

Transforming traditional models of initial teacher education through a mandatory experiential learning programme.

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1. Introduction

This paper is positioned at the intersection of the interrelationship between three key areas of initial teacher education (ITE): constructivist learning theories, teaching practicum (TP), and the promotion of reflective practices through experiential learning (EL). We view learning as a social and cultural process and attempt to demonstrate in this paper that teachers' expertise should not only reside in the knowledge domains typically established by universities and schools. Another crucial knowledge domain that should be accessible to all pre-service teachers is the community and we argue that universities, schools and community partners stand as key knowledge bases that when combined can maximize the learning potential of beginning teachers today. The study in this paper outlines the establishment of a *mandatory* EL block across multiple subject disciplines on a pre-service teacher preparation programme and draws upon qualitative data collected from participants and community stakeholders. We set out to critique an innovative approach to teacher preparation on a one-year postgraduate teacher preparation programme at a University in Hong Kong; we see this curriculum initiative in teacher training as enabling a powerful synergy between the core functions of a teacher-training faculty at university and the wider community. This paper will show how community partners including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play a highly significant role in the development of beginning teachers and how they might even be seen as co-educators in the process of teacher preparation.

Typically, TP has acted as the dominant experiential component in most teacher training programmes. In this model, pre-service teachers are placed in local schools for a fixed period of time to work alongside in-service teacher mentors and are given the chance to undergo an apprenticeship-style learning experience that

usually includes university staff visiting them on-site to observe and assess their teaching. This type of traditional model of TP has been challenged with Zeichner (2012) observing that very little success is achieved in coordinating what is carried out on the course and field components of ITE courses. This partly explains why we have turned to the community outside of the university and school classroom as a highly complementary learning space. We believe this space is where beginning teachers can encounter different types of learners and degrees of diversity than they might in traditional TP models, but where they can also transfer teaching skills acquired on their pedagogical courses at university.

To be clear, we are not presenting EL projects as an alternative to TP; the importance of TP in shaping the pedagogies beginning teachers need at the outset of their teaching careers should never be underestimated. However, the premise of this paper is that off-campus learning presents exciting new opportunities for pre-service teachers to view the community beyond the institutional walls of the university and TP classroom as a fundamental, but complementary layer of learning. According to Payne & Zeichner (2017) teachers need to know more about the communities in which their students reside so that they can draw upon the expertise and knowledge that is culturally embedded in those communities. We concur that this community beyond the university and school classroom is a powerful knowledge space that has been under-utilized in teacher preparation, and that there is a paucity of knowledge on how this beyond-campus learning model when carefully structured can actually complement and enhance the more traditional models of TP (Coffey, 2010). There is also a need to throw light on the impact of community-based projects on teacher training and particularly on the question of whether such an approach actually leads to tangible benefits in terms of subject matter teaching skills (Richmond, 2017).

The concept of EL is not new to ITE with typical examples of experiential education including field trips (Boyle, 1995), service-learning and cooperative education (Hollis 2002; Jakubowski & Burman, 2004). In most teacher-preparation programmes and certainly in our own context of South East Asia, pre-service teachers' learning in the wider world is often treated as peripheral rather than a central part of the teacher training process when compared with TP. The EL in our study integrates meaningful, structured activities beyond classroom teaching (Moore, 2010) with

reflective components that in turn enhance students' learning experience, 'knowledge of the community' (Murrell, 2001) and global outlook. It is important to note that students receive six credits for the EL programme, but they are evaluated in terms of a pass or fail grade for their participation in projects, so any stress on evaluation is minimized. We have undertaken the difficult task of seeking to promote in our pre-service teachers an intrinsically motivated engagement with community-based EL projects through a compulsory EL block. We are currently the only faculty of Education in Hong Kong to do this and believe this is a regional innovation too. We hope it will add to the weight of literature in community-based learning that has shown how this approach can cultivate in learner teachers a deeper understanding of diversity, social justice, and of themselves (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007).

Through the establishment of a raft of EL projects for pre-service teachers (one-year postgraduate diploma of Education, or PGDE students) with local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) we report on beginning teachers' understanding of real-world environments, their capacity to integrate theory and practice, and the broadening of their global outlook. This paper adds to our knowledge base by integrating a third layer of learning, namely learning that occurs in real world contexts, that is the community. From this situated learning perspective we see the community outside the university classroom as a vital 'inter-space' for knowledge building and the source of multiple learning opportunities (Zeichner, 2012). We believe we are facilitating an important change on our traditional teacher education landscape which brings to the fore the question of *who* can be teacher educators in our community. Payne and Zeichner (2017) raise the issue of *whose* knowledge counts in teacher education, and we intend to show how the scope of teacher preparation can be broadened to include community partners from outside the usual orbit of university and school educators. With this in mind, a single, but wide-ranging research question underpins our study:

- In what ways do faculty, pre-service teachers and community partners perceive the impact of a mandatory EL programme integrated into a pre-service teacher preparation programme?

2. Experiential Learning and Teacher Education

EL is often synonymous with service-learning (SL) and community work.

While EL is manifested in numerous formats including volunteerism, service-learning, internships, practica and cooperative education (Moore, 2010), SL is more intended to enhance students' academic and civic engagement (Bringle, Hatcher & Jones, 2012; Lim & Bloomquist, 2015). The community-based EL projects at the centre of our ITE programme integrate academic knowledge and facilitate student teachers' personal and social competencies, thereby complementing the traditional curriculum that too often focuses on academic knowledge and pedagogy at the cost of key competencies in the social realm. This EL initiative comes at a time when traditional models of teaching and learning are being challenged. In recent decades, a constructivist worldview has gone some way to explaining how to better support teachers through teacher education (see XXXX, 2018; XXXX, 2017; Richardson, 1997, 2003). Promoting constructivist models of teacher education can be a complex process and one reality of a constructivist approach is that it too often functions in a traditional university setting (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). Research on constructivist teaching has also emphasized the central role of learning from experience and social interactions as a way for teachers and students to co-construct knowledge (Kolb 1984; Mezirow, 2000).

Community-based experiences have been shown to develop knowledge and practices in novice teachers (see, for example, Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1998; Brayko, 2013; Payne & Zeichner, 2017; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). Coffey (2010), too, suggests that community-based EL projects can prompt pre-service teachers to think about the social factors that might influence school students and to consider how schools operate in the wider context of a community. Bhabha's (1994, p. 1-2), concept of 'third space' as a specific site "for elaborating strategies of selfhood... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself", was further developed by Kirkland (2008) who proposed "pedagogical third spaces" where students could question and develop the types of knowledge required and valued in school as well as the wider global landscape. Soja (2004, p. xi) reminds us that through this concept of a third space, the classroom becomes "an expanded world of learning and literacy practice, (where) the roles also become reversed, as every space and place in the world becomes readable or interpretable as a classroom." Dewey's (1938) view of direct experience as the key to learning and for forging connections across contexts is

of central importance here. As beginning teachers are socialized into the role of “teacher”, ITE programmes must offer space for these new teachers to question what is involved in such a role.

Building on this global backdrop, our study presents a pedagogical approach that takes pre-service teachers out of their classrooms and places them into the community to acquire rich and diverse learning experiences. We choose to look beyond the institutionalized boundaries of the university to a wider knowledge space that is, arguably, less clearly defined than an extended period of TP. Our projects include community placements in Hong Kong, as well as regional learning opportunities in India, Sri Lanka, China and Australia. In this study we also intend to show how community-based placements bring student teachers into closer contact with different types of educators and that they often afford our student teachers the chance to experience learning in out of classroom contexts which might contain ill-defined problems. Our community placements also expose learning teachers to a very different and valuable experience of collaboration with peers and within professional groups, seen as crucial in facilitating constructivist teaching (Fosnot, 1996). This offers an alternative to the more traditional TP mentor-mentee model in schools that can sometimes be rather hierarchical.

EL in our practice also requires some sort of structured reflection that is often carried out through assignments that run alongside academic study and community-based learning (Elwell & Bean, 2001). The curriculum change described in this paper places EL as a credit-bearing and compulsory part of the students’ ITE and allows for pre-service teachers to experience being “dis-positioned” as a means of re-examining their beliefs and practices related to teaching (Vinz, 1997). By dis-positioning our student teachers we seek to take them out of their comfort zones, namely from the ‘safe’ university classroom and into a more unpredictable and fluid community setting. Such a shift fuels powerful forms of reflection that can further narrow the gap between theory and practice (Attard & Armour, 2005). According to Gross and Rutland (2017), EL transfers abstract teaching and learning into more meaningful learning situations and changes the role of the teacher from being a transmitter of knowledge to being a facilitator of knowledge. We now turn to how EL was conceptualized on our ITE programmes.

2.1 *Context of curriculum reform in the faculty*

This study stems from a Teacher Education Institute (TEI) in Hong Kong that has recently made EL a *compulsory* learning opportunity across its postgraduate teacher preparation programmes. The programmes are characterised by an integrated approach, which emphasizes theory-practice integration of all credit-bearing components including the mandatory EL component. Underpinning the ITE programme are concepts that are seen to encapsulate the qualities of an effective twenty-first century educator. Stemming from an extensive literature review of existing teacher education courses in USA, UK, Singapore, Finland, Australia and China, certain concepts attend to the personal and professional aspects of teacher preparation (XXXX, 2018) and include the importance of fostering passionate and caring facilitators, creative, innovative and professional teachers who are socially engaged and policy-aware leaders as well as lifelong learners willing to collaborate and reflect on their practice.

Pre-service educators, under the supervision of local and regional NGOs, work in interdisciplinary teams to initiate community-based tasks closely linked to education and their ongoing role as educators. As learning is conceived as the dynamic process between a person, their peers and the environment eventually leading to knowledge creation (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012), such a learning process allows our pre-service teachers to take an active role to apply what they have learnt from their university courses and other contexts, construct new knowledge that addresses wider societal needs as well as reflecting on their role as educators and global citizens. The EL projects are all credit bearing, carefully structured, curricula-based and linked to specific course goals and learning outcomes. Students have the chance to undertake EL through extended participation with overseas or local community projects, aimed at enhancing students' understanding of real-world environments, expanding their capacity to integrate theory and practice, and to broaden their local and global citizenship. Links have been forged with more than twenty local NGOs and community partners in Hong Kong and South East Asia including some powerful global advocates of social justice and education. These include: World Vision (HK), UNICEF (HK), OXFAM (HK), World Wildlife Fund or WWF (HK), Asia's largest local marine theme park (HK Ocean Park), HK Science

and Technology Park (HKSTP), a range of Social Services groups, as well as local education centres and organisations promoting an ‘alternative’ education system through a ‘learning by doing’ curriculum for their students. We also encouraged students to suggest their own EL projects based on connections they might have had with NGOs and similar organisations. Four students took this option and this enabled us to forge links with new community partners.

A brief description of what our students do with these organisations may help to illustrate and contextualize the learning process on our ITE programmes. Table 1 outlines three of our EL projects and in these examples it can be seen how the projects are related to our pre-service teachers’ learning and teaching knowledge but which take place in community settings and where our community partners work alongside us to support our students. By actively engaging in such situational learning our pre-service teachers are in a better position to construct new knowledge through co-construction with different experts in their relevant fields.

The research question that underpins this study looks to examine the perceived impact of EL on our teacher preparation programmes through the eyes of the faculty, our beginning teachers and our community partners. In sum we seek to show how community-based EL projects can enable pre-service teachers to develop a better understanding of teaching and how they might complement TP. So what happens when a TEI compels 100 pre-service teachers to undertake a mandatory EL component as part of a revised ITE programme?

Table 1. Samples of community-based projects

	Nature of the organization / community partner	Key deliverables	Content knowledge	Pedagogical knowledge
1	A marine theme park that promotes education and conservation	Student teachers had to identify an endangered species in the park, designed and implemented a pop-up narration to engage Park visitors in promoting conservation.	Conservation and endangered species	Engaging visitors through questioning skills and interaction

2	A science and technology NGO that promotes STEM	Student teachers designed and lead science, technology, engineering and mathematics STEM workshops for schools visiting the NGO.	STEM education	Designing and conducting workshops based around specific aims and objectives specific
3	An NGO that works with local primary schools to promote 'learning by doing' (which contrasts with the examination-oriented local curriculum that dominates the school system in Hong Kong)	Student teachers designed workshops for primary school students based on the concept of 'learning by doing' to engage them in kinesthetic learning activities out of the classroom (e.g. building robots, designing sports and engaging in cross-cultural activities to promote awareness of customs and traditions)	Learning by doing teaching approach and creativity	Activity-based pedagogical approach 'learning by doing'

3. Methods

We adopted a grounded theory approach to learning more about how our beginning teachers and other stakeholders perceived the compulsory EL block in our teacher preparation programme. Through this approach we were better able to understand the 'unnoticed aspects of human life and learning' (Packer, 2010) and to generate a theory of human experience and social phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), highly relevant to our definition of EL. It's important to note that the researchers were also part of the course coordination team for the EL projects described here. Seeing grounded theory as a socially constructed process, the contextual influence from the researchers is incorporated into the analysis (Clarke, 2005).

3.1 Participants

The pre-service teacher participants from this study stemmed from the one year full-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) course which comprised of students from ten subject disciplines (see Table 2). The ratio of female and male students also reflects the general trend of the Hong Kong teaching population (Census

and Statistics Department, 2016). Students had all received their first degrees and were aged between 23 and 41 years of age. The majority of pre-service teachers were ethnically Chinese, from Hong Kong. A small percentage of students came from other countries including India, Canada, Australia and UK. For PGDE students the EL block is around six weeks long and held in the first semester of their one-year full-time programme. The stakeholder participants came from ten of our local community partners.

Table 2. Overview of the student teacher participants

	Discipline/Subject Major	Total number	Gender (M/F)
1	Early Childhood Education	9	0/9
2	Economics	5	3/2
3	Language majors (English & Chinese)	56	11/45
4	Liberal studies & Geography	10	2/8
5	Mathematics	10	5/5
6	Science education (Biology, Chemistry & Physics)	10	5/5
	Total	100	26/74

3.2 *Data collection*

We combined different techniques for collecting our data: written reflections, semi-structured focus group interviews with our pre-service teachers and our community partners. The significance of reflection in teacher education has been well documented and shows that students are able to create new perspectives or insights by revisiting and reflecting upon their own experiences and connecting these experiences to meaning by linking the two (Barnes & Caprino, 2016; Lee & Moon, 2013). In our study we attended to pre-service teachers' process of change through written reflections. The use of reflective journals is often considered as a single type of written summative assignment, usually after the project or task has been completed and sometimes containing a fixed set of prompts or guided questions to aid the student in reflecting. Our approach, however, is to make reflection an integral part of the learning process by requiring students to submit at least three pieces of reflection alongside different stages of the EL project. Before our students undertook their learning journey through their chosen project, we offered them one timetabled input session to help guide their appreciation of what reflective writing can be. Students

also had the chance to see a wide range of reflective writings as exemplars as we were conscious of the fact that providing limited input may have reinforced students to model 'good' reflections (Ryan, 2011). None of the reflections were graded.

We also encouraged our beginning teachers to capture their learning experiences through different media including the use of video recordings, photos, drawings, letters, and even poems. While we provided students with some prompts (see below) we wanted our pre-service teachers to think for themselves, believing that each reflection is both personal and unique. We did not impose a word limit on the students' reflections believing that students should have the space to write freely on their experiences. This formative approach provided us with a lens on the process of change in student teachers' learning. As mentioned, to help students dig deep into their experiences and reflect, we provide students with the following prompts; they may choose to adopt these prompts or form their own:

- Describe some of the successes and challenges you faced in your EL project.
- Describe your significant learning over the course of the EL block.
- How can the learning experiences be transferred to your teaching?
- How have your experiences informed you about educational issues taught on your teacher preparation programme?
- How has the project contributed to your personal, social and intellectual development?

Semi-structured interview is a well-regarded approach in qualitative research (Packer, 2010). The advantages of using face-to-face group interviews over a one-to-one interview is that when there are two or more participants engaging in an interactive and "focused" discussion, the researcher will be able to see the multiple perspectives in a group setting (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). We were careful to address issues such as structure, purpose, length, and frequency of the focus group interviews believing that this would eventually lead to more spontaneity compared to an individual setting (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). A total of 30 focus-group interviews were conducted with our pre-service teachers and most interviews lasted for around 60 minutes. We chose to employ dyad (two participants) and triad (three participants) groups to allow more interactions and sharing time between participants. We allowed

student teachers to choose the medium of language believing that this would make the interview experience less stressful for participants and they could converse more freely. Their views were solicited on the following areas: (1) general experiences (positive and negative) of the students' respective EL project and, (2) aspects of learning that relate to the student teachers' future role as an educator.

Engaging our community partners was also an important way of triangulating our data so these partners were invited to complete an online survey on our students' overall performance in each respective EL project. We sought to gauge their views on the general experiences of working with our pre-service teachers, areas of success and weakness and how we might improve the learning experiences and reciprocity of each project. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with the community partners to provide a more qualitative layer to our dataset.

3.3 *Data analysis*

When the entire corpus of data was collected, interviews were transcribed verbatim and we removed our beginning teachers' names. The grounded theory approach allowed us to develop themes inductively from the raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The authors undertook several rounds of reading closely through all of the reflective journal entries and the focus-group interview transcriptions with emphasis on emerging and recurring themes to avoid confirmation bias.

The first round of reading provided us with an initial understanding of participants' ideas, beliefs and experiences of the compulsory EL projects and their engagement with local and regional community partners as well as their sense of personal and professional development. In order to understand the teachers' experiences, open qualitative approaches to data analysis were used in the subsequent rounds of interpretative reading. This began with coding of reflection documents and interview data related to our overarching research question. Data from the reflective journals and focus group interviews were analysed using the comparative approach of the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This enabled us to remain open to the words and experiences of our new teachers, so as to accurately reflect their experiences and ideas.

We adopted an iterative approach by undergoing three stages of data coding: open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All codes were examined by the authors to identify any similarities and differences in the analysis as a way of achieving inter-coder reliability. Repeated comparison throughout the analysis was performed to reach the final coding framework with thematic categories. The creation of a coding system offers new meanings at a level beyond the surface of the words and forms organised constructions (Holliday, 2007). In this process we coded each line of the data by labeling or categorizing the topic or phenomenon that was being described, before attempting to sort out the ways in which the open codes were related to each other. We continued to process the data in an iterative manner until a consensus was reached between the authors on the themes and categories.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Collecting qualitative data through eliciting students' experiences depends on a sense of trust and rapport between researchers and the beginning teachers. To ensure that this qualitative data was trustworthy, we worked hard to build a rapport with our participants based on fidelity. We had already organized orientations for our pre-service teachers and followed that up by making on-site visits to each student during the EL block. This allowed us to develop a better awareness of our students and their needs. Pre-service teachers were not awarded grades for their participation in the EL block (our EL projects are pass/fail) so there was little or no danger of students supporting this study for any academic benefit. Our summative notes from evaluation meetings with colleagues held after the EL projects were completed; these notes were also employed as secondary data helpful in supporting or refuting our initial and tentative findings. Respondent validity was also ensured through a careful process of member checking with our participants. Ethical approval for this study was granted at institutional level and all participants gave informed consent.

4. Results

Data analysis yielded thirty-two units of data and these were further re-organized into three main categories: 'learner-centredness', 'critical and creative practitioner' and 'reflective practitioner'. The dominant category identified in our

current study was learner-centredness. Each category was further divided into properties and characteristics (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of thematic analysis: Categories and properties

	Categories	Properties
1	Learner-centredness	Caring facilitator
		Cater for learner diversity
2	Critical & creative practitioner	Contextually sensitive
		Adaptive
		Risk-taking
3	Reflective practitioner	Life-long learning

4.1 *Learner-centredness*

Learner-centredness was the core theme demonstrated consistently across the data. These pre-service teachers showed a very caring attitude that focused on the needs of the learner in their EL context (most of which were non-school related settings) as these comments from students reveal:

In my EL project I was able to work with young children from broken homes and who were deprived of education due to social causes. It was overwhelming. I worked on gaining their confidence, trust and security. These children are born curious and equipped with immense learning ability. They enjoy learning through play... It made me realise how much responsibility we have as teachers in the community. (A study major in Early Childhood Education with a self-nominated EL project at a shelter for the homeless)

Seeing these students who had none of the educational or social advantages or privileges that we have in Hong Kong made me realize how important teachers are. They made me realize why teaching is such an important role in society. (A study major in Science placed with Happy Tree Social Services in India)

Both these pre-service teachers were working with underprivileged and marginalized communities, but in very different contexts. One student teacher was overwhelmed by the poverty and lack of educational opportunities for some children in an affluent city like Hong Kong, while the other was talking about a similar phenomenon in one of the poorest parts of Delhi, India. Taken together it

demonstrates how both these beginning teachers were embracing similar cases of learner diversity in two completely different educational and socio-economic landscapes. Participants on the Indian project talked extensively about their own perceptions of the role played by teachers in society. It is noteworthy that the two different experiences reaffirmed the pre-service teachers' sense of belonging to the teaching profession and the importance of attending to individual learners. The next comment came from another pre-service teacher placed in a marine theme park:

I was inspired by my Ocean Park mentor's story of how instead of forming pre-conceived ideas about her visitors, she found out why many mainland Chinese tourists would take lots and lots of 'commonplace' photos and videos. The reason turned out to be a noble one – they may share their joy with those at home who didn't have the privilege to travel. If I were to effectively facilitate students' learning as a teacher, I need to be student-centred, I need to know my students and be curious about them. This certainly applies to us as educators. (A student major in Physics placed at HK Ocean Park)

This comment demonstrates the beginning teacher's ability to critically evaluate his supervisor at the park, something that appeared to help him imagine and project his own teaching philosophies and pedagogy. Community partnership brings pre-service teachers into contact with role models and experts from other fields and allows beginning teachers to see that certain teaching qualities stem from simple acts like curiosity, dedication and passion. The pre-service teachers' comment about learner-centredness is particularly revealing because in this project our beginning teachers did not actually work with young school students (as they normally would in TP), but spent their EL block sharing important conservation messages with tourists and the general public who visited the park. Such active observation with the public and reflection fostered a more nuanced and situated understanding of how and why teachers need to spend time understanding their own students' needs.

Another student reflection below reveals the impact of situated learning on his long-held assumptions, beliefs and attitudes towards education and the wider world:

Teaching English in India made me realize how often we take for granted many of the things we consider necessities in a classroom, which in other places could well be luxuries unheard of. My experience also challenged some of my long-held assumptions and compelled me to keep an open mind to everything that's going on around us. (A student major in English and placed at Happy Tree Social Services in India)

This pre-service teacher's reference to taking a more open-minded approach to what is happening in the world reflects, perhaps, the emergence of a truly local and global citizen and someone alive to cultural sensitivity (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1998; Sleeter, 2000). The following quotes offer another illustration of how pre-service teachers learned to cater for their learners' diversities:

I worked at HKSTP helping them develop STEM-based workshops and whatever we learnt in the PGDE was really helpful and beneficial to developing these workshops. For example, we learnt how to set up and manage a classroom, we also learnt about differentiating instructions for different abilities. (A student major in Physics placed at the Hong Kong Science and Technology Park)

Another interview extract stemmed from a pre-service teacher engaged in a community project built around conservation issues:

The project was generally a great experience for me and gave me an opportunity to trial aspects of teaching that I didn't have the confidence to try in microteaching (at university). For example, I used group work when we had a large group of 30 children and it allowed me to provide more focused input and to address the different age groups and interests in the room. (A student major in Mathematics placed at HK Ocean Park)

These reflections also demonstrate how pre-service teachers were able to 'trial' pedagogies and teaching strategies acquired on the PGDE programme through EL, but in a very different context to the usual microteaching format (whereby pre-service teachers demonstrate lessons and strategies to their peers in the 'safe' environment of the classroom). Such reflections hint at the transferability of skills acquired on EL projects to more formal teaching contexts as the two teachers confirmed later that they had indeed integrated group work and differentiated instruction into subsequent TP classes.

Most of these experiences gained during the placement can be transferred and applied in a normal classroom. For example, how we can teach students constructively so that we are not drilling knowledge into their heads. (A student major in Mathematics placed at YMCA, HK)

Skills transfer is possible when moving from community-based work to teaching practicum, but in this example we also see the pre-service teacher unpacking the benefits of his EL project by reflecting on the wider goals of education in Hong

Kong. This pre-service teacher was given the responsibility by his community partner of coordinating sports camps for hundreds of visiting primary and secondary school students. His awareness of constructivist teaching principles came through his situated practice with the NGO and then continued as he took this philosophy into his TP classrooms.

4.2 *Critical and creative practitioner*

The second emergent theme reflected that our pre-service teachers were developing into critical and creative practitioners who were seen to be challenging their pre-conceived ideas about young learners, as this feedback reveals:

We held workshops that we designed at a wide range of primary and secondary schools. I learnt not to label students based on the schools' (academic) reputation. Similarly as an educator I must be mindful of the labeling effect and have expectations for all my students. I should also encourage my students to have a growth-mindset. I learnt the importance of linking the science topics we teach in the classroom to daily life. (A student major in Biology placed at UNICEF, HK)

This reflection demonstrates how the student was able to link the goals of his NGO with the aims of education and teaching. A key point here is the reinforcement through the connection he made with hundreds of students from across the academic and socio-economic spectrum in Hong Kong about the dangers of labeling students. This is a concern in Hong Kong where schools tend to be given labels based on their bandings¹. Another interesting feature of this young teacher's experience with an external community partner was that he was given the chance to visit numerous schools and present the NGO's message about global conflict and its impact on children. This was echoed in other responses to the EL projects:

In my third week I ran a sports camp for more than 500 primary children and it was such an experience. The coaches were there to support me but I was given responsibility and trust to design the activities and to give out the instructions. Standing in front of so many children and seeing them follow my instructions was scary but empowering. (A student major in Maths placed at YMCA, HK)

Evidence also suggests that our beginning teachers were becoming more

¹ Schools in HK are categorized into three bands with band one being seen as the academically strongest schools and band three the weakest.

contextually sensitive, adaptive and more willing to take risks through the provision of learning opportunities as this extract reveals:

I was given a lot of autonomy by staff at the Park to design the input for my read aloud workshop with a group of visiting children. I could choose my own props but didn't know how to demonstrate a hammerhead shark so I borrowed some puppets and soft toys from the souvenir shop to make my story come alive. The children responded well and it showed me the importance of creativity. The whole experience gave me more confidence to take on different roles in class... a reader, a puppeteer and an actress in this case. (A student major in Early Childhood Education placed at HK Ocean Park)

Both pre-service teachers had different experiences during their TP period a few weeks later, especially in the type of learning opportunities offered to them. During TP the pre-service teachers were not given any similar responsibility or role by their practicum schools suggesting that it was the EL projects more than TP which provided more 'empowering' and perception-changing learning experiences. This was noted across several reflections from our pre-service teachers. It was evident that many of our community partners granted our student teachers autonomy and a richer space for learning and more risk-taking opportunities than some of our TP schools.

4.3 *Reflective practitioner*

The third emergent theme, the reflective practitioner, showcased our pre-service teachers' commitment to life-long learning. The following quotes expand on this point:

I have learnt not to be complacent about myself but always seek improvement. As a teacher, my job is to prepare the best learning opportunities for my students. (A student major in Economics placed at World Vision, HK)

I learned very quickly that I had to get students to pay attention and engage with our messages through good questions and prompts or else my message would be lost. This is exactly the same in teaching. I know it's not easy and I must keep working to improve. (A student major in Early Childhood Education placed at World Vision, HK)

In these extracts we see pre-service teachers who have developed a heightened sense of self-awareness and a more self-critical identity as a result of the EL projects which involved working on social justice with an NGO exploring issues of poverty and child rights. Both teachers reflect on how they need to know so much more as

teachers and demonstrate an understanding of why teaching is also a learning profession.

It was refreshing to see how education and teaching can be different if we just stop and reflect on our practices. The experience here made me question some of the approaches I have always taken for granted about teaching and learning. (A student major in Early Childhood Education placed at a project adopting an alternative educational philosophy)

This EL project was rewarding as it allowed me to work with different children and adults coming from different age groups and backgrounds. With the other leaders from the park I learnt skills that are needed to work with older children. I was moved by their passion, their energy and it was a perfect opportunity for me to try differentiated learning and some new play-based learning practices. I learned a lot about teaching from the staff there even though they weren't trained teachers like us. (A student major in Early Childhood Education placed at HK Ocean Park)

The first comment comes from a pre-service teacher who worked at an innovative primary school in Hong Kong as EL (with an 'alternative' teaching model). In this learning context, students do not have formal classes in the afternoons, but instead engage in other activities like sports, arts and crafts, outings, experiments and design workshops. The pre-service teachers here were introduced to the practice of co-planning their activities with experienced mentors and this positive experience of professional collaboration helped shape their own beliefs and their identity as 'becoming' teachers; the formation of teacher identity is definitely a life-long process. In a typical TP model, beginning teachers normally work with one teacher mentor. However, our diverse community-based settings allow pre-service teachers to work with a range of experts from different fields. Evidence suggests that the mentorship process might even be more inspirational and less hierarchical than in TP, as suggested by our beginning teacher. In the second reflection we see our pre-service teachers' recognition of the community partners at the marine theme part as knowledge providers even though they were not qualified teachers (they were marine biologists). This feeds into our earlier point about community partners being 'experts' in the same way as traditional teacher mentors and school leaders. The beginning teachers' awareness of particular skills like questioning and pedagogical approaches suggest that EL projects can foster specific classroom and subject skills development (Richmond, 2017)

4.4 *Feedback from community partners*

At the outset of the curriculum initiative we wanted to position our community partners as equals in these learning experiences provided to our pre-service teachers. We initiated an online survey for each community partner to send us feedback on the project and our pre-service teachers. We then visited each of the project sites and spoke with officials from the NGOs and partners so that we could get additional feedback on our students and address any concerns raised. These focus-group interviews allowed us to elicit more reflections on the overall innovation. The community partners all reported a positive experience of working with our beginning teachers and each organization offered to renew arrangements for the following academic year, suggesting this curriculum innovation is mutually beneficial to both the university and the NGOs and providing evidence of capacity building through sustainability. Fourie (2003) highlights the importance of sustainability when linking students with community projects and universities and the continuation of our EL projects into another year is evidence of the sustained nature of the work done so far. Some examples of our community partners' feedback are included below:

"We were deeply impressed by the intern students' preparedness, creativity and ability to integrate subject knowledge into child rights education; it created value to and expand the scope of our work." (Community partner at UNICEF, HK)

"Sometimes we hope that the student teachers can be more assertive, but they are young and this takes time to develop and we appreciate that when they faced challenges, they kept improving and improvising after gaining practical experience." (Community partner at UNICEF, HK)

"...they worked as equals in our small team...we feel this was a mutually value-added experience. This has given us confidence in recruiting more interns in HK to help the project which aims to spread to more schools..." (Community partner at Learning by Doing Academy)

"We were inspired by the students and went through the EL cycle ourselves together with the students – from having an experience to trying out what we learned. The whole experience was out of our expectation and we also learnt from the course. The EL project did not only provide a platform for students to turn theory into practice but also provided an opportunity for our team to review our education programmes and public narrations from a brand new angle." (Community partner at Ocean Park Discovery and Education Department)

Crucially, the feedback above substantiates the contribution from our pre-service teachers and we interpret this as reciprocity in terms of the mutual benefits gained by working with the community. This was definitely one of our hopes at the outset of this initiative and we believe that through this careful and extensive articulation of Zeichner's (2012) 'third space' we have promoted a very meaningful and sustainable community capacity that builds on previous work done in this important area (Baldwin, Buchanan & Rudisill, 2007; Brayko, 2013). It is heartening to see how the community partners also sensed the mutual benefits; it reaffirms the point about seeing the community as a rich source of knowledge and expertise. In the feedback from community partners we can, perhaps, hear the powerful and enabling voice of this 'third space.'

These reflections also appear to illustrate the importance of some of the transferrable teaching skills we have observed in these boundary crossing projects and mentioned earlier such as thinking, learning, problem solving, communicating and collaboration. These are also basic competencies in the eyes of many of our NGO community partners and are arguably crucial qualities in effective teaching as well. Some of our community partners noted that a few pre-service teachers needed to develop certain personal and professional skills more suggesting that the developmental process is a complex one. That said we can see from these insightful and constructive comments that feedback on teaching and teachers does not only have to come from school-based educators.

4.5 *Counter stories*

As seen, our student response was generally positive, but we found counter stories that demonstrate how complicated such a curriculum change can be. Aligning with other research on EL, some of our students learnt a lot from these opportunities, but some did not (McDonald, Bowman & Brayko, 2013). These were challenging and difficult responses to face, but important ones in the context of the innovation. These interview extracts from a handful of pre-service teachers sum up this dissonance:

"I think the EL block should be scrapped and replaced with more school experience. The only way to learn to teach is to teach and teach and teach

again. Frankly speaking I enjoyed the time at the Park but I gained nothing as a teacher.” (A student major in Economics placed at HK Ocean Park)

“...to me we are not gaining any subject knowledge by working in these organisations. I would suggest that we spend more time in schools as that is going to help us more. I did enjoy the project, but it’s not teaching to me.” (A student major in Physics placed at the Hong Kong Science and Technology Park)

“I am training to be a teacher so I should be trained by teachers not by people from other professions and walks of life.” (A student major in Economics placed at Ocean Park Marine Park)

Here it is possible to see the difficulties inherent in modifying teaching preparation models that have served universities and schools for so many decades. Some students held firm to the belief that they would learn more from being placed in schools through extended TP. We sense these pre-service teachers may not have fully understood that these EL projects were designed to underpin some of the core responsibilities of effective teaching including cultivating a positive disposition and understanding of diversity in their learners. The only difference was that these students’ learning needs were being attended to outside of school and TP. These are important views that need to be carefully considered as they go to the heart of what it means to ‘become’ a teacher. We also faced discrepant voices from within the faculty and these will be addressed in the next section.

5. Discussion

5.1 Positive outcomes

We sought to understand more about how a mandatory EL component in a postgraduate teacher training programme might benefit faculty, candidate teachers and community partners and how it might complement the teaching practicum rather than replacing it. At the outset of this curriculum initiative we also sought to build a bridge between our own teacher preparation courses and the community through projects that served both the core functions of our teacher education courses and the wider community (in and outside of Hong Kong). Such an aim was in line with similar calls in the literature on developing the third space in education and appeared to achieve similar outcomes as other studies on community-based learning embedded into teacher training courses (Brayko, 2013; Zeichner, 2010).

Perhaps the most impressive benefit was in the knowledge and experience gained by student teachers in the carefully organized EL projects established by the faculty. As evidenced by the students' comments highlighted earlier, there is evidence of pre-service teachers acquiring skills and knowledge from engagement with community-based learning that have been seen as fundamental to effective teaching in the 21st century, but which research has not easily captured (Coffey, 2010; Richmond, 2017). Another positive outcome of the initiative relates to the way that beginning teachers chose their own EL projects, meaning all of the groups were interdisciplinary. These pre-service teachers had the opportunity to engage with peers from almost every other discipline (something that does not happen in our university-based courses where most courses are organized by disciplines).

Many comments from our pre-service teachers are examples of how the EL block enabled them to hone their classroom teaching skills through community engagement with local NGOs. Our beginning teachers were developing and coordinating workshops for visitors who were from different academic levels and ages but who were engaging in extra-curricular outings to learn about STEM education or child rights and even sports. The pre-service teachers commented on how such diverse opportunities (with the support of NGOs and community partners) allowed them to understand more about their audience (of diverse backgrounds), professional collaboration, materials design, coping with diversity in the classroom, questioning and interaction and about differentiated instructions. All of these stand as salient aspects of effective teaching in the 21st century. Other transferrable skills highly relevant to the teaching profession included personal and professional qualities like learner-centredness, a passion for teaching, social awareness, critical and creative thinking, life-long learning and risk-taking. In contrast to many teacher preparation programmes, these skills and powerful perceptions were not forged in school settings, but in community-based EL projects where pre-service teachers were given space, time and opportunity to engage with the goals and practices of their respective NGO. Interestingly, some of our pre-service teachers told us that they acquired these skills and took up more responsibilities in EL than they did through their subsequent TP placements.

It was also evident in this study that most of our pre-service teachers adopted the community partners as role models and that the support they received from NGO personnel enabled them to develop their own identity as teachers. While it may be an exaggeration to describe our community partners as ‘co-educators’, evidence from our students’ feedback shows how community partners became co-creators of knowledge and practice alongside teacher educators. These community partners provided their own unique types of expertise and benefited our pre-service teachers as they underwent professional and personal development on their one-year teacher preparation course. They have helped articulate and develop the teaching philosophies and identities of our young teachers of tomorrow and provided us with a rich and powerful new knowledge space that is outside the conventional TP model, but which informs, complements and benefits that model as well. Such a finding surprised us, but perhaps demonstrates the extraordinary potential of capacity building between universities and community partners as Payne and Zeichner (2017) have pointed out.

It was rewarding to see that this boundary crossing offered the faculty and the community reciprocal benefits and that carefully constructed engagement with community partners allowed for an equal distribution of power and leadership. Our first action when setting up a compulsory EL component was to try and forge a positive and mutually beneficial synergy with NGOs and to involve them throughout the process of curriculum design, evaluation and feedback. We attempted to treat all our community partners as co-educators in this innovation, even if all of them were too humble to acknowledge that degree of parity. Through these powerful and positive relationships we argue that we have been able to contribute more to the question of how EL and community-based learning can align better with teacher education. For example, some of our EL placements promoted beginning teachers’ willingness to work in schools that serve diverse populations and this was particularly the case for those students who travelled to India or who worked with advocates of social justice in Hong Kong.

5.2 Areas for improvement

These positive findings notwithstanding, there have been tensions and puzzles as reflected in the counter-stories from some pre-service teachers. One considerable

challenge related directly to the compulsory nature of the EL block. As mentioned earlier, we wanted to appeal to pre-service teachers' intrinsic motivation for community knowledge and social justice, but this ideal aim bumped against the harsh reality to some of our students that this EL component was compulsory and unwanted.

In our case we were faced with a handful of beginning teachers who could not accept that their EL projects were assisting their development as emergent teachers. At staff-student consultative meetings across the year a small, but vocal, group of pre-service teachers with similar views questioned how the community-based learning projects could ever prepare them for their future role as teachers. Perhaps in these cases we are able to see the complexities inherent in preparing a teaching force for the twenty-first century. Most definitely, some pre-service teachers we have worked with need more convincing to dissuade them that good teaching is not only about developing technical skills. Some pre-service teachers did not see the value of community knowledge and its importance in enhancing their awareness of learning diversity in the classroom. This is a serious and worrying outcome and requires some consideration. It is possible that better orientation is required at university level to prepare these pre-service teachers for the EL projects. Certainly, more effort is required in enabling students to connect the different strands of their preparatory programme so that they can relate the EL projects to their future identity and work as teachers. We do know that reflection was not an issue in these cases as the discrepant cases in our study wrote lengthy and personal reflections on how they saw teacher education and how they believed the best way to prepare teachers is in a classroom.

Sadly for a forward-thinking TEI like ours, these student teachers' dissonance was also echoed by a handful of faculty colleagues who maintain that the best way to develop teaching skills is to engage in more classroom teaching. This is a reflection, perhaps, of how divided the education community is about the issue of preparing our teachers of tomorrow and how readiness for change among teaching staff can vary. Sleeter (2001) notes that some teacher educators may not see the benefit of these programmes and activities without a stronger research base, so our response is to work harder to provide this evidence base to try and show that EL and engagement with the community has more than just social value. We must also show that these boundary crossings carry educational value too, and that they promote specific subject matter

teaching-related skills (Richmond, 2017). In some of the examples presented earlier we believe we are responding to that gap in the literature.

Some other minor issues concerned the choice of projects. For a few pre-service teachers who were rejected by their first-choice community partner their second choices might not have carried so much weight in terms of personal investment or ownership. We noted that some pre-service teachers were less motivated than others when they were not able to secure their first-choice projects (many EL projects required a quota). We addressed this problem by securing more variety in our placements with NGOs and ensuring that these co-constructed community projects are more aligned with our educational aims, by forging new partnerships and also allowing pre-service teachers to nominate their own projects for consideration.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have outlined a curriculum innovation which has made EL a mandatory component on teacher preparation programmes. Evidence from pre-service teachers who participated in these EL projects and community partners who hosted our beginning teachers as well as faculty staff paint a generally positive, yet complex and multi-layered picture. Data suggests that our beginning teachers acquired a rich set of transferrable skills through their participation in community-based learning. These professional benefits were matched by several personal benefits, too. Such findings align with research on community-based learning, most notably in the United States and Australia. Certainly, evidence tells us that our community-based projects have contributed much more than a stronger awareness of teacher skills and readiness in our students, but we also need to unpack the benefits of these boundary crossings from multiple perspectives. Counter stories have told us that there is still work to do. For a start, more can be done to highlight the importance of community-based learning in TE and how the two are inextricably connected. This might first require a process of community mapping whereby TEIs and faculty staff develop a vision so that the needs of the local community (as seen through the eyes of NGOs) are integrated into pre-service teacher training courses at faculty and programme levels. The quality of our future teaching workforce and how their disposition towards the

wider community (both in and outside of schools) can be cultivated is another reason for further research in this area. We welcome further dissemination of similar boundary crossings between universities and the wider community.

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