

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL PLACEMENTS IN FACILITATING STUDENT TEACHER LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Student placements are an integral element in teacher education and commonly, both students and teachers consider placements a critical aspect of initial teacher education. Within this context, the contemporary nature of placements and their success in meeting professional development needs was investigated throughout the period 2003–2005 by surveying the views of student teachers and teachers.

The findings of this research indicate that students and teachers share many views and consequently several key experiences and opportunities emerge. Different priorities are, however, also highlighted. Overall, perceptions suggest that school placements must be orientated towards a social constructivist paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) qualification for secondary teaching in Scotland, a one-year full time course of study. The course sits alongside other routes into teaching in Scotland – the 4 year BEd (Primary) degree and the recently developed part time PGDE Programmes. The full time PGDE course is organised, by statute, so that placements take up to 50% of course time. Given that they are a significant component of initial teacher education, it is imperative that the purpose and benefit of placements is clearly understood and articulated and that the characteristics and elements of successful placements are known and considered. This requires the analysis of critical questions. Three questions framed the research:

1. Why is placement an important part of learning to teach?
2. What are the essential experiences and opportunities which result in significant learning and professional development occurring during a placement?
3. Are student teacher school placements currently delivering what is required for successful student learning and professional development?

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Why is placement an important part of learning to teach?

During the last fifty years, several paradigms for teacher education have been developed and promoted. These can be viewed independently of one another, but there are points of contact and overlap. In practice no one paradigm addresses all aspects of teacher education. Each involves the student engaging in practice *in-situ* on professional placement and emphasises different elements of learning to teach, resulting, thereby, in different placement experiences.

The competency based paradigm has been the strongest influence on teacher education practice (Feiman-Nemser, 1990: 212). Competency based teacher education aims to set standards for teaching and is criticised for its inability to accommodate personal philosophies and preferences (Valli and Rennert-Ariev, 2002). The generic list of competences applies to all teachers independent of stage (pre-school, primary or secondary) and implies that they can be applied to all contexts, all levels and all modes of teaching. Critics (Ball, 1999; Carr, 2005) see this as behaviourist in orientation,

reducing the role of the teacher to that of ‘technician’. Using a list of competences to improve learning and teaching, is also however, viewed as useful by teacher educators in that it defines standards and enables monitoring and quality control. Although the idea of competences has become a major element in many aspects of initial teacher education (planning, teaching and assessing), there is ‘room for constructive interpretation’ (Landman and Ozga, 1995: 32) where courses retain considerable freedom to decide on the particular approach they take to competences.

Another approach, the personal orientation to teaching, emphasises that one of the ‘chief instruments a teacher uses is his or her own person, and that teaching requires a fit between the teacher as a functionary and the person of the teacher’ (Van Huizen, *et al.*, 2005: 269). This focuses on personal creativity, self-development and self-fulfilment. Critics suggest that this is a one-sided view which overlooks the public and corporate aspects of teaching, and since the teacher’s personality is shaped by social interaction and the socio-cultural environment, this stimulus which supports and develops creativity, self-development and self-fulfilment needs to be acknowledged (Buchmann, 1990). They suggest that theoretical concepts can only be used by student teachers if they can find meaning for them in their personal working which then become embedded in their professional practice.

Another paradigm (‘The Reflective Practitioner’) emphasises reflection and inquiry upon learning and experience as core teacher qualities (Stenhouse, 1975; Schön, 1983; Calderhead and Gates, 1993). Critics suggest, however, that such an approach overemphasises reflection and diminishes the established knowledge, definitions and repertoire required in teaching (McIntyre, 1996).

Finally, Van Huizen, *et al.* (2005) offer a ‘Vygotskian Paradigm’ for teacher education which focuses on the contextualised support student teachers require to develop a professional identity. Professional learning and development evolves through participation in social practice (placements). In such placements, action and understanding are dialectically related (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 102). As Vygotsky suggested, most human capacities are not learned in isolation but with other people who help the learner to perform actions in pursuit of outcomes meaningful to that learner.

‘Participation involves being drawn into a setting that includes a programme directed to the realization of values and goals, forms of social interaction and co-operation in an institutional context, and the use of cultural resources.’
(Van Huizen, *et al.*, 2005: 274)

With an emphasis on development towards a standard of competence, development of a personal orientation towards teaching, and reflective enquiry, the Vygotskian perspective on learning and development offers a comprehensive paradigm for teacher education.

Within any model of teacher education, University-based learning might not connect with learning on placement and an experiential barrier may be created between academic learning which is perceived as theoretical and abstract, and placement learning which is seen as being applied, practical and skills-based – one of the roots of the unhelpful ‘theory/practice’ dualist opposition (Foster, 1999; Asher and Malet, 1999; Hobson, 2003). If, however, learning to teach is conceptualised and planned in such a way that all the dimensions of learning to teach feature throughout the learning of the student teacher, in both university and school-based elements, this opposition may be avoided and the resulting holistic learning experience might be more meaningful, purposeful and effective. The challenge to teacher educators (those based in schools as well as in universities), is to provide effective and linked learning experiences which encompass all of the identified elements in university and placements. This is not to say that the location of learning is irrelevant; there is a relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs. Neither is it

merely a matter of structure or of location. The challenge is to translate professional development as an integral part of social practice into an analytic approach to learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

What are the essential experiences and opportunities which result in significant learning and professional development occurring during a placement?

Professional placements in school are an essential part of initial teacher education. Student teachers achieving professional growth and development whilst on a placement requires the provision of a range of experiences and opportunities. It is also dependent upon there being a rationale and approach which informs the design of the placement, is shared by all involved and reflected in their relationships, behaviour and dispositions.

The innovative and influential Oxford Internship Scheme of the late 1980's, which focused upon integration and partnership in initial teacher education, identified agreed goals within teacher education. These goals included beginner teachers being well informed, being highly skilled in a range of areas and being able to critically evaluate practice. However, it was noted that student teachers are marginal people in schools with little status and that there are substantial differences between the modes and strategies promoted by University-based and school-based educators. Also, little value is given to the observation of experienced teachers and that little help is given to student teachers in critically examining the range of practice that is observed (Benton, 1990).

Elliot and Calderhead (1995) see teacher education as a complex and multi-dimensional growth process that involves changes in knowledge, beliefs and skills. This process involves increasing knowledge about pupils, a changed focus from self-concerns to the concerns of the learners to whom teaching is directed, routines becoming automated, an increase in meta-cognition and more differentiated, multi-dimensional and context-specific problem-solving. Students must, therefore, spend time in communities, schools and classrooms. This situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 29) places learning in social relationships and in situations of co-participation. Not only is situating the learning experience in a school and classroom necessary, but the situation of the learner within the community — the extent to which the learner/student teacher is encouraged to be appropriately involved — is a critical factor, raising issues of power and status. Lave and Wenger (1991) see the learner ideally joining the community of learning at the periphery and, as confidence increases, moving to the centre. Being peripheral can be positive and empowering in that it can involve a progressive change or shift towards more intensive participation and power. Conversely, however, it can also be disempowering in that, often legitimately, it prevents full participation.

With models of teacher education increasing the amount of time student teachers spend in school, classroom teachers now have increasing responsibility for the professional growth and development of beginning teachers. Arguably, therefore, student participation and involvement in the school community is dependent upon successful induction and the exemplification provided by supporting teachers or mentors. In the Scottish context, a major current concern is the definition of 'partnership' between schools and Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs). Previous government moves to introduce mentoring received a serious setback when, in 1994-95, teachers, backed by the main teachers' union, resisted and rejected the introduction of this form of partnership. This took place despite a successful pilot by one teacher education institution. There is currently significant support amongst Scottish teacher educators for innovation on partnership (Smith, Brisard and Mentor, 2006). The Second Stage Review of Initial Teacher Education (Scottish Executive, 2005a) and accompanying Ministerial response (Scottish Executive, 2005b) stress the need for a clearer understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities

of stakeholders. This focus on developing partnership is currently a key issue in teacher education and is evident in, for example, the national Scottish Teachers for a New Era (STNE) project based at the University of Aberdeen. The developments of teacher education through this project include a radically different approach to placements and to partnership.

The growing importance of mentoring as an educational methodology makes a significant contribution to the rationale of school placement as a substantive element of successful student learning. Critical to a successful mentoring relationship are trust and identification, the latter being defined as ‘...the amount of projective self-image or value congruence that the protégé feels toward an idealized mentor.’ (Bouquillon, *et al.*, 2005: 241). According to Bouquillon, *et al.*, trust may be gained when the mentor is conceived by the protégé or mentee as competent, concerned, open and reliable. Trust and identification are associated with three mentor functions which provide positive experiences and opportunities for the recipient student: psychosocial support (involving providing acceptance, friendship and confirmation of behaviour), role modelling and career development (including protecting the protégé, providing challenges and facilitating positive exposure and visibility). These demands are diverse and complicated.

Giles and Wilson (2004), suggest mentoring brings developmental benefit personally and professionally to both participants. Mentoring is not always, however, a positive experience. Constructive criticism can be interpreted negatively or student teachers may feel bullied by their mentor (Maguire, 2001). Mentoring may be conservative, discouraging the student teacher from taking risks, working flexibly and creatively and using their initiative (Beck and Kosnik, 2002). This may occur when assessment is closely related to ‘a catalogue of prescribed competences’ (Jones, 2001: 82), when the mentoring practices reflect the mentor’s belief that ‘good teachers work things out for themselves’ (Feiman-Nemser, 2001: 1033), or when mentors expect to cultivate a replica model of themselves (Adams and Tusiewicz, 1995). Power differentials can impact upon the student experience of mentoring and upon outcomes. As assessor, the mentor has an unequal share of power. Feelings of inferiority and inadequacy not only undermine relationships but may restrict the development of an individual style (Jones, 2001). Young, *et al.* (2005) suggest that relational parity can only exist when mentor and student teacher view each other as peers, both make distinct contributions and ‘feel invested in each other, albeit in somewhat different ways’ (p.176).

Clearly, a successful student teacher placement requires more than the provision of a set of pre-determined tasks or activities. Growth and development occurs in a varied, subtle, indeterminate and often unpredictable social situation. Whilst the desired outcome of a placement is professional growth and development, the experience is personal and subjective. Personal characteristics and individual biographies of mentor and student teacher also profoundly influence the kind and quality of the relationships that develop (Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002). With these influences to consider and the related social complexities, all participants in placements need to be fully aware of the affective nature of situated professional growth and development.

Are student teacher school placements currently delivering what is required for successful student learning and professional development?

Issues concerning the placement of student teachers in schools have become more prominent recently for several reasons. The Scottish National Agreement between teachers and management (2000), known as the ‘McCrone Report’, considered the framework for professional conditions of service for teachers, including the role of teachers in initial teacher education. The report stated that:

‘...schools chosen for teacher placements must have departments where good practice is the norm, and where sufficient support and guidance can be given to trainees...’ (McCrone Committee, 2000, para. 3.5)

The First Stage Review of Initial Teacher Education in Scotland (2001) which arose as a direct result of comments made to the McCrone Committee, promoted the concept of more effective partnership, but it was found that:

‘...the current arrangements for placements for students, can in some cases, be unsatisfactory and fail to provide students with appropriate learning experiences’. (Deloitte and Touche, 2001: 7)

Brisard, *et al.* (2005), after undertaking significant research, recommended to the General Teaching Council for Scotland that a framework for ITE partnerships be established. This framework should be based upon a collaborative model, recognising the contribution of all stakeholders and increasing the range of interaction between schools and universities. The introduction of new models of initial teacher education, such as part time courses or those with a substantial element of open or distance learning, has also led to a reconsideration of student placements. The number of students on pre-service placements is due to increase over the next few years, because of the commitment of the Scottish Executive (the devolved governing body of Scotland) to raise the number of teachers and because of the age profile of the profession.

The Inspectorate Review of *Initial Teacher Education* (2002), stated:

‘Overall, stakeholders expressed broad satisfaction with the provision of ITE in Scotland. In particular, they saw recently qualified teachers to have a good understanding of the curriculum they were to teach and the knowledge, skills and understanding to teach effectively.’ (HMIE, 2002: 5)

A subsequent HMIE review of student teacher placements within teacher education revealed some perturbing data in relation to school placements where ‘inconsistency in the level of support given to student teachers on placement’ and ‘increasing difficulties in securing good quality placements’ was found (HMIE, 2005: 11). Considerable variation within university practice in terms of the preparation of teachers involved in working with student teachers has also been reported (Hagger, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; EIS, 2005).

HMIE were asked by the (Scottish Executive) Minister for Education and Young People to report on current good practice of student teacher placements and to make recommendations for improving their quality and provision. The research for this task revealed a variation in the quality of school placements. However there ‘was good practice in many of the schools visited’ (HMIE, 2005: 9) and all those involved — students, teachers, head teachers, education authority and university staff — agreed on what constituted good practice. As one of the most detailed studies in this field, key features of effective practice for students were analysed and included a broad induction programme; a good range of classes; a well-defined framework; a supportive learning environment. Other features were good feedback, access to the school’s resources, being welcomed and valued by schools, being treated as professionals in training, having good role models, being involved in wider aspects of school life and being given responsibility to teach on their own.

Given the range of views expressed in previous research and recent criticism of the effectiveness of placements (SEED, 2005a; 2005b), the authors felt compelled to explore these issues further and to answer the question - what are the essential experiences and opportunities which result in student learning and professional development occurring during a placement and, are student teacher school placements currently delivering what is required for successful student learning and development?

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory survey was used to investigate the experiences and opportunities that students and teachers thought essential to school placement. Participants responded to open ended self-completion questionnaires designed to encourage reflection. Two phases of data collection were completed.

Phase One

Phase one involved a survey (questionnaires) of all PGDE(S) students studying at one University (from 2 year groups) regarding their views on the necessary experiences and support required during a successful school-based placement. The questionnaire was devised by two members of staff who taught on the course in consultation with an independent researcher. It was piloted in one secondary school.

Students in session 2002–2003 were sent the questionnaire with a short rationale explaining the research via email. They were asked to respond within a given timescale and sent a reminder, and 14 (9% of the PGDE(S) student cohort) replied. This low response rate may have been due to the timing of the e-mail towards the end of the course and also to the voluntary nature of the questionnaire's return. The same questionnaire was issued in hard copy to a second cohort of students for session 2003–2004. The questionnaire was completed by 68 students, (38% of the PGDE(S) student cohort). This relatively high return was expected as the students were evaluating the Programme at the time and appeared to see this as an extension of the evaluation process.

Phase Two

Phase two involved a survey (questionnaires) of Principal Teachers in eight secondary schools in four local authorities, regarding the experiences and support that they give to students whilst on placement in their school. The four local authorities were chosen because they assist the University in placing the largest number of PGDE(S) students on school placements and it was felt they had the most experience. Within each authority, two schools were chosen at random and each school was sent questionnaires; 200 were sent in total. Head teachers were asked to invite all the Principal Teachers or subject/area team leaders in their school, to participate voluntarily. Teachers from a range of school subjects responded. The quality of data provided in the replies, suggested that the teachers who completed the questionnaire, took the exercise seriously. This research endeavours to understand the perspectives of the individual participants. Such an approach acknowledges that the researcher is not a detached objective observer but that she/he shares the participant's frames of reference. Direct, phenomenological experience is seen as being essential for understanding and insight rather than being rejected because it is too subjective. It is assumed that the presence of a response means that it is valuable to the process of becoming a professional teacher.

The Questionnaires

Two open ended questions were presented in the questionnaires. Participants were asked to provide 'a list of experiences and opportunities that you think are essential whilst on school placement: eg. 'observe others teaching' and 'what you think teachers/principal teachers should do to provide you with support and exemplification', 'raise points of concern as early as possible in the placement'. This resulted in almost 1000 statements being made. These responses were coded afterwards using the representational approach (Sapsford, 1999). Responses were then systematically interpreted and assigned to codes and classifications. The codes were developed from the student responses and no imposition of codes from the literature review was made. To assist with validity, both authors devised the code list

and classifications together and then assigned responses to these. The classifications and code descriptions evolved as the responses were successively interpreted. The 592 student responses were coded into 103 descriptions under 27 classifications + 'other'. These code descriptions and classifications were then applied to the teacher data and, significantly, a further 19 were added to encapsulate all the teacher comments.

Limitations/Bias

The response rates were not as high as hoped for. This could possibly give a sample which is not representative and detailed results need to be treated with caution. Conclusions, however, are drawn from trends in the detailed results and, hence, are considered to be valid. Relying solely on self-report data carries some risk, since given their stage of development, the student teachers may have limited insight into their needs for professional development. Nevertheless, when placed alongside other evidence, they provide an important dimension. Both questions in the questionnaire illustrated the type of response expected with an example, and this may have introduced an element of bias.

RESULTS

Given that there were so many responses to the questionnaire, that placement is a complex experience and that learning to teach is multi-dimensional, it is not surprising that there was a wide range of statements. The percentage of respondents emphasising the same experience or opportunity is relatively small. The highest percentage for any one shared response from teachers is 50% and from students it is 58.5%. The total number of responses from individual students ranged from 3 to 13. The total number of responses from individual teachers ranged from 2 to 19. The number and percentage of responses by students and teachers are shown in Table 1.

The five categories with the most frequently reported responses were the same for students and teachers:

- getting to know the school and having a sense of belonging
- extending teaching experiences
- observe others teaching
- advice/guidance given
- regular feedback

although the order within this 'top five' was different. 'Sense of belonging', 'extending teaching experiences' and 'observing others teaching' were listed most often by students; 'advice/guidance given' was seen as essential by teachers more often than any of the other categories.

Table 1: Number and percentage of responses in each classification by students and teachers

Classification	Number of responses		Per cent of all responses <i>(rounded to nearest whole)</i>	
	Students	Teachers	Students	Teachers
Responses made by 5% or more (of either students or teachers)				
Getting to know the school and having a sense of belonging	75	49	13%	14%
Extending Teaching Experiences	75	47	13%	13%
Observe Others Teaching	74	39	13%	11%
Advice/Guidance Given	47	52	8%	15%
Regular Feedback	40	37	7%	10%
Constructive Feedback	36	11	6%	3%
Empathy	32	16	5%	4%
Taking Responsibility	26	20	4%	6%
Other responses made by less than 5% of students & teachers				
Expectations, experiment, support early, observation of teaching by others, Continuous Professional Development opportunities, resources, access to documentation, collaboration, pre-placement planning, all teachers involved to take notes on performance, self-assessment/self-evaluation, placement design, teacher responding to student's learning needs, nominated person(s) for feedback, placement structure, student treated professionally, written feedback given, raise points of concern directly with student first, assessment, others.	187	85	32%	24%
Total	592	356		

To illustrate the coding, Table 2 gives examples of responses coded under the first three classifications at the top of Table 1.

Table 2: Comparison of the most common responses from students and teachers

Classification	Code (description)	% of students n=82	% of PTs n=38
Getting to know the school and having a sense of belonging	Become familiar with and/or meeting all staff (including guidance, learning support/ additional needs, senior senior management, Newly Qualified Teachers)	22	28
	Attend department meetings/ Principal Teachers' meetings/ Teacher Regents' meetings/ staff meetings	18	50
	Whole-school /extra-curricular activities eg. School trips, student to participate in extra curricular activities, activities days.	26	42
	Being treated as member of dept (not outsider)	17	5
Observe Others Teaching	Observe any teacher inc other subjects	58	47
	Observe various teachers delivering similar material	3	18
Extending Teaching Experiences	Teaching Secondary 1 to Secondary 6 and to different levels	17	15
	Attending parents night	12	28
	Shadowing a pupil/class/teacher (Primary7/Secondary 1 shadowing)	25	15
	Help to validly assess pupils work	4	28
	Give assistance with curriculum development	8	21
	Team teaching with experienced staff	9	21

In the following sections, some of the most common experiences/suggestions/ opportunities from students and teachers are illustrated for the classifications in Tables 1 and 2.

Getting to know the school and having a sense of belonging featured prominently in both student and teacher responses. One student wanted:

“somewhere to work, leave your books, bag etc, then you don't have to worry if you've taken someone's place or have to act as a pack horse for days on end”.

Another wished to:

“... feel part of the team, even if it is temporary”.

The experience listed as essential by half of the teachers was for student teachers to attend meetings where decisions were made and information shared. One teacher commented on the importance of involvement and participation in such meetings for “professional discussions”. This suggests getting beyond simply the sharing of information.

To observe others teaching was the experience which students (58%) and teachers (47%) most commonly thought was essential. This substantial student number wanted to observe any teacher, irrespective of subject specialism.

“I felt by my second placement that I was expected to teach straight away, but I would have benefited from observing more teaching styles and strategies”.

Another related this to reflection and analysis of their professional practice by making comparisons:

“observation for the last week to compare your own teaching with that of the teachers”.

Extending teaching experiences was suggested by just over 25% of students by, for example, ‘shadowing a pupil, class or teacher’. One student commented that

“shadowing a class is always good – to see other subjects, and their different teaching strategies”.

Other important experiences which teachers identified to assist in extending teaching experiences related to ‘attending parents evenings’ (28%), ‘helping to validly assess pupils’ work’ (28%) and ‘providing assistance with curriculum development’ (21%).

DISCUSSION

The results were analysed then evaluated in relation to three themes based upon the respondents’ priorities:

- Sense of belonging
- Communication and support
- Professional development opportunities.

These themes were selected as they encompass the experiences and opportunities given highest priority by the participants (see Table 1).

That the majority of responses from students highlight learning through working and communicating with others illustrates that for students (particularly, but not exclusively) placement is very much a social activity: learning and development on placement is dependent upon the social context in which the activity occurs. This supports the promotion of a social constructivist approach to placements and by extension, to teacher education (Van Huizen, *et al.*, 2005).

Sense of Belonging

A community of inquiry is marked by both ‘a sense of belonging’ where individuals feel supported, as well as a commitment to ‘critical reflection and constructive engagement with others’ (Darling, 2001: 8). Our data provided rich examples of students’ need for this sense of belonging and feedback. In fact, nothing was seen as being more important by students than this. Whilst teachers also saw ‘belonging’ as important, they suggested that the giving of advice and guidance as being of greater

importance. Students and teachers mentioned several elements which contributed to achieving a sense of belonging, including attending a range of relevant meetings and participation in whole school and extra curricular activities.

A feeling by students that they belong to the school community, is viewed as a critical pre-requisite to their professional development. It is clear that students need to feel included as a member of 'the team' and not be treated as an outsider, to engage with and be known by a range of staff including senior management and department colleagues. This relates to the findings of Hayes (2002) where student teachers recognised they were 'outsiders' and needed to discover the norms of the school, its staff and the school culture. In the findings of this research, nearly one fifth of students stated that being treated as a member of a department was essential; interestingly this was mentioned by only two of the teachers. This social 'situated' and participatory learning is a recognised key feature of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; McIntyre, 1997; Merriam and Caffarella, 1998).

Communication and Support

It is evident that half of students and a quarter of teachers valued the giving or receiving of feedback in some form as being an essential opportunity or experience. This is indicative of its significance to student professional development. The significant difference in the number of students and teachers prioritising giving/receiving feedback is noteworthy and is suggestive of the fact that not all teachers are aware of the importance to students of receiving feedback. A significant percentage of students and teachers specifically wanted the feedback to be given regularly and in quality time. What 'regularly' means varied between students and teachers; teachers prioritised giving feedback after every lesson whereas no student did so. Discussing concerns early was more important to students. It appears, perhaps not surprisingly, that the purpose and form of the feedback is of more significance to students than the timing of it. More students than teachers mentioned that feedback should be informal but also appropriate and systematic. Further, it should reassure as well as challenge and should be formative. Additionally, points of concern should be made clearly and feedback should include suggestions for ways to overcome concerns.

The teachers' experience of supporting students' professional development appears evident in the frequent mentioning by teachers of the content of the feedback. More teachers than students thought that feedback should be to support the development of teaching and planning and should include advice and guidance on lesson planning in particular and appropriate teaching strategies. This aspect was the most highly rated by teachers. Other aspects of advice and guidance seen as necessary by teachers were discipline/class management, on resource issues and on health and safety matters. Teachers also mentioned training in the use of equipment, advice on standards, advice on professional development issues, advice on assessment and advice on school and department planning. The only comment regarding the content of feedback made by more students than teachers was that feedback should include exemplification from teachers' classroom experience.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

a) Opportunities to observe others teaching

Observation for students and teachers was seen as an essential experience and within this aspect, they suggested a varied range of observation opportunities. To observe others teaching, including other subjects, was amongst the most common responses of both students and teachers. Observation in its many forms, remains one of the essential experiences of school placement highlighted by participants in this study.

In advice to schools (University of Aberdeen, 2005) a developmental approach to

school placement is suggested, where students start by observing and assisting, then take responsibility for parts of lessons before taking full responsibility for a lesson. This does not fully meet the needs of some students who value observation to such an extent, that they suggested opportunities for further observation as a placement progresses. As their awareness of teaching expands and develops, students may be looking for opportunities to test ideas, revisit and analyse and make sense of observed practice by good role models, before integrating and embedding elements into their own practice. This extends beyond the competency based paradigm and aligns closely to the personal orientation to teaching, Vygotskian and reflective practitioner paradigms, where, within a co-operative and social environment, the emphasis on self reflection and enquiry helps to generate personal preferences and assists beginning teachers in forming their own professional perspectives and philosophy (Van Huizen, *et al.*, 2005). Observing allows student teachers to see the consequences of another's actions and social learning theory suggests that individuals learn from observing other individuals (Merriam and Caffarella, 1998). Therefore, learning to become a teacher is not simply about observing and acquiring knowledge, structures or models.

b) Opportunities to take responsibility

Taking gradual responsibility for a lesson is advised (University of Aberdeen, 2005) and it is surprising, therefore, to find that just under a quarter of the teachers, and no students, identified taking responsibility for part of a lesson as an essential experience for school placements. We would have expected gradual responsibility to be identified by students also. The opportunity to shadow a class, teacher or pupil and teach a range of different ages and levels is important to the students while the emphasis for teachers here is slightly different where attending parents' evenings, assessing pupils' learning, assisting with curriculum development and teaching a range of different ages and levels, are their preferences. As one would expect, teachers have a broader view of teaching than students and the importance of development work for the classroom, prepared out with this environment, is also a priority for them. Teachers are also more aware of the external impact of assessment and of attending Parents' Evenings on public accountability and as a means of developing working partnerships with parents.

Students themselves should strongly influence their learning in any school placement and mentors must be sensitive to their needs (Anderson and Shannon, 1995). Given the complex and gradual nature of achieving teaching competence, learning from mistakes in a supportive learning environment to achieve personal fulfilment and success (HMIE, 2005), it may be necessary for student teachers to be further alerted to the significance of these professional development opportunities. Very few students or teachers identified any form of experimentation such as the opportunity to try new learning and teaching approaches.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite its complexity, placement is valued as an essential part of learning to teach. This study confirmed that the current practice of the participants is, to some extent, currently delivering what is required for successful student learning and development and in doing so, is meeting several of the key features of good practice outlined in the HMIE report (2005).

Placement offers opportunities for learning and professional development which not only are best undertaken 'in the field', but need to be, since student teacher learning is situated and social. The student teachers and teachers in this study highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging. This could so easily become marginalised due to the sheer volume of other, perhaps more measurable demands of

a school placement. Yet this belonging to a new and sometimes alien environment is a significant contributor to student teachers' professional development in general.

The articulation and integration of communities of practice, in school and university, is essential to the achievement of learning and professional development. To solve this effectively, partnerships must be close and complimentary with contributions from partners that are viewed as different but equally legitimate. The social constructivist approach, applied to all shareholders, could result in a truly collaborative approach, a joint enterprise to create new meanings by enabling a refinement and rethinking of professional practice. This would go some way towards meeting the suggestion of HMIE that those involved in teacher education should 'clarify their roles and responsibilities in relation to all aspects of student teacher placements' and 'build on the successes' (HMIE, 2005: 8). No one partner can succeed alone. How this is to be achieved will be critical to future success and may be a contentious issue where funding is required or needs to be re-channelled.

While recent engagement amongst SEED, universities and education authorities regarding student teacher placements has helped to clarify and strengthen the structures and procedures necessary for more effective placements, there are further targets to be addressed at a deeper level.

Successful learning by student teachers on placement in schools is heavily dependent upon social factors — belonging, participation, collaboration, responsiveness, clear and successful communication — and, therefore, while practice by teacher educators must be orientated towards the social constructivist paradigm, it must also take cognisance of the affective domain and the emotional welfare of the learners. This is especially so in relation to mentoring.

The partnership in schools between teacher mentors and student teachers in this research was partly one sided for each partner, with students expecting to get a range of forms of support and feedback from teachers and conversely, teachers expecting to give a range. This suggests a need to develop a more democratic, collaborative model of learning within the mentor and student teacher relationship and to empower both if the partnership is to be a mutually beneficial one. To achieve relational parity the agenda needs to be set by both, where experienced teachers, just as student teachers, give access to their own practice — the good and the bad. These realistic examples can then be critically and constructively discussed and analysed, with this dialogue helping to develop the critical enquiry skills expected of today's professionals. Since it is likely that schools will be given more responsibility to assess and mentor student teachers in the near future, we must acknowledge that continuing professional development for prospective mentors is not always an option. With opportunities to critically examine their diverse roles and how implementation of these impacts on the learners, this raises questions about the kinds of interpersonal and professional skills mentors require and whether one mentor can effectively fulfil all roles and responsibilities.

In order to maximise effectiveness of placement, we must take full account of student teachers' subjective perspectives. Any cohort of learners is of mixed ability. This involves responding to individual learning needs and devising a series of appropriate learning experiences and opportunities. These student teachers do not, as some experienced teachers do, hold the assumption that teaching is a solitary activity where you eventually find your own way after some support. These different perspectives, can limit the effectiveness of the mentoring process and related outcomes. The evidence suggests that some student teachers require longer periods of formative experience which must involve an appropriate mix of observation and collaborative teaching, in response to each student's stage of professional development. These aspects should feature throughout later as well as earlier placements when student learning is deeper and more contextualised and when, consequently, they can draw more from observation and collaboration. While beneficial to all concerned,

extending observation and collaborative teaching may also enhance the model of mentoring by establishing productive and mutually supportive relationships, through continued interaction and reflection. There is, however, a more comprehensive and beneficial mentoring model to aim for which establishes a community of enquiry which is underpinned by a supportive environment – ‘a sense of belonging’ as well as a commitment to ‘critical reflection and constructive engagement with others’ (Darling, 2001: 8). The student teachers in this research clearly articulated their need for a sense of belonging and for dialogue that would aid their professional development. In order to achieve this desired outcome, dialogue has to focus on critical enquiry, to challenge and extend thinking. The possible tension between ‘supportive’ and ‘critical’ merits further investigation.

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