her teacher [who] wanted her to yell at the kids, and she didn’t want to. I thought people got their problems solved or were given more suggestions than they could come up with. I thought that was a really good point (Jenny/Int2).

4.3.4 Thinking/Reflecting

Along with thinking about the anecdotes told by others, several of the preservice teachers talked about how the weekly meetings scheduled in a time for thinking or reflection. “You’ve got the company... You’ve got the pull to have to be there and, when you’re here, you tend to reflect. You tend to do that thinking even if you’re not talking. It works well” (Gabrielle/Int2). Jenny found it beneficial because “you don’t have a lot of time as it’s all happening in your class ... to actually think about what you’d do,” (Jenny/Int2) whereas during the sessions the students could think both about their own teaching and situations raised by others. Gabrielle also shared that not all of their thinking would have been obvious to me as an observer in that “A lot of the stuff we didn’t actually say, but we processed... I know I processed a lot of stuff, and thought about teaching-related things” (Gabrielle/Int2).

In her interview, Karen suggested that the single most positive element of participation for her had been the thinking that she did while listening to other participants. She enjoyed “relating” the stories – “thinking about what I’d do in that situation” (Karen/Int2). This led her to become what she felt was “more critical,” something that extended to her thinking throughout the week. She shared that “When I’d taught a class [I’d ask myself] ‘How do I know that they’ve learnt?’” She went on to say that she found the task of writing self-evaluations after each lesson (a requirement for her mathematics teaching methods course) became easier. She said: “At the beginning I found [evaluating lessons] quite difficult. And after those Thursday sessions, I had a lot more to evaluate. I could look more critically” (Karen, Int2).

4.4 Thoughts About Logistics

4.4.1 Group size

All of the students interviewed felt that the group size was appropriate. The students suggested that having a larger group would likely make it more difficult for each person to contribute, and might make the group “less personal” (Janice/Int2). Even at its present size of seven students, two students suggested that a greater effort could have been made to draw in those students who didn’t contribute as frequently to the discussion (Gabrielle/Int2, Jenny/Int2).

However, it was also both stated and implied that the features that the students enjoyed about participating in the group discussions might not be present if the group were too small. “You’d tell one person – How satisfying is that?” joked Karen. “Like, you’re going to have the same person to talk to each time. Then, you’re going to get the same ideas each time” (Karent/Int1). Janice agreed, speculating that with less than five people there wouldn’t be “enough ideas to bounce” (Janice/Int2). Similarly, Gabrielle said that a smaller group size might reduce the “interplay” during the meetings (Gabrielle/Int2).

4.4.2 Cross-curricular group make-up

The fact the group brought together students from different curriculum subject areas was very popular among the interviewees. When I inquired of all participants what they might think of a “single-subject” group, all five said that the cross-curricular group seemed preferable. As highlighted earlier, the group found it “interesting” to hear about different subject areas and different schools and really enjoyed that element of diversity.

Janice commented that she liked “the mix” and there would be “no point in three English people sitting there when you could have an English, a Science, a Maths, and an IT [student]” (Janice/Int2). She said that having different schools, a range of ages among the participants and different subject areas were all beneficial. If everyone were grouped by subject area Jenny thought “You’d just get bogged down into [discussion about] how to share resources... I think you’d get stuck on subject rather than learning” (Jenny/Int2). Gabrielle also envisaged that the topic of discussion would have been very different if everyone had been from her subject area, and they would have ended up discussing the issues that they discuss “all the time” (Gabrielle/Int2).

Although there was a diversity of subject areas, several of the students commented on ways in which the students selected for the discussion group were atypical of the group as a whole (Jenny/Int2, Michael/Int2, Karen/Int2). Two students found it surprising that there were no Physical Education students in the group, particularly given that the students thought they made up a large group in the GradDipT programme. Jenny and Gabrielle both explained, although not their personal opinion, that Physical Education teachers sometimes “have a chip on their shoulder” (Jenny/Int2) because they are not viewed as contributing to the programme intellectually or they are viewed as just wanting “practical skills” and often ask: “What relevance has this got to teaching?” (Gabrielle/Int2).

During the last of the weekly sessions it was also pointed out by one member of the group that the group was not very diverse culturally (FieldNotes/Session6). Although two of the discussion group participants are immigrants, both are from European countries, meaning that all of the members of the group were Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent). Coming from a very ethnically-diverse city in Canada, I too, had found this surprising and asked a few of the participants during interviews about whether this was true of the students in the GradDipT programme overall. According to them, the programme is perhaps not as culturally diverse as New Zealand society as a whole, but there were members from cultural and linguistic minority groups in the programme (Jenny/Int2, Janice/Int2). The weekly meeting group did not reflect the ethnocultural diversity of the GradDipT programme overall.

Another way in which the discussion group did not mirror the demographics of the larger teacher education programme was in gender. Six of the seven student participants were female, as were both of the associate teachers who participated, both of the university lecturers and myself. Interestingly, none of the women commented on this during their interviews. However, Michael joked that it was a good thing that he “gets along well with women” and said that “it would have been nice not to be the only male” (Michael/Int2).

4.4.3 “We were different”

During the first meeting of the discussion group, as the facilitator was explaining her vision of the project to the students, several questioned her choice to pilot the project with a group of students they didn’t feel were representative of

the group as a whole (FieldNotes-Session1). During their individual interviews, students questioned whether they themselves, or other members of the group, fit the criteria of “having developed good classroom management skills” (see Appendix A – Invitation Letter), and three of the five participants interviewed asked me if I knew more about how they were selected (Jenny/Int1, Janice/Int1, Gabrielle/Int2).

The idea that the group members “loved to talk” was often joked about during the sessions and was also mentioned by some students during their interviews (Jenny/Int2). Jenny commented that “we probably are some of the most vocal people in the course” (Jenny/Int2). Michael commented that “everybody there was quite open” and the facilitators “had a whole bunch of people who were quite happy to discuss what they think” (Michael/Int2). Karen, who was regarded by the others as the quietest member of the group, said that “a lot of those people are very, *very* strong, very vocal people” (Karen /Int1).

In the public forum of the group meeting and group evaluation, several participants spoke about how they felt all preservice teachers could benefit from participating in a similar group. However, in the individual interviews both Michael and Karen expressed some reticence about this:

If you do this on average with the whole class, right, you’re going to get a hugely different outcome. Because, if you did this with a random group, there would be at least half of the people sitting there who would absolutely not be interested in being there. ... But they might be the ones who would benefit the most... (Karen/Int2).

4.4.4 Books and handouts

Among the “logistics” I also asked the students about the book (Clarke, 2003's *Enriching Feedback in the Primary Classroom*) and handouts which they had been given during the first session. Given that the university lecturer had clarified that the students should not feel obliged to read them cover-to-cover, I phrased my question in an open-ended way that didn't imply that they should have read them.

Of the five interviewees, three of the students (Karen, Jenny and Michael) didn't have much of a look. Each gave a slightly apologetic response about having

“meant to” or being too busy. Michael, although he didn’t have time to read himself, commented that having reading available in future years could be beneficial because it “depends on your personality” and some people enjoy having access to reading materials (Michael/Int2).

Janice and Gabrielle both appreciated receiving the print resources. Janice shared that:

I did find the handouts useful although we only seemed to use them as a starting point and we soon went off track and discussed other things – which I think was better than restricting our thoughts and ideas (Janice/Int2).

Gabrielle also enjoyed getting reading materials and “would have liked more.” She said: “I thought we had them only for a week, so I read both of those books very diligently straight after we got them.” But she commented that she found them “not too reflective” which she explained as the books perhaps placing a greater emphasis on “how to” rather than “why” (Gabrielle/Int2).

4.4.5 Facilitation

One area where students had quite different ideas of the group discussion was reflected in their answers to my questions about facilitation. Their differences in opinion about their view of the facilitation that took place, or in some cases, the facilitation that they felt should have taken place, reflect underlying ideas about the purpose of the group and the degree to which it should be modified.

Karen appreciated that: “[The facilitators] always gave us somewhere to start, because that’s all you need really. And then after that, we were off.” (Karen/Int2) Jenny, Gabrielle and Michael all felt that a key role of the facilitator was to make sure that all of the participants were encouraged to contribute and to “draw in” (Jenny/Int2) members of the group who contributed less often to the discussions (Jenny/Int2, Gabrielle/Int2, Michael/Int2). Similarly, Michael felt it was beneficial that the facilitators were there to “whistle back” members, so that no one person dominated the conversation (Michael/Int2).

When speaking about the facilitation Janice felt that it was a positive fact that the group “often went off on slight tangents” yet “we always seemed to come back.” She viewed the flexibility as positive because if it had “been way too structured we would have spent so much time concentrating on just that thing that

other valid points would have been missed” (Janice/Int2). Michael too liked “that there was no really set agenda” and that at every session “when something was brought up at the beginning, it was allowed to develop in whatever way... and of course it can develop in a totally different direction than what you thought” (Michael/Int2).

On the other hand, Jenny commented that she sometimes found herself wishing that the conversation was a little bit more directed, particularly during the earlier sessions: “I’m thinking [the facilitator] has to be in strong control. She was in charge of the research and I was waiting for her to give us the cues.” She explained that she sometimes found herself thinking about interjecting to say: “So shall we talk about -” but said she didn’t “feel it was my place” to say for the whole group “that we should be talking about this.” However, she did caution about the other extreme. She said “if you’d just shown up and you were given bang, bang, bang, bang, these are the purposes” students might feel they “wouldn’t be able to live up to that.” She described a need to find “a medium” or “a balance” in which the facilitator was “definitely not a pure dictator” but was “keeping us on track” (Jenny/Int2).

Gabrielle also felt that the group might have benefited from a slightly more directive style of facilitation. She felt that perhaps the facilitator needed to make comments such as:

‘So we’re focusing on learning’ or ‘What I heard such-and-such say is about this. Doesn’t that relate to ... ?’ ‘Can any of you see a reason how this relates to ... ?’ ... When the conversation begins to go off-track then someone should perhaps suggest: ‘Let’s pull it back ... Let’s analyze what you were actually saying about learning’ (Gabrielle/Int2).

Like Jenny, she did clarify that this need for more structure was a matter of degree and that “too much facilitation might be not good.” But, she thought that the degree of guidance “needs to be *much* more than in the beginning, to get us into it quicker. As we get on maybe it happens less, because we understand how to make those links” (Gabrielle/Int2).

4.5 Views on the Participation of Associate Teachers

4.5.1 General

In the initial conception of the larger project, it was hoped that the discussion group would bring together student-teacher/associate teacher pairs. Although the associate teachers of all seven GradDipTeaching students were invited to participate in the weekly meetings, only two associate teachers opted in. Each teacher attended three of the six weekly sessions, with both teachers present only once, during the fourth session. During the group discussion the associate both commented on, and offered suggestions relating to, the anecdotes shared by students. The teachers also related anecdotes from their own classroom experiences.

During the discussion at the conclusion of the sixth session there seemed to be general agreement that the associate teachers' attendance had been a very valuable element of the project. "Because just having one person here that's giving *that* point of view from experience, and is able to add, it's just helpful" (Gabrielle /GroupEval Session6). This view was also mentioned during the individual interviews. All of the students appreciated the participation of the two associate teachers. Specifically the students appreciated the associate teachers' "experience." Three preservice teachers (Jenny, Janice and Michael) mentioned that the associates offered "a different point of view" (Janice/Int2). Jenny also commented it "would have been cool to broaden more, [the associates'] comments and experience... [it] would have been useful to utilize them more" (Jenny/Int2). Janice viewed that it "was quite nice to have a present teacher's point of view to counteract some of the ideas when we were discussing things." [The associate] would say: "But it doesn't quite work like that because-" (Janice/Int2). In general, the associates seemed to participate in the group on a relatively equal footing with the students, asking questions, offering advice, but not claiming to have "the right answers" (FieldNotes/Session5). However, there were several times during the sessions in which the associates did "counteract," offering what sounded to me (clearly as a rather critical listener) like "cautionary tales" about the consequences of elements such as not finishing the prescribed curriculum, or teaching in ways too different from the school community's accepted norms (FieldNotes/Sessions3&4).

During their individual interviews, two preservice teachers retold anecdotes told by associates. In one case, Jenny questioned whether it was “appropriate” for one of the associate teachers to have told about those times when she feels “she’s only taught herself” because the pupils haven’t been listening (Jenny/Int2). In the other case, Gabrielle (who mentioned several times in her interviews her frustration with reductionist skills-based teaching approaches in Technology, her subject area), was very upset by the associate teacher’s description of a research article. The associate teacher told the group of preservice teachers about an article she had recently read about Mathematics teaching, and disagreed with the article’s suggestion that pupils should spend less time in class doing practice-type exercises such as practicing exam questions. Gabrielle felt strongly that the associate teacher was “trivializing” not just this article but educational research more generally (Gabrielle/Int2).

4.5.2 Caveats

Although all five interviewees seemed to agree that the presence of associate teachers was beneficial, none of the students whose associates hadn’t taken part made any indication that they had wanted *their* associate teacher to take part. I asked about this while presenting my preliminary results to the group. They agreed with my observation that it was “associates”, not “my associate” that was important. As a group, they expressed the opinion that it was important for the associates who participate to have a good idea of the type of project they will be embarking on. The students felt that given a good description of the project in the letter of invitation, participants would “self-select” as they wanted those teachers who participate to be “reflective” (Jenny, Karen, Gabrielle, OralFeedback).

This point had been made emphatically during an interview, by one of the two students whose associate had participated. Karen’s view was that her associate who had participated “was very reflective” (Karen/Int2). She pointed out that the associate has recently spent a year studying at the university and “is into this kind of thing.” She contrasted that with her first associate who she viewed someone as “who’s very much ‘A spade’s a spade.’” Karen suggested that her first associate teacher “would probably be one of those who were like:

‘That bloody meeting, on bloody Thursday... Gotta go again.’ and it just would have become a hassle for her” (Karen/Int2).

When talking about the participation of associate teachers, the students were also very sensitive to the fact that Janice had had a very difficult relationship with her associate teacher. The students realised that if Janice’s associate had accepted the invitation to participate in the discussion group, it would likely have been not only very difficult for Janice, but potentially awkward for the group as a whole. The need for the project organizer to be sensitive to the sometimes complicated relationships between student and associate teachers was described by Jenny who commented that: “ If everything was in a happy ideal world and you were just learning to teach... as in get the kids thinking... and everything else was fine, that would be ok [to have all associates participate] but, there definitely are some dynamics” (Jenny/Int2).

4.5.3 Views of Students Whose Associates Had Participated

Although reaction from students whose associates had not participated was of a uniformly positive nature, the two students whose associate participated (Jenny and Karen) both had more mixed reactions. Their key concern was that they did not feel comfortable expressing themselves freely in the presence of their associate teacher. Jenny commented that:

If [associate] had been there every time then I probably wouldn’t have said some of the things that I did when she wasn’t there. You know, when you do talk about “Ya, my teacher...” or “One of my teachers does that.” You wouldn’t even go there. [haha] You definitely would have rephrased some things (Jenny/Int2).

This idea was echoed by Karen who clarified that even if the comment along the lines of “I saw a teacher do this” was complimentary, she felt uncomfortable saying it with the associate teacher present, as the associate would likely be able to recognize their colleague (Karen/Int2).

However, despite this feeling of being more constrained when their associates were present, both agreed this factor did not outweigh the potential benefit of having associate teachers as part of the group. The two students whose

associates attended the group also felt positively about the involvement of associate teachers in the discussion group in general. Karen said:

I think in the end, having [associate] there was better than not having her there. I mean, we discussed it outside as well, stuff that I'd brought up, she'd bring up again. ... We talked a lot more, we reflected a lot more about my teaching, my associate and I. She'd drop me home after. And we'd often chat on the way home about ideas that had come up. We'd just talk in a bit more depth about them (Karen/Int2).

As well as talking in greater depth, she also felt more comfortable discussing things that she thought the group might disagree on in a one-on-one with her associate.

Jenny, the other student whose associate took part in the project, did not report any change in her relationship with her associate and said it was “unfortunate” that the associate who participated was the one with whom she had the least classes, as she was teaching in the classrooms of five different associate teachers to fulfil various subject-area requirements.

Karen also admitted that having her associate present made her feel “embarrassed” about what she felt was an element of arrogance that she saw in the group. Prefacing her comment with “this is going to sound terrible but” she said:

I found at times the group got a little arrogant. Like, “I saw this person doing this, and it was *wrong*.” It's like ooooo [shocked noise]! And then I had my associate sitting next to me. And I was *embarrassed* that she was hearing that. I mean we're not even beginner teachers yet, and we're getting so arrogant that we're saying [funny voice] “Oh, *everyone* else is doing it wrong!” (Karen/Int2).

She suggested that having associate teachers present might “make people think about what they're saying.” As an observer during the discussion group and also during the interviews I was aware that the student teachers had different underlying assumptions about their role on practicum and views about what they and their associate teachers “should” be doing. For example, during the discussion Michael said several times that a certain pedagogy being discussed was not in line with his associate's classroom. During the interview with me, he said that he viewed himself as “a guest” in his associate's class:

So, if I come into the school, I'm not going to change that school around in six weeks. I have no desire [to]. I see myself as a guest and I want to learn as much as I can as a guest. A lot of people went in [to the practicum] with the perception that "I want to do my thing." But you're a guest. So you've got to first and foremost conform" (Micheal/Int2).

3.5.4 "Not saying"

I hoped that asking participants about what they "weren't saying" or "didn't feel comfortable saying" also allowed me to get another perspective on the participants' view of the group, as well as a glimpse of some of the group dynamics. As outlined above, both Karen and Jenny reported feeling uncomfortable talking about their schools while their associates were present. Only Janice reported that there was "nothing at all" she didn't feel comfortable saying in front of the group (Janice/Int2).

On the other hand, Michael noted that "There were definitely things where I disagreed or whatever with people. But I specifically didn't want to say that." He considered that this might be one consequence of it being a group of women, and the fact there were several very "switched-on" (i.e., passionate) people in the group. He added candidly that "in all honesty, you've got to be careful as a male, they'll shoot you to bits!" (Michael/Int2).

I clarified to Michael and the other interviewees that this line of questioning was based on my observation that the participants rarely disagreed openly with each other during the sessions. I was very aware that this lack of disagreement could be interpreted as a sign of respect for each other, or what they felt was expected in the situation. Also, as an observer who was not participating in the discussion, I might have been overly sensitive to the uncomfortable moments or silences when participants' body language, tone of voice etc. suggested they weren't in agreement with the speaker.

Jenny shared a conversation that she had with her associate during which the associate thought one of the members of the discussion group had been out-of-line when describing "riff raff" students from whom you couldn't expect much. Jenny said that her associate, who felt passionately about educational equity and support for students from different cultural backgrounds, had been "really put out" that no-one had challenged the comments. Jenny described her associate's

decision to “try and change the subject quickly”, a tactic that I observed at other points during the weekly sessions (Jenny/Int2).

Gabrielle described her moments of avoidance mainly as “lots of pulling back” when she wanted “to talk in more depth about the theories and stay on a topic for longer.” However, she described it “not being my place” (Gabrielle/Int2).

Karen spoke at a few points during the interview about not feeling comfortable with what a few people were saying, especially in the first few sessions. Feeling that maybe she just had a “different mentality” to others in the group, she thought it was inappropriate to be “insulting even the school and the teachers.” But she recognized that “that was just because they needed to let off steam, and they probably hadn’t seen anyone to talk about it” (Karen/Int2). She sometimes also discussed ideas that she didn’t want to raise within the group with her associate teacher.

Because there’s stuff in that discussion group that I didn’t feel comfortable saying in front of everyone. I was just thinking: ‘Aw, these nice passionate people are just going to just cut me down, because I don’t agree with that.’ Whereas I didn’t mind saying it to [associate], because even though if she didn’t agree with me, she wouldn’t go ‘No, that’s a *stupid* idea!’ which I thought would happen in the discussion group sometimes (Karen/Int2).

4.6 General Feedback at the Conclusion of the Final Meeting

At the end of the sixth and final session of the discussion group the preservice teachers were asked to comment on the value of the six sessions. They were responding to the facilitator’s question: “Tell me about the value of this, for you.” This five-minute discussion was included as part of my data, as an informal triangulation of my interview findings.

Karen opened the discussion by stating:

I think it’s been very beneficial. I think that on an informal level, we probably do this kind of stuff all the time... But because we don’t see each other as much on Practicum... I think it’s been very beneficial. I think it would be nice for other people to do it as well (Karen/GroupEval).

One of the students in the group (“Susan,” with whom I hadn’t conducted an individual interview) told the group that she had initially been very concerned about the added time commitment. She said that “at the beginning, when I got the

letter I was like: “Argh, this is going to be the *last* thing I need to do! Oh! How am I going to cope?” But she went on to say that “in the end it’s just been a breeze. [...] Probably because it’s been useful it becomes a breeze.” She suggested the group had been worth the investment of time, but that had it been longer than an hour and a half per week, it would have been too great a time commitment.

Discussion of the time commitment being reasonable prompted Susan to speculate about whether meeting fortnightly or even just once during the practicum would still benefit students on practicum (Susan/GroupEval). The idea that meeting together even once would be valuable was strongly supported by Karen (Karen/GroupEval), who had shared with me privately that her first practicum had been “extremely lonely” (Karen/Int2). However, Gabrielle countered this idea by reminding the group that they didn’t get “anywhere near as much learning or feedback, or get the dynamics right until later on” (Gabrielle/GroupEval).

The value of the group being voluntary and not formally assessed came into question when Michael tentatively suggested that the discussion group “could be used for assessing” (Michael/GroupEval). The comment garnered a flurry of light-hearted protest. “Where’s the fun gone?” asked one participant (Karen/GroupEval). “Too much pressure” commented another (Susan/GroupEval). A simultaneous comment of “We’d feel obligated to say stuff” (Karen/GroupEval) led to Michael clarifying simply that the discussions “could give an idea [of a teacher’s performance in the classroom]” which again met protest (Michael/GroupEval). In short, during the group forum the participants agreed that participation in the discussion group project had been both useful and beneficial, but that formal assessment was probably not a good idea.

4.7 Summary of Results – The Feedback Session

Approximately six weeks after the last group meeting I met again with the preservice teachers to present a summary of my analysis. This lunchtime meeting was also an opportunity for the group to get together one last time, and for my supervisor, the group facilitator, to thank the participants once more for having taken part in the project.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I found myself struggling to present the results in a way that summarized, but did not homogenize the individual perspectives presented during the interviews. I aimed to create a summary that would encompass the main ideas expressed by all participants, as well as the ideas that were emphasized by individuals. I decided to give each student a written summary (see Appendix F – Draft Findings). I made it clear to the students that their input on the validity of my interpretation was important and invited them to comment orally, ask questions and make comments directly on the summary sheet. I also told students to feel free to suggest alternate wordings or ways of explaining any of my findings. There was fairly lively discussion during the half-hour session, but few written comments.

The following section therefore serves as a summary of results, but also includes the oral and written feedback provided by the students at the meeting.

4.7.1 Overall impressions of group meetings

Given that the general tone in which the participants had talked about the discussion group was overwhelmingly positive, I decided to open with a selection of descriptions of the participation. Description included:

Beneficial	Awesome	Higher than my expectations
Interesting	Useful	Wonderful
Not stressful	Valuable	Very good
		Fun

To this list one participant suggested we add “welcoming,” but otherwise my description of the overall experience met with general agreement.

4.7.2 Specific benefits of participation

Under the heading “People said they enjoyed/benefited from:” I listed four positive elements mentioned by the participants, with clarifying examples under each heading, as follows:

<p>Getting together Seeing each other during practicum/Catching up Getting to know other participants</p> <p>Listening to the practicum experiences of others. Get Ideas Different Schools/Subject Areas – Interesting Feeling of being in the “same boat”</p> <p>Telling their own experiences Helped to clarify their thinking Get advice/suggestions Feel supported</p> <p>Thinking/Reflecting About other people’s comments/ideas About their teaching on practicum About - -</p>
<p>Table 3 – Extract of Handout given to participants (see Appendix F)</p>

The participants responded positively, but had nothing to add to the first three benefits (Getting together; Listening to the practicum experiences of others, and Telling their own experiences). As explained earlier in this chapter, I hoped to elicit more detail about the fourth category “Thinking/Reflecting” and left blank bullet points at the end (for entire handout see Appendix F – Draft Findings). Only one participant responded in writing, adding “focus” (Gabrielle/WrittenFeedback). The student, who was not interviewed explained to the group that she found that the group “programmed in time” for her to “focus on teaching.” (Susan/WrittenFeedback) On her comments sheet she also wrote “sparking wider issues,” an idea which was not mentioned in the group’s ensuing conversation.

4.7.3 Learning as teachers

Among the three descriptions of types of learning I offered (gaining ideas, evaluating the ideas of others, greater awareness of their teaching), it was “awareness” that the group responded to most emphatically, and one participant underlined this word on her sheet (Janice/WrittenFeedback).

I commented that my understanding based on the interviews was that the type of learning was less about application of new ideas/techniques and more about reflecting and thinking back. This comment on my part was both awkward and unplanned and resulted in a moment of tension in the room. Gabrielle, whose individual interviews suggest that she spent considerable time reading and reflecting about pedagogy during her practicum, was quick to point out that she did try new techniques that were suggested in the readings and in the handouts for the discussion group. However, the rest of the group, in their silence, provided from my perspective a strong, yet tacit agreement that they did not consider the group to be a source of concrete pedagogical techniques to try during their practicum.

The awkward silence about “application” was broken by the seventh student in the group (Grace, who was not interviewed) who wanted to emphasize a positive element of the group for her. She observed that “the way [the group] was fun made it welcoming and a safe environment to get stuff off our chests” (Grace/OralFeedback). On the comments sheet she wrote “safe environment to share, no other” (Grace/ WrittenFeedback). This led other participants to clarify elements of their own learning. Jenny commented that people who hadn’t participated in the group don’t have the same “awareness of taking a step back” (Jenny/OralFeedback), and Janice added that the group had contributed to higher marks on lesson planning assignments (Janice/OralFeedback).

4.7.4 Recommendations for next year

My basic finding, that the group meetings should continue in following years in a similar format, was endorsed by the group. Two issues contemplated by the group for future years were whether it would be beneficial for students to participate in weekly meetings during their first practicum, and the level of involvement of associate teachers.

The group spent about ten minutes discussing whether the voluntary participation in a discussion group would be beneficial for students during their first practicum. Janice proposed that “everyone should participate in a group” (Janice/OralFeedback). Although there was initial agreement to this proposition, Michael reiterated what he had shared during me during the third interview, that participation in this type of group would only be beneficial to students who were

interested in discussing their practice (Michael/ OralFeedback). The idea that individual preservice teachers might view this as an unwanted demand on their time was voiced by one of the participants whom I did not interview (Susan/OralFeedback).

Janice's other suggestion was that the group begin earlier, because it was only by the third session that participants "were able to help each other" (Janice/OralFeedback).

As for the question of associate teacher participation, I explained to the group that from the interviews I conducted it was clear that the contributions of those associates who had participated was greatly appreciated. However none of the participants whose associates did not take part said that they wished that their associates had done so.

Janice, whose difficult relationship with her associate was known to all of the other members of the group made several jokes about how she had good reasons for associates not to participate. On her feedback sheet, under the heading "increased involvement of associate teachers" she wrote in large type "NO THANK YOU!!!!!!" (Janice/WrittenFeedback).

I clarified to the group that I would like to hear a little bit more about how they felt the associates contributed to their experiences. Karen expressed the role of associates as "the voice of moderation" (Karen/OralFeedback). Karen specified that as preservice teachers, "we don't want 'This is how you do it'" (Karen/OralFeedback). Gabrielle appreciated how the associates "acknowledged" their ideas and sometimes provided "a little twist" (Gabrielle/OralFeedback).

4.7.5 Topic of conversation

Susan, who joked that she generally likes structure and organization, commented that she liked that there was "no second guessing what was coming out," and that making the group more structured would lead to "second guessing" the participants' contributions (Susan/OralFeedback).

Gabrielle pointed out that it was not so much structure she wanted more of initially, but that there should be greater focus (Gabrielle/OralFeedback). She explained, as she had in the interview, the she felt the first few sessions would have been better with more guided questions from the facilitators (Gabrielle/Int2). However, the participant who appreciated that there was "no second guessing" felt

that it was up to the group to develop the focus, and that the group had in fact done this over the six sessions (Susan/OralFeedback).

In short, the issue of structure, like the issue of associate teacher involvement did not result in any consensus among the group. In the next chapter (**Chapter 5 – Discussion**), I will explore how these differences in opinion about the participation of associate teachers and the degree of structure may reflect differences in individual conceptions about the purpose of the group, and differences in underlying values and learning style.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The students in this study all expressed the view that participation in the professional development group during their practicum had been a positive experience, and that the group's format had provided opportunities for emotional support as well as a time for reflection and learning. This chapter situates this study's findings within the wider context of teacher learning communities, in both preservice and inservice teacher education. The chapter includes:

- a comparison of the experiences of the preservice teachers in this study to other small-group conversation-based learning opportunities (5.2)
- a discussion of tensions and contradictions in the data (5.3)
- an overview of the limitations of this study and opportunities for further research (5.4)

5.2 Benefits of Participation

5.2.1 Getting together: Creating a supportive community

When asked about their participation in the weekly professional development sessions, the preservice teachers I interviewed were unanimous in their appreciation of the opportunity to meet and get to know each other, and have regular social contact with other preservice teachers during their practica. They viewed the collegial atmosphere of the group to be a safe space in which they could discuss their successes and failures in teaching, and have their ideas and concerns taken seriously. Despite the fact that all of the students were placed at schools that hosted more than one preservice teacher, and that the students had access to an online forum to share their experiences with members of their tutorial groups, they perceived that a weekly face-to-face professional development group provided a form of emotional support that would not otherwise have been available to them.

The idea that teacher professional learning best occurs in an environment of trust and mutual support has been widely promulgated within the literature concerning initial teacher education (Hansen & Jorgensen, 2003; Hoban, 2004; Sim, p. 36) and teacher professional development more generally (Clark, 2001b; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Senese, 2007). According to Fogarty & Pete (2007)

teachers are “social creatures” who value a “collaborative, respectful, mutual and informal climate” in which to learn (p. 20). Teachers will not meaningfully engage in learning activities unless they feel that they are in a “safe environment” where their contributions will be valued and failure will be tolerated (York-Barr, Sommie, Ghere, & Montie, 2001, p. 155).

Within the New Zealand context, Hanson & Jorgenson (2003) surveyed graduating students of Massey University’s Graduate Diploma in Secondary Teaching about their opinions regarding the “community focus” of their programme in teacher education. The researchers found that the GradDipT Secondary students highly valued a “supportive climate,” including membership in a “tutor group” and completing learning tasks in small groups (p. 163). They suggest that teacher candidates are “challenged in ways that they have not been before” during their preservice programmes (including, but not limited to, the practica), and they argue that effective secondary teacher education must provide a sufficiently nurturing environment to allow for the personal development that will allow preservice teachers to develop the self-confidence, creativity and resilience to become effective teachers of secondary students (p. 168). Sim (2006) found similar results in nine years of data from Australian preservice secondary teachers whose teacher education was modelled as a “community of practice.”

Although some authors have supported the conclusion that a safe, personally supportive environment is a necessary condition for teacher professional learning (Fogarty & Pete, 2007; Graven, 2004; Senese, 2007), other authors have also explored the idea that an overly-supportive social environment may have drawbacks (Farr Darling, 2001; York-Barr et al., 2001). For example, in their recent review of professional learning and development practices to support pupil learning, Timperley et al. (2008) note that mutual support in communities can be a “double-edged sword” (p. 203). Citing examples from recent international research, they note that collegial interactions involving high levels of trust and respect sometimes result in ineffective professional development, as participants may support each other in maintaining status quo teaching practices, or in reinforcing each others’ discriminatory beliefs about students. This tension, between a professional learning community’s supportive

function, and its role in challenging participants' beliefs, was also present in this study and will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

5.2.2 Listening: Being in the same boat and gaining new ideas

Each of the weekly sessions was constructed around the sharing of anecdotes from the preceding week's teaching. As evidenced in Chapter 4, one of the key aspects that students valued about participating in the discussion group was the opportunity to hear about the practicum experiences of their peers. In the individual interviews, students talked about two broad types of reasons that they valued this element so highly.

Firstly, hearing that their fellow group members were experiencing some of the same challenges helped the preservice teachers to recognize that the problems they faced weren't due to personal failure or incompetence. The idea that other articulate and hard-working students (who had all been chosen for the group based on having been very "successful" in the first practicum) also experienced times of frustration seemed to allow students to more easily accept that teaching involves both successes and failures, and helped them to feel less isolated and/or self-critical. That the feeling of "being in the same boat" can promote a certain degree of personal empowerment is particularly prominent in the research literature surrounding the use of in-person and online discussion forums for students in their first and/or early years of teaching (Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Romano, 2008).

Secondly, participants explained that hearing the experiences of their peers allowed them to gain new "ideas." By "ideas" the students referred to elements such as teaching activities that their peers had tried with their classes, as well as more generalized approaches to challenges such as motivating their students, classroom management and the groups' stated foci of using formative assessment strategies and taking pupil thinking into account.

Although the seven preservice teachers who participated in the weekly sessions had access to a very wide variety of sources of knowledge about teaching (their prior university coursework, their associate teachers, as well as copious print and online resources), the students clearly valued listening to their peers as a highly legitimate and very valuable source of information about teaching. Rogers and Babinski (2002) relate similar findings with beginning teachers to Vygotsky's

Zone of Proximal Development. Teachers in Rogers & Babinski's groups viewed each other as having slightly different levels of expertise with regards to a particular domain of teaching, or particular context and therefore viewed others in the group as "slightly more expert" than themselves (p. 85). In some cases the novice teachers found the information of their peers to be of greater relevance than that of their "expert" mentor teachers.

The preservice teachers in this study mentioned that they particularly valued hearing about the experiences of other preservice teachers engaged in teaching at different schools, and in different subject areas than their own. It is noteworthy that during the feedback session all participants agreed that the cross-disciplinary nature of the group should be maintained in future years of the project. Within the literature concerning teacher professional development, it has been suggested that composition (i.e., the homo- or heterogeneity of the group's members) should reflect the aims or purposes of the group (York-Barr et al., 2001). Broadly speaking, whereas a very homogeneous group generally results in more focused expertise and the production of a more in-depth body of knowledge, more heterogeneous groupings generally give rise to "more creative" or "more innovative" solutions to problems shared by the group (York-Barr et al., 2001). For example, Erin (Int2) hypothesized that the group was able to stay more focused on the larger topic of "[pupil] learning" rather than getting "stuck" on subject-area details, which Gabrielle (Int2) felt were adequately discussed in the regular course-work of the GradDipT programme.

5.2.3 Telling anecdotes: Clarifying thinking, seeking support and advice

In addition to listening to their peers, the students in this group welcomed the opportunity to tell the other group members anecdotes from their practice. This allowed them to articulate their concerns (an opportunity they valued in its own right) and also to seek support, and in some cases advice, from others. Students felt that this was a unique opportunity, different from other forums in which they might discuss their practice with peers (e.g., informally at their practicum sites or in the online forums that existed for their tutorial groups).

The expression "clarifying thinking" is an expression I borrowed from Erin, who told me in her interview prior to the group's first meeting, that she "thinks by talking" and later, in her second interview, that putting her thoughts

into words during the weekly sessions often helped her to better understand the problems she was trying to solve (Erin/Int1&2).

Within the literature on teacher learning communities there is a recognition that teachers often benefit from planned opportunities to articulate and make their (often tacit) knowledge explicit. Rogers and Babinski (2002) refer to this as “thinking out loud” (p. 59). Likewise, Loughran (2006) notes that writing or telling anecdotes from practice can help preservice teachers to “see” situations more clearly, allowing them to make meaning from complex educational situations and also to “come to know themselves” as teachers (p.121). The preservice teachers were very interested in hearing about other subject areas, and other schools, and thus provided an attentive audience for their peers to relive and restructure their experiences through conversation.

The group’s heterogeneity may also have been a factor that contributed to students’ feelings of ease in discussing the challenges they faced on practicum. Senese (2007) suggests that practicing teachers may be more apt to fully describe elements of their teaching practice to those who teach in different subject areas, schools, or grade levels than their own because teachers are less likely to feel that their subject-area knowledge or competence more generally is being challenged. Although this may be less of an issue for preservice teachers, for whom expertise may not be expected, the students felt that they could share both their frustrations and successes. Senese (2007) notes as well that teachers in mixed groups must “explain more of what they do and why they do it because their colleagues are honestly unfamiliar with the answers” (p. 53).

Along with helping them to think through situations, the students appreciated that telling anecdotes contributed to the feelings of “personal support” discussed previously. Although the participants were able to share their frustrating experiences with friends and spouses outside of teaching, they valued being able to tell others who were currently experiencing the challenges of preservice teaching themselves. And, although students also had the opportunity to communicate with peers via the online forum, this was viewed as “less personal” (Erin/Int2).

Within the literature on teaching and learning there has been growing recognition that teaching and learning are not only concerned with knowledge, cognition, and skill but can be understood as “emotional practices” in which

teachers must constantly “reach into the past store of their own emotional experience” to recognize and respond to the emotions of others (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1037). Zembylas (2004, 2007) and others have used the concept “emotional work” to describe the way in which teachers are required both to manufacture the “appropriate” emotions in a given circumstance (e.g., caring, concern, patience) as well as to mask other emotions (e.g., fear, frustration or anger). This negotiation of relationships in public space can be a source of stress and negative emotion for teachers (Hargreaves, 2001). As preservice teachers, the participants in this study were involved in multiple relationships with pupils, teachers, administrators and other members of their school communities. Navigating these relationships as a newcomer to a school community can require substantial “emotional work” in the early months and years of teaching (Rogers & Babinski, 2002).

Among the participants in this study it was Janice, who had a very strained personal relationship with her associate teacher, who was the most emphatic in her individual interviews about the degree to which she appreciated being able to “moan to” other group members about the frustrating elements of her practicum (Janice/Int2). Others had reservations about this aspect of the group, however. In their individual interviews Karen, Erin and Gabrielle expressed some concern that this venting of frustration (what Susan called “getting things off our chests”) could at times be unprofessional (especially with associate teachers present), and were aware that it took time away from other types of conversation (Susan/FeedbackSession; Karen/Erin/Gabrielle/Int2).

Some participants highly valued being able to seek advice, or alternate solutions, from peers. In my interviews conducted prior to the beginning of the weekly meeting, Janice felt that one of the key advantages of participation would be the ability to have fellow participants help her solve problems by suggesting “try this, try that” or “do this, don’t do that” (Janice/Int1). And after the completion of the project, Erin felt that one of the best elements of participation was that they “had their problems solved or been given more suggestions than they could come up with [alone]” (Erin/Int2). As an observer, I noted the way in which participants tended to phrase their suggestions and advice tentatively, avoiding the pitfall noted by Clarke’s (2001a), who cautions that advice, especially unsolicited, “often includes implied judgment and criticism” (p. 179).

5.2.4 Thinking and reflecting: Individual learning in a social context

The students in this study spoke both in their interviews, and when together as a group, about the fact that participation in the Thursday afternoon sessions “programmed in” (Susan/WrittenFeedback) time to think and/or reflect about their teaching practice, and educational issues more generally. And although ideas of “thinking” and “reflecting” are arguably in some ways inseparable from the context and/or activities discussed above (e.g., getting together, listening to, and telling anecdotes), some participants did seem to view thinking or reflecting as a distinct activity that they engaged in at the weekly meetings. And, perhaps most importantly, students felt that participation in the professional development project not only improved their ability to think in certain ways, but that in some cases this thinking was not limited to the weekly sessions, but extended into their daily lives while on practicum.

Within teacher education there is a recognition that what Darling-Hammond (2006) and others have termed “learning to think like a teacher” is not a simple process, in part because teaching is such a complex activity (p. 34). Yet, preservice teachers are expected not only to take meaning from these complex situations, but to develop the ability to “to justify, critique, and evaluate their teaching practice” (University of Waikato School of Education, 2004) and develop “an emerging personal, professional philosophy of teaching and learning” (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007b). The teaching practicum thus becomes not a simple opportunity to “practice” good teaching, but also an opportunity to develop deeper understanding of one’s emerging teaching practice and an opportunity to view one’s own teaching in light of larger-scale ideas and principles.

As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), many programmes of teacher education internationally (including the programme in which this study’s participants were enrolled) include among their objectives having students develop the metacognitive disposition of being able to reflect on their own practice (Bansford, Derry, et al. 2005, University of Waikato, 2004). It appears that the pedagogy explored in this thesis (the weekly meetings) was effective in this regard, as all of the participants interviewed felt that one of the principal benefits of was that participation provided an opportunity for reflection, and improved their ability to think reflectively.

Within their individual interviews, final evaluation and feedback session, the preservice teachers in this project clearly communicated that both listening to, and responding to anecdotes during the weekly sessions allowed them to “take a step back” (Janice/Int2) and think critically about their teaching. For example, both Karen and Erin told me that they often found themselves thinking about what they would do in a situation described by their peers (Karen/Int1, Erin/Int2). According to Grossman (2005), in her review of pedagogical approaches in teacher education in the United States, advocates of so called “case methods” in education feel that discussion and analysis of real-life scenarios allow preservice teachers unparalleled opportunities to “think pedagogically, to reason through classroom dilemmas, and to explore possible actions” (p. 439). However, as Grossman, (2005) and more recently, Ben-Peretz & Kupferberg (2007) have noted, more research must be undertaken as to the specifics of how preservice teachers learn through cases, and must also consider how preservice teachers’ case-based learning affects their teaching practice.

As well as reflecting about how they might act in a given teaching situation, a second type of thinking/reflecting in which the students engaged during the weekly sessions involved reflection about their own teaching, in what might be described as a self-evaluative manner. Both Janice and Karen felt this ability to think more critically led to being better able to complete their lesson planning (Janice/GroupFeedback) and lesson evaluation (Karen/Int1) assignments that were required as part of their course-work. Erin and Gabrielle felt that this ability to reflect allowed them to stay more focused on what their pupils were learning (Erin/Int2, Gabrielle/Int2). In short, each of the students spoke in some way about the way in which the weekly sessions provided opportunities to reflect on their practice within schools as being a key benefit to participating.

To summarize, the students in this study reported that weekly participation was beneficial in that it allowed them to: 1) Get together with other preservice teachers during their practicum 2) Listen to the experiences of others 3) Tell others about their experiences and 4) Reflect about teaching. The following section places these findings within the literature on teacher learning.

5.3 Theorizing the Learning of the Preservice Teachers

5.3.1 The issue of methodology

One of the main challenges in writing this thesis has been in attempting to understand the learning of the preservice teachers in a wider theoretical context without oversimplifying my data, or shoehorning it into a particular model of teacher learning.

At the conclusion of the analysis phase of this study, I felt very comfortable with my conclusions about *how* the participants felt they had learned. That said, I had some lingering uncertainty about the degree to which I could summarize *what* they thought they had learned (and indeed, the degree to which these can be separated).

In part, this arises from the interpretive stance of this research. I did not go to the students asking “Did you learn X or Y?” Rather, I asked open-ended questions about their experience of having attended the six sessions, and what they felt the benefits had been. So, as I returned to the preservice teachers with my preliminary results I still had some unanswered questions about their learning. And, as can be seen in the handout I gave to participants during the Feedback Session (Appendix F – Draft Findings), I left open a series of bullet points under the heading Thinking/Reflecting, with the hopes that the students might help to clarify what they had been reflecting *about*. In hindsight this focus on trying to “nail down” what the students had learned to a simple set of facts belies the complex nature of teacher learning, as discussed in the opening section of my literature review (Chapter 2 – Literature Review).

5.3.2 Learning as a sociocultural practice

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) in their review of teacher learning remind readers that the knowledge of teaching that has been researched and described in the research literature is only one facet of knowledge about teaching (which they term “Knowledge-from-Practice”). And indeed, if I had solely attempted to figure out what “techniques” or “theories” the students had learned I might have completely lost sight of the fact that the preservice teachers were *creators* of knowledge, as they shared, discussed and debated elements of their teaching. This dialogue resulted in the creation of both individual and shared knowledge, which

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) described as “Knowledge-in-Practice,” and it does not easily lend itself to simple descriptions or categorizations.

Similarly Bell & Gilbert (1996) view teacher development as going beyond simple acquisition of propositional knowledge (although the acquisition of new theoretical ideas and teaching suggestions can obviously be an important objective of teacher development programmes). In studying the development of teachers in the *Learning in Science Programme*, Bell & Gilbert (1996) described the teachers learning in the project as consisting of social development, personal development and professional development. They posit that development cannot occur in one aspect without development in the others.

The preservice teachers in my study spoke clearly about having experienced social development, i.e., “working with, and relating to, other teachers and students to reconstruct the socially agreed knowledge” (Bell & Gilbert, 1999, p. 34). The education students in my study also spoke about what could be understood as personal development. They clearly described the way in which the weekly sessions gave them a forum to “attend to feelings” about teaching and being a teacher, which Bell & Gilbert describe as an integral part of teacher learning. The preservice teachers also did make some references to professional learning when they talked about “gaining ideas” for tools and techniques they could try in their own classrooms. It may be worth noting at this point that although the weekly meetings were designed to focus on two pedagogies (“taking into account pupil thinking” and “formative assessment”) the bulk of the students’ feedback about what they learned involved the first of these goals. In fact, some of the students expressed concern that it would have been stressful had they been asked to attempt particular assessment techniques during their practicum. As noted in the literature review, there is significant evidence to suggest that many preservice teachers feel a certain need to conform to the teaching that they observe in their associates’ classrooms (Hoban, 2004; McGee, 1996).

To summarize, the data indicates that the preservice teachers involved in this study strongly agreed that participating in a weekly conversation group was a highly positive experience, and provided them with opportunities to further their professional growth as teachers. In their individual interviews and group

evaluation sessions the participants spoke first and foremost about the *process* by which they learned (the sharing of anecdotes about practice). In addition, the students felt that the weekly sessions constituted a safe and collaborative environment in which they could articulate, debate and reflect upon their experiences in their schools. And indeed, the *product* of their learning involved both social and personal elements, with the group discussions in the small community of participants favouring, and often leading to, new insights on the personal level. This outcome joins the thinking of Vásquez (2006) and other sociocultural theorists who speak of learning “proceeding from a sociocultural (intermental) to an individual (intramental) level of organization” (p. 36). However, as in any community, whether it be that of the students of this study, or in the larger community in which they did their *practica*, contradictions in viewpoints led to a certain number of tensions, and these will be discussed in the following section.

5.4 Tensions and Contradictions

5.4.1 Participation of associate teachers

Six weeks after the conclusion of the practicum I met with the preservice teachers involved in this project both to thank them, and to gain feedback about my analysis up to that point. I told the group that one issue I wanted to explore further had to do with their thinking concerning the participation of associate teachers in future years of the project. Firstly, I noted that when speaking in general terms, there was agreement that the participation of Karen and Erin’s associate teachers (who each attended three of the six sessions) had been valuable, as they contributed what the students felt was a different point of view, that Gabrielle termed “the point of view of experience” (Gabrielle/GroupEvalSession6).

The idea that preservice teachers think of more experienced teachers as a valuable source of information is hardly surprising. What I found more interesting was that, as previously noted, at no point during any of the interviews or group discussions did any of the participants whose associates had not taken part express the wish that *their* associate had participated. Although this was what I would have expected for Janice, whose strained relationship with her associate

teacher had made her practicum in many ways a quite negative experience, I wished to better understand why the other preservice teachers did not necessarily want their own associate teachers to be involved.

On a practical level, part of the preservice teachers' reluctance to have their associate teachers involved is likely the simple recognition that their associate teachers are very busy. Not having sufficient time to work with preservice teachers was a significant concern expressed by New Zealand teachers surveyed in 2005 by Greenwood, Copley, Mikaere-Wallis, and Fa'afoi (see Rivers, 2006). The researchers found that difficulty finding time to talk to preservice teachers was particularly common among teachers working in secondary schools. Within the context of this study, there was clearly reluctance among the preservice teachers to add attendance at a weekly meeting to the other responsibilities of their busy associates.

However, perhaps even more revealing is the idea the students suggested that, regardless of time constraints, only certain "types" of associate teacher were desirable from their perspective. In her doctoral research concerning the secondary practicum, Hoben (2007) noted that secondary associate teachers differ not only in their openness to new learning but also in the degree to which they promote inquiry and reflection in their work with preservice teachers. It is clear that the students in my study had an awareness of their associates' approaches to teaching, as well as their approach to their work with preservice teachers. For example, in her interview, Karen felt that her associate teacher during the first practicum was not "the kind of person" that would have enjoyed the weekly meetings, in contrast to the associate who had participated (Karen/Int1). Karen noted that this teacher had taken courses at the university, and was interested in educational research more generally (Karen/Int1). During the group discussion the preservice teachers appeared to agree that being "reflective" was an important quality for associate teachers to have if participating in the group. The students felt that associate teachers, if provided with a letter outlining the aims and goals of the group, would be able to "self-select" as to whether they would be interested.

One final issue to consider with regards to the participation of associate teachers is whether the preservice teachers felt that joint participation influenced the mentoring they received. In the letter inviting associate teachers to participate in the weekly sessions, it was hoped that associate teachers would benefit from

receiving “support for their mentoring” of the preservice teacher (see Appendix B – Invitation Letter to Associate Teachers). From Karen’s perspective, having her associate teacher participate did contribute favourably to their personal and professional relationship. She shared that her associate drove her home from several sessions, and that they continued discussing ideas in greater depth that had been raised during the session (Karen/Int1). This was not true for Erin, who reported that given that she was working with five different associate teachers, she had unfortunately had very little time to meet and discuss with the teacher who had participated in the weekly meetings.

Clearly, the need to fulfill subject-area teaching requirements can be seen as another constraint that may in some cases further reduce the already limited amount of time that preservice teachers have to discuss their practice with associates. Perhaps inviting multiple associates to participate in even a small number of sessions (for example, asking associates to participate for a single session) might allow for the more professional dialog that preservice teachers felt occurred with experienced teachers present. Alternately, some sessions could be conducted with just preservice teachers, with associates present at others, allowing both for the associate teachers’ contribution, and for the candidness of the discussion of when associates were not present.

5.4.2 Views of structure, focus and facilitation

During my interviews with the preservice teachers in this project I spent some time asking them about what I termed “logistics.” Although my original intention was pragmatic, to gather preservice teacher feedback that might be useful in future years of the project, their answers to my questions were often revealing about what elements of the group they most valued and felt should be continued. Although there was general agreement on some issues, other logistical elements led to debate during the final group feedback session that I feel are illustrative of certain tensions involving the groups’ function and format.

As was seen in Chapter 4, one important point of discussion that the students valued as a group was that participation did not add additional stress or pressure to their practica. For example, when discussing the book they had been given as optional reading, both the students who had referred to it (Janice and Gabrielle) and those who had not (Karen, Erin and Michael) felt that that it was important that the readings were voluntary. And the students also valued the fact

that although the group's facilitator had given a handout with pedagogies that can be used for formative evaluation of pupils, there was no requirement to try any particular type of these activities during their teaching practicum. This was a particularly important fact for Michael, who cautioned that some of the pedagogies discussed weren't in line with practices in his associate's classroom (Michael/Int2). He felt that some other preservice teachers are overly eager to try new ideas, without an appreciation of being a "guest" in their associates' classrooms (Michael/Int2). Taken together with Karen's suggestions that at times the group was "arrogant" in critiquing practices at schools, despite "not being even beginning teachers," I feel there was some tension in the group about the degree to which each participant wanted, or felt obligated, to try teaching in ways different from their associates.

Interestingly, during the final group evaluation session, Michael asked about whether the group could perhaps be used as a means of formal evaluation of preservice teachers. The six other participants seemed somewhat shocked by this suggestion and felt that if the group were used as an evaluative tool, it would no longer be "fun" (Karen/GroupEvaluation) and would be "too much pressure" (Susan/GroupFeedback). Without further discussion it is difficult to tell whether Michael's suggestion was indicative of a desire to receive some type of academic credit for the time that he and others had contributed, or that the discussion represented a more authentic, or simply less onerous form of evaluation than written assignments. Clarke (2001a) argues that all "good conversation" is voluntary and that "mandated conversation" (when teachers are required to participate in professional learning communities) is far less likely to lead to professional learning (p. 177) than when teachers choose to examine elements of their practice on their own. That said, Timperley et al.'s (2008) recent review suggests that in terms of pupil learning, it is not so much whether professional development programmes are voluntary or compulsory, but whether the teachers involved engaged with the learning process at some stage (p. 72).

In discussing the length of the project (six meetings during the seven week practicum), Janice suggested that perhaps the group could have started earlier, suggesting that there was a progression over the six weeks of the project. The idea that meeting together even once during the practicum would have been valuable was brought up by Karen, who as already mentioned, found her first practicum very lonely (Karen/GroupEval&Int1). Gabrielle countered this idea by

reminding the group that they didn't get "anywhere near as much learning... or get the dynamics right until later on" (Gabrielle/OralGroupEval).

When asked about the size of the group, the students all felt that its size of seven student participants allowed for things to be "personal" (Janice/Int2) and allowed for ideas to be "bounced around" (Karen/Int1), or what Gabrielle termed having "interplay" (Gabrielle/Int2). So, clearly the group valued not simply telling or listening, but the debate and dialog that led to new ideas. As discussed earlier in this chapter, students felt that the cross-curricular make-up of the group was beneficial. It allowed them to see issues happening within their practicum classroom from the perspective of students teaching different subject areas, and at different types of schools. For both Gabrielle and Erin, this helped the topic of conversation remain more focussed on "learning" (Gabrielle/Int2, Erin/Int2), but this issue of the group's focus was the source of tension in the group as well.

During the group feedback session I shared that during the individual interviews, some of the participants (Erin and Gabrielle) thought that the weekly sessions might have been improved by a slightly more directive style of facilitation, especially during the earlier sessions. However, during the group evaluation, when I brought up this point, other participants felt that this narrowing of focus would have resulted in what Susan referred to as "second guessing" what the participants were saying (Susan/ GroupEvaluation). This suggests to me that the preservice teachers highly valued the fact that the weekly sessions were structured around their concerns, and less so around the issues that the preservice teacher educators, and/or associate teachers felt were most important. However, a tension clearly exists between making participants feel that their dialogue is focussed enough to promote learning, while at the same time not being strictly controlled by an outside agenda such that it is not responsive to the concerns of the participants.

5.4.3 The Paradox of reflective practice

Perhaps my greatest insight during this project has been an appreciation of the complexity of learning to teach, and the degree to which some of the conceptual tensions which I identified are not easily answered by thinking about them as "either-or" propositions.

I first began to think about the idea of “paradoxes” in response to York-Barr et al. (2001)’s description of several “paradoxes of reflective practice.” They argue that effective school-based professional development must often bring together qualities that at their extremes would be contradictory. They identify five primary tensions in projects designed to foster reflective practice. They argue that: 1) “There must be enough **vision and direction** for participants to know where the initiative is headed and why, as well as enough **flexibility** to allow participants to shape the initiative and make it personally meaningful.” 2) “There must be enough **design and structure** for the process to get underway as well as enough **flexibility and creativity** to allow ongoing adjustments that support an emergent learning process.” 3) “There must be enough **support and encouragement** for participants to feel safe as well as enough **pressure and challenge** to promote divergent thinking.” 4) “There must be acknowledgment of the **uncertainty, ambiguity, and value of practice**... as well as regard for the clarity of high-hard-ground knowledge reported in the **research literature**.” 5) “There must be enough focus on **individual learning and growth needs** as well as attention to the **learning and growth needs of the organization**” (York-Barr et al., 2001, pp. 146-146, my emphasis).

This idea of paradoxes has been further discussed within the context of teacher education by Loughran (2006), who explores the way in which Wilkes (1998), Palmer (1998), Berry (2004) and Senese (2002) have made use of the idea of tensions, contradictions or paradoxes to guide their practice as teacher educators. Loughran (2006) suggests that because in teaching “there is no recipe or formula for how best to deal with a given situation,” at times teacher educators need to “hold on to tension, by purposefully keeping opposites in balance” (p.72).

As previously mentioned, the students involved in this project clearly wanted to talk in a safe and emotionally supportive environment, but they also wanted to be challenged to think in new ways. They wanted the weekly sessions to be somewhat unstructured and informal, yet at the same time wanted some direction from the group’s facilitators. They wanted to consider their own experiences, and wanted those experiences to be viewed as a valid source of learning, yet at the same time they valued the contribution of more experienced associate teachers. The participants were open to discussing teaching practices that were not used by their associate teachers, but recognized that their teaching

must to a certain degree comply with the expectations of their associates, and larger school communities.

In short, if this type of professional development is to be successful, both participants and facilitators must be conscious of the complicated and sometimes conflicting dynamics that exist in learning to teach, and attend to the “creative tensions” that develop in a learning community.

5.5 Afterthoughts and Opportunities for Further Research

The participants’ reception to my summary of research was, I believe, one of general agreement with my findings. I took time and care to develop a relationship with the participants during the interviews, and as an observer at the weekly sessions. The semi-structured nature of the conversations allowed participants to return to issues they felt were important, and also allowed me to seek clarifications. However, the preservice teachers themselves were aware of some limitations of my study, which they discussed both as a group, and during their individual interviews.

The main limitation according to the students concerned the generalizability or transferability of my finding to other groups of preservice teachers. As explained in Chapter 3 (Methods), the seven students who participated in the pilot year of the practicum discussion group had been selected by the Secondary Practicum Coordinator of the School of Education based on having been successful on their first practicum. Often students invited, seven chose to participate. The degree to which this group was representative of the larger cohort of preservice teachers was questioned by Michael, Erin and Karen during their interviews who focussed on the idea that the pilot year participants were “vocal” people (Erin/Int2, Karen/Int1) who were “happy to discuss what they think” (Michael/Int2). This issue of generalizability with voluntary groups of preservice teachers is raised by Hamre & Oyler (2004) who conducted a highly successful weekly “collaborative dialog group” for preservice teachers over four years. They remind the reader that students who volunteer for an extra weekly seminar are clearly “exceptionally motivated” and show a greater depth of commitment than might be expected from a random grouping of preservice teachers (Hamre & Oyler, 2004, p. 157).

This study also shares limitations in terms of generalizability with other small-scale case studies in teacher education. Both Cameron & Baker (2004) and Zeichner and Conklin (2005), who conducted comprehensive reviews of teacher

education research (of New Zealand and the United States respectively), provide significant cautions about the generalizations made based on small-scale studies of various courses, or individual pedagogies in teacher education. That said, I hope that the findings of my study will be useful on a local level, and that themes and issues I have raised might be recognizable to others within wider educational contexts.

The clearest challenge to validity in this study is the length of time that has elapsed between the collection of data, analysis, and the writing of this thesis. As the reader may have noted, four years elapsed between the original collection of the data, and the completion of this thesis, something that Cresswell, Guba & Lincoln, and other authorities in qualitative methodology quoted in Chapter 3 would likely not condone. I managed, however, to resist the temptation to make substantive changes to Chapter 4, the only chapter that was written during my tenure in New Zealand. I stand behind the authenticity of the narrative that chapter presents. If an upside to this situation exists, it is that this experience did provide me with the opportunity to do what Janice called “taking a step back” and seeing this project with “new eyes” (Janice/Int2). As the study began I was immersed in the world of academic research, and the New Zealand cultural context. The remainder of this thesis has been written while working as an intermediate teacher in Canada, which has allowed me to draw on a much wider body of literature and experience, including my own participation in an eight-week professional programme that shared many of the positive features of the group described in this thesis.

As a preliminary study, my analysis was focussed on the preservice teachers’ perceptions of the weekly discussion group with a view to shaping future incarnations of the group. As such, it leaves open many possibilities for future research. This current study was rooted in interpretive methodology, and used grounded theory to analyse data thematically. At times however, I found myself drawn to the issue of language – both mine and that of the preservice teachers. Over the course of this study I found myself increasingly interested in the way students talked about their learning, the words they used, and how this language reflected their conceptions of their own learning, as well as that of their pupils. Taking another look at the interview data and using other forms of discourse or conversation analysis might also prove highly interesting.

I feel this study has answered a critical first question: Would a series of voluntary weekly professional development meetings be viewed by Secondary GradDipT students as time well spent, during an otherwise busy practicum? It appears that the answer to this question is yes, which opens the door to a wide range of studies of this pedagogy.

This study does, however, leave many questions unanswered. Perhaps the most obvious avenue for future research is to investigate the content of the weekly sessions. What did the preservice teachers talk about? Did talk change over time? How? Why? Also, this study did not broach the experiences of the other two groups of participants – the associate teachers and the university lecturers. What were their impressions? What did they learn? Was there improved mentoring? Improved teaching? Improved pupil learning?

Finally, having developed a relationship with the participants of the group, I can't help but wonder about what the participants in this study encountered in their early years of teaching. How did they translate their learning from this group, and from initial teacher education more generally, into their classroom teaching? Did they maintain their focus on pupil thinking and pupil learning? Did they find supportive forums in which to continue the discussions begun in this project? I hope so.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been the investigation of a pilot project that saw the formation of a weekly voluntary discussion-based professional development group for preservice teachers and their associates during the second seven-week practicum of the one-year Graduate Diploma in Teaching (GradDipT - Secondary) at the University of Waikato, in Hamilton New Zealand.

This project adopts the view that learning is an inherently social enterprise, and that conversation can be a means of joint knowledge construction in communities of teachers. Grounded in interpretive methodology, this study focused on the experiences of the seven preservice teachers participants. Data generated over the course of the practicum included qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with four participants prior to the first of the weekly sessions, notes recorded as an observer at the weekly sessions, the transcript of a brief discussion at the conclusion of the last session, and individual interviews with five of the seven participants. These data were analyzed to reveal common themes among the participants about the values of participating in the sessions, and about the format the group should take in future years. My findings were presented to the group of preservice teachers, and their feedback about my results indicated agreement with my findings.

Participants in the group discussions identified a number of features of the discussion group and interviews that they found helpful. Chief among them were:

- being able to hear about the experiences of other preservice teachers
- being able to tell others about their teaching while on practicum
- being able to seek advice and potential solutions to problems
- a sense of personal connection and emotional support from group membership

Similar to other teacher learning communities described within the research literature, the participants in this group reported that the weekly conversations made them more aware of their teaching, and allowed them to see situations in their own classrooms from a different perspective.

There was general agreement that the relatively small size of the group (seven members) and its interdisciplinary make-up were valuable features of the group. The small size allowed all members to participate in conversation, and

diversity of subject areas allowed the discussion to focus on shared concerns around formative assessment and gaining an understanding of their pupils' thinking.

The views expressed about the role of the associate teachers in the weekly sessions were somewhat more contentious and stimulated frank exchanges during both the discussion with the facilitator and during my post-session interviews. Although all seven of the participants' associate teachers had been invited to participate in the weekly sessions, only two opted to do so, each attending only three of the six sessions. While the contributions of the two associates who participated were judged to be largely beneficial, few if any of the participants whose associates did not attend any of the weekly discussions expressed regret over their absence. The participants suggested not all associate teachers are equally oriented towards reflection or inquiry, and that when preservice teachers did not have a positive relationship with their associate this type of weekly meeting would place a considerable strain.

Although the preservice teachers in this study concluded that participating in the weekly sessions had been useful, and did not add additional stress to their practicum, two of the five preservice teachers suggested that I should be cautious in extending this finding to conclude that *all* students in the GradDipT – Secondary programme would feel similarly. In part, the students in this group were aware that they had been selected for the pilot year of the programme based on teaching success during their first practicum and they were not necessarily representative of the larger group of students. The participants suggested that not all students in their programme were similarly disposed to reflection, and therefore might be less interested in this type of weekly discussion.

That said, I strongly support the contention that such a weekly discussion group shows the potential to be an effective pedagogy for preservice teachers to learn about their teaching. And, when participation is limited to voluntary participants interested in this type of activity, the benefits of the weekly discussion strongly outweigh the time required to participate.

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Appendix A – Invitation Letter to Participants

Associate Professor
Xxxx XXXXXXXXX
Department of Professional
Studies in Education
School of Education
Te Kura Toi Tangata
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand

Phone +64 7 838 XXXX
www.waikato.ac.nz/education
email: xxxxx@waikato.ac.nz



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

19 July, 2004

Dear [preservice teacher],

I am writing to invite you to be involved in a research and development project, The Theorising of Practice on Practicum Research and Development Project, during the second practicum in August / September, 2004. This research and development project is investigating the learning of secondary preservice teachers on their second practicum. The research is investigating how secondary preservice teachers theorise or explain their teaching practices which they are using in their placement school, and in particular, taking into account students' thinking and formative assessment.

You have been selected by myself and Bev Cooper, the Secondary Teaching Practice Coordinator, on the basis of a successful first practicum during semester A, that is, you have developed good classroom management skills in the first practicum and identified by Bev Cooper, as 'not at risk'. Your associate teacher in your placement school will also be invited if you accept this invitation.

Involvement in this research and development project will mean:

- using the two identified pedagogies (taking into account students' thinking and formative assessment) during the time of the practicum.
- attending the 1.5 hour weekly meetings during each week of the second practicum (in August and September, 2004), at a local school, in after-school hours. At this meeting you will be given professional support for your teaching.
- agreeing to the group discussions being audiotaped for transcription.
- reading and giving feedback on the transcripts of the meetings and draft research analysis, if you wish.
- being interviewed on three occasions by an MEd research student, Emily Gesner, if you wish.
- being aware of the future publication of the data analysis.

Your acceptance of this invitation is voluntary. None of the research findings will be used in any assessment or appraisal of the preservice teachers by the University of Waikato staff on the secondary Diploma of Teaching programme. If you

accept, I will not mark any of your 2004 university assignments from now on nor do an appraisal of your teaching on the practicum.

The research data (the transcripts of the meetings) will be held in a secure place indefinitely in accordance with the University of Waikato Human Research regulations, and be available only to myself as the researcher. Your name and identity will remain confidential, be known only to myself and others in the weekly group meetings, and therefore not used in any analysis of the research data, published articles or books resulting from this research.

I will be concerned at all times that involvement in this research does not adversely affect your successful completion of the practicum. You can withdraw from the project at any stage in the 2004 practicum and up to one week after the final weekly group meeting, by contacting myself as the researcher or Dr Margaret Nichols, Chairperson of the Professional Studies in Education Department, phone ext 7935, email: margn@waikato.ac.nz

If there are any concerns regarding the research and development, I or Margaret Nichols can be contacted. In addition, any concerns regarding the practicum itself can be made to Bev Cooper, Teaching Practice Coordinator (07 838-4382 or bcooper@waikato.ac.nz).

An information sheet is attached. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Kind regards,

Associate Prof. Beverley Bell
07-838-4101,
xxxx@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix B – Invitation Letter to Associate Teachers

Associate Professor
XXXX XXXXXXXXX
Department of Professional
Studies in Education
School of Education
Te Kura Toi Tangata
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Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

28th July, 2004.

[Associate Teacher]
XXX High School

Dear [name of Associate Teacher],

As an associate teacher of [name of DipT Secondary student], I invite you to be involved in a research and development project, The Theorising of Practice on Practicum Research and Development Project, during the second practicum in August / September, 2004. This research and development project is investigating the learning of secondary preservice teachers on their second practicum. The research is investigating how secondary preservice teachers theorise or explain their teaching practices which they are using in their placement school, and in particular, taking into account students' thinking and formative assessment.

[Preservice teacher] has been selected by myself and Bev Cooper, the Secondary Teaching Practice Coordinator, on the basis of a successful first practicum during semester 1, that is, she has developed good classroom management skills in the first practicum and identified by Bev Cooper, as 'not at risk'.

Involvement in this research and development project, will mean for an associate teacher:

- using the two identified pedagogies (taking into account students' thinking and formative assessment) during the time of the practicum.
- attending the 1.5 hour weekly meetings during each of the seven weeks of the second practicum (in August and September, 2004). At this meeting you will be given professional support for your classroom teaching and mentoring of the preservice teacher.
- agreeing to the group discussions being audiotaped for transcription.
- reading and giving feedback on the transcripts of the meetings and draft research analysis, if you wish.
- being aware of the future publication of the data analysis
- an opportunity for professional development as a teacher and as an associate teacher.

Your acceptance of this invitation is voluntary. [Preservice teacher] can still be involved if you do not wish to join the project in 2004. None of the research findings will be used in any assessment or appraisal of the preservice teachers by the University of Waikato staff on the secondary Diploma of Teaching programme. I will not be marking any of [preservice teacher]'s 2004 university assignments from now on or doing an appraisal of his/her teaching on the practicum.

The research data (the transcripts of the meetings) will be held in a secure place indefinitely in accordance with the University of Waikato Human Research regulations, and be available only to myself as the researcher. Your name and identity will remain confidential, be known only to myself and others in the weekly group meetings, and therefore not used in any analysis of the research data, published articles or books resulting from this research.

I will be concerned at all times that involvement in this research does not adversely affect [preservice teacher]'s successful completion of the practicum. You can withdraw from the project at any stage in the 2004 practicum and up to one week after the final weekly group meeting, by contacting myself as the researcher or Dr Margaret Nichols, Chairperson of the Professional Studies in Education Department, phone ext 7935, email: margn@waikato.ac.nz. In addition, any concerns regarding the practicum itself can be made to Bev Cooper, Teaching Practice Coordinator (07 838-4382 or bcooper@waikato.ac.nz).

An information sheet is attached. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information

I look forward to hearing from you

Kind regards,

Beverley Bell
07-838-XXXX,
XXXX@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix C – Information Letter to Participants

July 28, 2004

Dear _____ ,

My name is Emily Gesner. As part of my Masters of Education degree, I am performing a research project about the practicum experience of students at the University of Waikato. In particular, I wish to investigate the experiences of DipTchg students who participate in a discussion group that involves students, their associate teachers and university tutor.

The objectives for my research are:

- To explore and describe the experiences of the students who participate in a discussion group during their practicum.
- Identify elements of participating in the group that were helpful/beneficial from the perspective of students.
- And, possibly, to propose ways in which such discussion groups could be improved.

Dr. Beveley Bell has informed me that you have shown interest in participating in a discussion group during the upcoming Aug/Sept practicum. Although the discussion groups will be facilitated and audiotaped by Beverley, my project will be to interview the students about their participation. In short, Beverley will be convening and leading the groups, and I hope to study how being a part of the discussion group may have contributed to your learning.

If you decide to take part in the discussion group, I would like to interview you about your experience of participating. Ideally, I would like to meet three times, once before, once during and once at the conclusion of the practicum. These three meetings/interviews can be arranged at your convenience and are unlikely to last more than an hour.

None of the interview data will be used in your assessment for the DipTchg and will not be revealed to your associate teacher. Your name and identity will remain confidential to all people with the exception of myself and my supervisor (Dr. Bell) at all stages of the project. In keeping with the University of Waikato

Human Research Ethics Regulations your interview data will be securely stored indefinitely. If for any reason you wish to cease your involvement with the project you are free to do so at any time up until one week after your final interview (~September 21, 2004).

If you have any concerns about any aspect of this research you can see the Associate Dean of Teacher Education, Brian Prestidge who can be contacted by phone at (07) 838-7869 or by email at bprest@waikato.ac.nz. In addition, decisions regarding completion of your practicum can be appealed through Bev Cooper, the Teaching Practice Coordinator ((07) 838-4382 or bcooper@waikato.ac.nz).

Please do not hesitate to contact me at any point in the project.

Sincerely,

Emily Gesner
ekg1@waikato.ac.nz
Phone: (07) 859-XXXX

Appendix D – Research Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

I have received a copy of the introductory letter and have the details of Emily Gesner’s Masters research explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point up until one week after my final interview.

I agree to participate in Emily Gesner’s research under the conditions set out on the introductory letter.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E – Interview Guides

Interview Guide –Pre-Group Interview

Introduce myself

Description of project & my involvement

Consent Form

Explain interview (set questions, open-ended, informal)

Personal History

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.

- decision to study teaching?

- any particular plans / goals in teaching?

Learning to Teach

What do you think are important things that you need to learn as you prepare to become a teacher?

What do you think of the DipTchg programme?

What have been the most valuable parts of your programme in the School of Education?

Practica – Past Experiences

Tell me about what you feel was your best/most successful aspects of your first practicum.

Which aspect of the practicum would you describe as your worst?

What do you think you learned from your first practicum?

Any particular hopes for the upcoming practicum?

Group Meetings

Why did you get involved with this project?

What are your expectations of Project?

What type of group discussions/discussion groups have you participated in in the past?

Questions? Thanks & How to contact me

Interview Guide – Post-Group Interview

Description of Interview Format – Open-ended, with more specific logistics questions if required

Review Confidentiality

The Practicum

How has this practicum been?

How does it compare to the last one?

The Discussion Group

Was the discussion group what you expected?

What were your early impressions?

What did you think of last night's group?

What elements have you enjoyed? not enjoyed?

(Were there things you would like to have said but didn't?)

Any memorable things you've learned?

Has it affected your teaching in any way?

To whom would you recommend participating?

Logistics

Considering Beverley would like to run this group again next year, are there any changes you'd suggest?

Size

Timing – length of sessions, scheduling of sessions,

Facilitation

Facilitation Style

Selection of the group members

Presence of associate teachers

Books/ Reading Materials

Teacher Education

How do you feel about teaching next year?

Anything you'd like to add?

Thanks, next meeting & how to contact me.

Appendix F – Draft Findings Presented to Participants

Experience of the Thursday Afternoon Discussion Group

(a.k.a. The Theorising of Practice on Practicum Research and Development Project)

Friday October 29, 2004

****In progress****

Here are some basic findings. I'd appreciate both feedback and feedforward. Please feel free to comment orally, ask questions and to write directly on this sheet. Thanks!

1. Overall, you reported that your experiences of participation were **very positive**.

Beneficial	Awesome	Higher than my expectations
Interesting	Useful	Wonderful
Not stressful	Valuable	Very good
		Fun

2. People said they enjoyed/benefited from:

Getting together

- Seeing each other during practicum/Catching up
- Getting to know other participants

Listening to the practicum experiences of others.

- Get Ideas
- Different Schools/Subject Areas – Interesting
- Feeling of being in the “Same Boat”

Telling their own experiences

- Helped to clarify their thinking
- Get advice/suggestions
- Feel supported

Thinking/Reflecting

- About other people's comments/ideas
- About their teaching on practicum
- About -
-

-
3. When describing their **learning as teachers** people mentioned:
 - gaining ideas
 - evaluating the ideas of others
 - greater awareness of their teaching

 4. **Recommendations** for next year include:
 - Do this again!
 - Keep the size of the group and length of sessions similar to this year.
Some people would like more sessions – (Begin earlier, meet later)

 - Maintain diversity of: Subject areas? Gender? Age?
However it must be recognized that this group was unique

 - Increased involvement of associate teachers (because they...)

 5. Some questions remain about the topic of conversation.
Some people liked the breadth and flexibility
Others would like more structure, particularly at the beginning.

 6. Have you had any problems with being part of a research project researching a research project? or anything else you'd like to add?

Thanks again,
Emily – ekg1@waikato.ac.nz

As explained, it would be most helpful if I could use your comments as part of my analysis. Again, all information will remain confidential as outlined on the Consent to Participate in Research.

I consent for this summary sheet to be used to further develop the Theorising on Practice on Practicum project and for analysis as part of Emily Gesner's Masters research.

signed

date

Appendix G – Final Letter to Participants

29 October 2004

Dear [preservice teacher],

Once again, I'd like to thank you for allowing me to be a part of this project and for sharing your experiences with me. I recognize that this is a very busy time and I very much appreciate your willingness to contribute.

Attached you'll find a copy of all of your transcripts. Please feel free to share any afterthoughts/ideas you might have. If there are parts of the interview you would like me not to use simply let me know. Unless I hear otherwise, I am assuming that you are continuing to give your consent to my using this information for the purposes of my thesis.

In reading the transcripts, you'll notice that I have used a series of symbols and have also included the umms, ahhs and errs of conversational speech. These make it much easier for me to "hear" the conversation as it happened. However, if I use an excerpt from your interview to illustrate my findings, many will be omitted to make the text readable.

Transcription Symbols (Adapted from a variety of sources)

...	(ellipsis) pause
<i>always</i>	(italics) stressed syllable or word
wha-	(hyphen) indicates cut off word, or cut off sentence
No:o	(colon) prolonging of a sound
[sneeze]	(anything in square brackets) Clarification or explanation, sounds.
[haha]	(haha in square brackets) laughter
>at the time<	(anything in angle brackets) said faster, or as an aside
/??/	(question marks between slashes) unable to decipher

Finally, I have included a copy of the draft analysis that was presented today. I welcome any additional feedback you might have. Also, if you would like to keep the audiotapes of your interviews let me know, as I would be happy to return them at the conclusion of my research.

Again, please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any comments about the content of your interviews, the interview process, or any other aspect of the project.

Many thanks and have a safe and relaxing summer,

Emily Gesner – ekg1@waikato.ac.nz
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