

The Curtin Coaches: Benefits of an outreach tutoring program for first year pre-service teachers

Saul Karnovsky, School of Education & Charles Flodin, Ethics, Equity & Social Justice, Curtin University

Abstract

The Curtin Coaches program represents a dynamic outreach opportunity for pre-service teachers enrolled in their first year of study at Curtin University to engage with school-aged students as classroom tutors. Research has shown that tutoring experiences can benefit both the students receiving support and those who tutor, particularly in settings where individuals are engaging in community support work. According to program feedback, participants were able to develop a range of profession-related skills such as relationship building and gain new knowledge such as understanding how students learn. These competencies are salient as they align with the newly implemented federal standards for graduate teachers. Understanding the benefits such outreach programs bring pre-service teachers is vital as the future of university funded school programs such as the Curtin Coaches is uncertain but the importance of Work Integrated Learning is increasing.

The Curtin Coaches Program

The Curtin Coach program is an outreach tutoring service for public primary and secondary schools in the Perth metropolitan area which rate low on the ICSEA (index of community socio-educational disadvantage) scale and have a significant gap in students who test well in NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) but fail to take up tertiary level studies post-graduation. The program is funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP, 2014) prompted by the Bradley Review (2009) recommendations for Australian Higher Education. West Australian schools have also identified a need for additional support in the classroom for students who struggle or who are not meeting their expected potential. In response to these needs the Curtin Coaches program has been designed to be a mutually beneficial outreach program. Partner schools receive no-cost in class support from enthusiastic individuals who have chosen education as their intended career and those tertiary students participating in the program gain valuable educative experiences as a result of the involvement (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003).

Selected coaches work in a number of partnership schools for two to five hours per week on a paid or voluntary basis to deliver bespoke academic tutoring for identified students. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to engage with profession-related experiences, such as programs like Curtin Coaches which provide them with practical teaching and learning degree-related opportunities. Established in 2010, more than 100 (second to fourth year) pre-service teachers have completed the program. In 2013 the program coordinator facilitated partnerships between two primary schools and as a pilot program, nine first year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students were recruited to conduct paid work in the two schools as classroom tutors.

Benefits of tutoring programs

Tutoring has a long and venerable history. Gordon, Morgan, Ponticell and O'Malley (2004), in a research review related to tutoring, revealed more than 300 books and 7000 academic articles indicating that “tutoring procedures appear to produce positive effects on *both* [emphasis added] students and tutors” (p. 62). Gordon et al.(2004) found that the consistently reported positive effects of tutoring included achievement, affective measures of self-esteem, and intrinsic interest in the subject matter being taught. Results from numerous cross-age and peer-tutoring studies conducted with learners across the life span have also yielded positive findings. They sum up these findings, noting, “it appears that tutoring offers a powerful technique for enhancing student learning across a wide sample of different types of students and content areas” (p. 62). More recently, this finding has been reinforced by a meta-analysis of effects of tutoring style programs by Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow and Martin-Glenn (2006) as well as research conducted by Rothman and Henderson (2011).

The Curtin Coaches program provides tutoring services to schools in predominantly low socio-economic areas or where students come from traditionally marginalized groups. This outreach focus means that at least in part, the experiences of those participating as Coaches comprise a form of ‘service-learning’ which is “an alternate learning space in which pre-service teachers can enhance their multicultural awareness through community work with marginalized and disadvantaged groups” (Boyle-Baise and Sleeter, 2000; cited in Tatebe, 2013, p. 244).

When pre-service teachers are given opportunities for observing and applying understandings about teaching and learning in real educational contexts, significant professional development can result (McIntyre, Byrd & Foxx, 1996). Regular feedback from Coaches has shown that working in schools as a paid employee of the university has resulted in a number of benefits as pre-service teacher students are able to gain skills and knowledge in their chosen profession in an environment that is distinct from the university classroom or formal practicum placement.

Evaluation of the program

Feedback regarding the program was requested using quantitative (5 point Likert scale) and qualitative (free response questions) feedback at the completion of the pilot program. An example of a quantitative item is: “Rate your experience of the program from 1 (not true of me) to 5 (true of me) for the statement: *I developed a deeper understanding of educational issues.*” An example of a qualitative item is: “Please comment on the following: *The best thing about being involved with the Curtin Coach Program was...*” Seven out of the nine coaches responded to the survey, which was administered online through the Survey Monkey web tool. An existing five dimensional framework was used as a basis for analyzing the outcomes of the pilot program for first years (McLoughlin and Laslak (2003). These include developing pedagogy skills such as building relationships and reflective practice, knowledge bases such as understanding about school students, and the teaching - learning cycle.

Findings of the program

Results are organized around the five dimensions of McLoughlin and Laslak (2003). Each dimension is explained, percentages from the quantitative items are provided, and examples of comments from the qualitative items are presented.

Dimension 1: Developing understanding about school students

Learning to teach means that prospective teachers begin to see the world through a professional educators eyes while they struggle to reconcile the feelings and experiences they have had as students. The tutors learned about their students in general, as well as why and how teachers connect with students in order to encourage growth (McLoughlin & Laslak, 2003, p. 271).

- 100% of Coaches enjoyed supporting students, felt they interacted well with them and gained a greater understanding of individual student learning
- 86% of Coaches felt they “made a difference” to students learning
- 67% assisted students with their sense of self-worth and motivation to learn

“Getting hands on experience with different children, and being able to make a difference was the best thing about the program.”

“Helping and observing different students learning was the best thing about the program.”

Dimension 2: Developing technical pedagogical skills

Tutors believed that the variety of strategies they used to communicate with students, to instruct and assess them, and to manage the classroom environment had greatly increased (McLoughlin & Laslak, 2003, p. 274).

- 71% gained greater understanding of their course’s conceptual material
- 83% helped students engage with lessons and apply the knowledge learnt
- 67% assisted students with communicating ideas, numeracy skills and social awareness

“The best thing about the program was being able to provide help to the students and interact with them, interact with class teachers to find out more about future career opportunities, education syllabus/system, teaching challenges and so on.”

“It was important to relate questions to real life events as the students are able to relate more to these and understand what concepts are being asked to them.”

Dimension 3: Developing relationships with colleagues in school settings

Tutoring programs presented the prospective teachers with opportunities to spend time in school settings, to interact with teachers and administrators, and to learn from their university mentors. These opportunities were believed to contribute greatly to their professional development (McLoughlin & Laslak, 2003, p. 275-6).

- 100% gained greater insight into the inner workings of a school environment

“I believe this program is a fantastic way for first year students in particular to experience the school environment and put all of the theory learnt over the course of the year or semester into

practice. It is also a great way to begin to build up a teaching portfolio of activities and teaching ideas.”

“Gaining experience in the classroom environment working with and alongside experienced teachers was the best thing about the program.”

Dimension 4: Developing more sophisticated understandings of the teaching and learning process

Tutors realized deeper complexities in the teaching/learning process while engaged in the tutoring programs was directly related to their growth as reflective practitioners (McLoughlin & Laslak, 2003, p. 278).

- 100% felt being involved in the program added value to their degree
- 67% helped students engage with the curriculum through expansion on ideas and using examples

“Over the course of the program I found that observing and working with different students of different abilities widened my view and understanding of classroom dynamics and challenges.”

“I found that throughout the program it was not so much about children not understanding the work they were presented, but about their perception of their ability to learn.”

Dimension 5: Developing a reflective practice

Tutors indicated that they had grown in their ability to reflect in the teaching-learning process (McLoughlin & Laslak, 2003, p. 278).

- 71% clarified possible future educational and career plans

“I had to learn to adapt to what the student wanted to do and make the lessons more student-centered, focusing on his interests to keep him engaged.”

“I found this program to be a great experience, one I will never forget and it has helped me build my skills to become a teacher.”

Discussion

Most (71%) Coaches felt they developed more empathy for students who face challenges in school, which aligns with the notion that this experience can be considered as service-learning. This is a very positive finding as research shows that empathy is a key factor in developing teachers, and combined with communication skills can aid their ability to affect both the emotional and academic lives of students (Cain, 2008; McLoughlin & Laslak, 2003). Similar benefits from service learning were also found in this pilot program such as strengthening academic learning, developing personal, communication and critical thinking skills, stronger commitment to teaching as a profession, and a greater awareness of the need to adapt instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners (Malone, Jones & Stallings, 2002; Tatebe, 2013). The results also mirror those of McLoughlin and Laslak (2003) that small group tutoring fostered “the ability to pay more attention to how to interact with, and learn from, particular students” (p. 280). The findings are also significant as they align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2014) which outline what graduate teachers should know and be able to do. For example, they clearly align with

Standard 1 (know students and how they learn), Standard 4 (Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments) and Standard 7 (Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community).

Questions for discussion

A. It is clear from the research outlined that there are benefits for first year pre-service teachers to engage in profession-related experience. How can such experiences be further developed and embedded in first year education courses?

B. The issue of paid versus voluntary work in outreach programs such as the Curtin Coaches has implications for sustainability in terms of financial and funding factors and also on the parameters of the program. Will such programs be a fundamentally different experience if the pre-service teachers are not paid? What repercussions arise from recent Fair Work Australia rulings regarding student volunteer work?

References

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2014). *Home page*. Retrieved, from <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/>
- Cain, G. (2008). 'Roots of Empathy': A research study on its impact on teachers in Western Australia. *Journal of Student Wellbeing*, 2, 52-78. Retrieved from: <http://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/JSW/article/viewFile/168/227>
- Gordon, E. E., Morgan, R. R., Ponticell, J. A. and O'Malley, C. J. (2004). Tutoring solutions for no child left behind: Research, practice, and policy implications. *NASSP Bulletin*, 88(638), 59-68.
- Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. (2014). *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/Equity/HigherEducationParticipationAndPartnershipsProgram/Pages/default.aspx>
- Lauer, P. A., Akiba, M., Wilkerson, S. B., Apthorp, H. S., Snow, D., & Martin-Glenn, M. L. (2006). Out-of-school-time programs: A meta-analysis of effects for at-risk Students. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 275-313.
- Malone, D., Jones, B., & Stallings, D. T. (2002). Perspective transformation: Effects of a service-learning tutoring experience on prospective teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 29(1), 61-81.
- McLoughlin, A. S., & Maslak, M. (2003). Prospective teachers perceptions of development during fieldwork: Tutoring as a vehicle for professional growth. *The Teacher Educator*, 38(4), 267-284.
- Review of Australian Higher Education Report. (2009). *Review of Australian Higher Education Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/ResourcesAndPublications/ReviewOfAustralianHigherEducation/Pages/ReviewOfAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>
- Rothman, T., & Henderson, M. (2011). Do school-based tutoring programs significantly improve student performance on standardized tests? *RMLE online*. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ925246.pdf>
- Tatebe, J. (2013). Bridging gaps: service learning in teacher education. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 31(3), 240-250.