Initial Teacher Education Programs at University are preparing Pre Service Teachers to cater for a diverse range of students within their classrooms

Assoc Prof. Robyn Brandenburg
Dip T (ACU), BEd (ACU), MEd (Deakin), PhD (Monash)
Faculty of Education and Arts, Federation University.

Associate Professor Robyn Brandenburg is a teacher educator researcher in the School of Education at Federation University Australia. Her interests include researching learning and teaching, mathematics education and the reflective practice and feedback in learning about teaching.

Deborah Robertson
BEd (PE) Hons, MApp Sci
Faculty of Health, Federation University.

Deb Robertson is a lecturer in the Faculty of Health at Federation University Australia. Her interests include researching inclusive teaching practices and applying this to her teaching and learning practice, which has a strong focus on catering for diverse learning needs.

When teacher education students begin their Teaching Degree at Federation University, they have had a minimum of thirteen years experience as a learner in a school setting. Many will have been fortunate enough to have formed a learning relationship with quality, caring teachers that often made teaching appear ‘seamless’, meaningful and connected. While the inspiration to become a teacher is individual, often it is the desire to make a difference in the lives of the children they will teach that is, or becomes, a common ideal. As one pre-service teacher suggested, “My PE teacher at school was a big reason for me choosing to come to University and become a teacher. I just really liked how interested they were in me and I want to be able to do that for my students in the future.” One of the most challenging aspects of this desire is the ability, as a teacher, to reach all students; to cater for all students and to make the learning journey one that is meaningful for students, parents and care-givers and teachers.

As a pre-service teacher, students will be challenged to initially identify how they see themselves as a teacher; what they believe is important when teaching, what they understand about teaching and why all of this matters. One way that pre-service teachers are encouraged to think about these beliefs and assumptions is through illustration. For example, in the early stages of Course learning, students are asked to represent themselves as a teacher, as a visual image.
These images are collected and during tutorials and workshops, the key representations are discussed and the dominant understandings and beliefs that become evident through these representations are identified. The images below were provided by first years pre-service teachers at two universities and they reflect a range of interpretations including the teacher being the ‘light to knowledge’ (Figure 1); learning in an outdoor environment (Figure 2) and the teacher as the focus with attentive students (Figure 3). Figure 4 represents a progression from Einstein to the role of technology in learning and teaching (Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2016).

Figure 1: A Teacher is the light of knowledge

Figure 2: An outdoor learning environment

Figure 3: Teacher as focus

Figure 4: Historical References

Throughout their Courses, pre-service teachers are encouraged to reflect on their personal perceptions of teaching and teachers, to examine their own developing identity and to critically examine the historical foundations of the discipline area they are studying. By questioning their often ‘taken for granted’ assumptions, pre-service teachers begin to challenge and expand their expectations of themselves as learners and prospective teachers. It is through discussing and identifying the dominant and the marginalized or silent discourses that enables teacher educators and pre-service teachers to ultimately become co-learners who work together to grow understandings, develop attitudes and enhance practices and skills to cater for all students that we teach.
Students in teacher education courses enter classrooms and learning settings early in their Courses and engage in a diverse range of professional, 'hands-on' experiences where they progressively develop skills in recognizing and working with student’s strengths, interests and experience. The aim is to help students to work towards reaching their full potential. With each experience comes new insights and an integral aspect of each course is the development of reflection techniques that enable students to understand the learner and more about themselves as a developing teacher. A key aspect of effective reflection techniques and strategies is the importance of student, teacher educator and teacher feedback on teaching and learning so as to understand more about the complexities of learning and teaching.

Pre-service teachers become researchers of their own learning and gather data and evidence related to their teaching to improve their teaching. In this way, pre-service teachers (and teacher educators) are constantly reflecting to identify how and where they can continue to improve their teaching practice to cater for all learners. For example, the feedback provided from one year 4 student to a pre-service teacher following a lesson in response to the question, “What did you like or dislike about the activities?” suggested that “They gave me the chance to work my mind a little harder. I found them challenging. I liked that” and “I would like you to come and teach maths again because I found I liked having [a] new maths teacher for a bit”. Pre-service teachers are given real world opportunities, through professional placements, learning experiences and school immersions to develop, practice and refine teaching practices. This rigorous, integrated and ongoing process of understanding who we are as teachers, of reflecting on our learning and teaching and gathering feedback encourages the development of a ‘growth mindset’. This learning process also creates an awareness of self-responsibility and the professional supports that are available that combine to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes to provide an inclusive education for all the students that we teach.

References

Brandenburg, R., & Gervasoni, A. (2016). Images of teaching: Discourses within which pre-service teachers construct their professional identity as a teacher upon entry to Teacher education Courses. In R. Brandenburg, S. McDonough, J. Burke & S. White (Eds.), Teacher Education: Innovation, Intervention and Impact. Dordrecht: Springer Publishing.