Extended School Placement in Initial Teacher Education: Factors Impacting Professional Learning, Agency and Sense of Belonging

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Abstract: School placement plays a critical and complex role in student teacher development as well as in their professional dispositions and career attitudes. It is where theory and practice meet, teaching skills are developed, professional relationships formed and future careers envisioned. This mixed methods study explores student teachers' experiences with and perspectives about new models of extended school placements developed in Ireland following significant policy and programme reform. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaires with one of the first cohorts to experience a reconceptualised initial teacher education programme, including extended school placement periods in a variety of school settings. This paper will explore student teachers' perspectives regarding the value of the extended placement and factors influencing their professional learning, agency and sense of belonging. Overall, our findings confirm the pedagogical benefits of the extended placement in two different school settings for student teachers' professional learning. However, they also highlight how a number of factors, including the existence (or absence) of school support structures, school culture, peer networks, paid or unpaid additional workload and financial pressures impacted on student teachers' capabilities to develop their skills and professional agency, their sense of belonging and, in some cases, their physical and mental health.

Keywords: *Agency, belonging, mentoring, practicum, school culture, teacher education, Ireland.*

Introduction

School Placement (or practicum) forms an integral part of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes providing student teachers with opportunities to contribute to and learn within a school community. Some of the core aims associated with school placements focus on student teachers' ability to practice, experiment and develop teaching and learning approaches and classroom management skills as well as their understanding of schools as complex and collaborative ecosystems supporting students' academic and professional development. During school placement, it is hoped that student teachers are appropriately supported and challenged so that they develop their competency and teacher identity as well as a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. In addition to the various goals associated with the development of student teachers' professional knowledge, skills and identity, school placement is also recognised as a significant period of stress and hardship for students caused by various internal and external factors (Burns et al., 2023; Caires et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2018; Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2023; Kilroy, 2016).

This paper explores the impact of recent changes in initial teacher education (ITE) policy and practice in the Republic of Ireland on student teachers' experiences and professional learning. In Ireland, all teachers need to be registered with the Irish Teaching Council, the regulatory body for the teaching profession which also accredits ITE programmes. Entry to ITE is competitive and demand for places has exceeded supply for many years resulting in a high calibre and highly regarded teaching profession (Heinz, 2008, 2013; Heinz & Keane, 2018). In 2011, the Irish Teaching Council developed the 'Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education' (Teaching Council, 2011b) to set out a path for the development of teacher education and teacher professional learning. One of the main pillars of the consequent ITE programme reform was the extension of undergraduate programmes from three to four years, and of post-graduate programmes from one to two years. New postgraduate masters-level programmes started to incorporate extended and more immersive practicum experiences, especially during year 2, as well as teaching-related research (Heinz, 2014). The importance of

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experiencing school life and practice was highlighted as a core requirement for all programmes which should be fostered by higher education institutions (HEIs), school management and mentor teachers. A change in terminology from 'teaching practice' to 'school placement' and a call for higher education ITE providers to develop 'new and innovative school placement models using a partnership approach, whereby HEIs and schools actively collaborate in the organisation of the school placement' set the tone for a new approach to ITE placement in Ireland (Teaching Council, 2011a, 2017, 2020).

This paper focuses on the school placement experiences of Professional Master of Education (PME) students during the second year of their programme following the reconceptualization and extension of ITE programmes in the Republic of Ireland. The study's participants were the third cohort to undertake the new and extended masters level initial teacher education programme. A mixed methods approach was used to investigate how student teachers were experiencing the extended school placement and whether the new structures enabled them to "participate in school life in a way that is structured and supported" and to "apply educational theory in a variety of teaching situations and school contexts" (Teaching Council, 2017, p. 6). The central research question was: What are the school placement experiences of second year Professional Master of Education students following policy and programme reforms in initial teacher education? In the following section we will review national and international research in the area of ITE placement paying special attention to three key themes that are most relevant to this study: i) the role of the placement in bridging the theory practice divide, ii) the roles of key stakeholders and the importance of partnership, and iii) student teachers' experiences and perspectives on school placement.

Literature Review

The Role of the School Placement in Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide

The key function of the ITE placement for student teacher development has been highlighted throughout the international literature (Hall et al., 2018; Korthagen, 2004; Murray-Harvey et al., 2000); "the overwhelming evidence of a decade of research on teacher knowledge is that knowledge of teaching is acquired and developed by the personal experience of teaching" (Munby et al., 2001, p. 897). Through connecting academic and placement elements, teacher educators strive to develop meaningful links between educational theories and their practical application. Nevertheless, existing research (Farrell, 2021; Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Higgins et al., 2013; Korthagen, 2004, 2012) clearly demonstrates that building meaningful connections between theory and practice and partnerships between placement schools and ITE providers are complex and ongoing concerns in ITE. Forty years ago, Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) cautioned educators that efforts of linking educational theories with practical applications may result in a 'wash out' of educational theory and ideas.

In the Irish teacher education context, conceptualisations of teachers as "reflective, enquiry-oriented, life-long learners" relate closely to the theory-practice challenge (Teaching Council, 2011b). Since the reconceptualization of ITE programmes, most student teachers complete practice-related research projects, often implemented during the final year of their studies and directly related to their final school placement (Keane & Heinz, 2019; O'Mahoney & Heinz, 2016). There is a consensus throughout the literature that "the practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop their personal teaching competence" (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005, p. 291).

Research emphasizes the importance of prolonged placements to ensure that student teachers can truly immerse themselves in school life. However, placements require careful design, including appropriate supports from school and university partners. High-quality learning during school placement is also dependent on the existence of a learning culture within the wider school, effective balancing between individual and organizational needs and, finally, availability of sufficient time and space (Heinz & Fleming, 2019; McNamara et al., 2014). It is important for teacher educators and school mentors to recognise student teachers' dual positionality as students and beginning teachers in an established school community (Murray & Passy, 2014). Student teachers' difficulties in this context have been linked to their struggles to belong and gain 'peripheral legitimacy' in communities of experienced teachers (Johnston, 2016).

Schools as Sites of Learning - Key Actors, Partnership and Challenges

Schools are no longer viewed as 'just' a place to apply theory in the classroom. Rather, their vital importance in teacher development has been recognised and has led to closer attention to the importance of meaningful partnership approaches (Cochran-Smith, 2005; de Mora & Wood, 2014; Farrell, 2021; Heinz & Fleming, 2019). In Ireland, the benefits of involving schools more systematically in initial teacher education have long been extolled and the emphasis on partnership has increased over the past decade (Coolahan, 2003; Farrell, 2021). The Irish Teaching Council (2013, p. 6) describes partnership as the "the processes, structures and arrangements that enable the partners involved in school placement to work and learn collaboratively in teacher education".

In Ireland, ITE school placement structures and partnerships between schools and HEIs have historically been undefined and informal. Ni Aingleis (2008) argued that partnerships were one sided, with HEIs benefitting more than schools.

However, research by Heinz and Fleming (2019) emphasised the difficulties experienced by second-level ITE providers in the context of schools' 'voluntary' contributions which can lead to imbalanced relationships between schools and teacher education providers ultimately constraining ITE practice and student teacher development. During school placement, mentor teachers provide the most substantial day-to-day support to, and interaction with, student teachers. However, while their roles and responsibilities have been defined by the Teaching Council (2013) in the School Placement Guidelines, the types and degree of support provided to student teachers differ widely between schools (Heinz & Fleming, 2019). Challenges that continue to inhibit the development of closer school-university partnerships include the limited time available for mentor teachers and university tutors to meet (Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Young et al., 2015), lack of clarity of roles (Chambers & Armour, 2012; Farrell, 2021) and lack of professional development opportunities for co-operating teachers which can result in inconsistent support and feedback received by student teachers (Clarke et al., 2012; Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Hudson, 2014).

It is widely recognised that mentor teachers are very influential in student teacher development. However, in the current context of limited support and quality assurance (Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Higgins et al., 2013), the effect of mentor teachers' influence and potential challenges associated with the mentor teacher-student teacher relationship are not fully clear. For example, in schools where school leaders and mentor teachers approach their work following an apprenticeship model of mentoring (Wang & Odell, 2007), a student teacher may try to mimic their mentor teachers' conservative teaching or classroom management style without opportunities to critically interrogate their own perspectives and/or develop their competencies with more innovative methodologies (Sultana, 2005; Woodgate-Jones, 2012). Furthermore, mentor teachers may be reluctant to provide appropriate feedback, sometimes due to a fear of possible negative repercussions for their relationship with student teachers (Maynard, 2000) or, indeed, as a result of doubts regarding their competencies as mentor teachers (Heinz & Fleming, 2019). Student teachers, on the other hand, are often unwilling to discuss challenging experiences with their mentor teachers (LaBoskey & Richert, 2002) fearing that their reputation may be damaged and future job opportunities negatively affected. While the role and tasks of the mentor teacher have been set out by the Teaching Council, they are vague in their description.

HEI tutors are required to support student teachers throughout their placement, to provide feedback and perform summative assessment. They are also tasked with promoting reflective practice and bridging the theory practice divide. Ultimately, partnership work remains the responsibilities of ITE providers who 'should support placement tutors and mentor [co-operating] teachers to ensure the guidance is implemented in a consistent manner' (Teaching Council, 2013, p. 16). This is a big ask in a context where partnership continues to rely on schools' 'goodwill' and teachers' 'voluntary contributions'.

Student Teachers' Experiences and Perspectives on School Placement

In their recent Irish study, Hall et al. (2018) describe school placement as "the space where theory and practice meet for students, where skills are honed, where idealism and desire for teaching gain expression and are revitalized, and where self-belief in their capability is affirmed" (p. 154). Student teachers in Hall et al.'s study appreciated the extended teaching block of ten weeks as offering a more authentic teaching experience which made them feel like genuine teachers. These findings mirror student teachers' prioritisation of placement as a key factor in their learning reported in international research (Caires et al., 2012; Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Murray-Harvey et al., 2000). Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) found that 90 percent of student teachers considered their placement to be the most significant part in the preparation for teaching (p. 298) and Caires et al. (2012) highlighted the positive impact of school placement in relation to students' "growing levels of autonomy and self-confidence" (p. 169).

A less affirmative yet also widespread theme throughout the literature relates to anxiety and fear experienced by student teachers during school placement which are often related to contextual and pedagogical concerns. Pedagogical concerns can centre around classroom management and student teachers' own perceived standard of teaching (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Moore, 2003; Poulou, 2007). Contextual stress factors may relate to difficult relationships, "excessive, highly pressured and unrealistic" workloads (Hall et al., 2018, p. 162), financial concerns (often related to student teachers' inability to work part-time), issues relating to unpaid work, travel and other practicum-related expenses (including accommodation and costs of clothes and materials) (Hall et al., 2018; Heinz et al., 2023; Prendergast et al., 2021; Ryan, 2023). Experiences of stress can be further compounded as a result of lacking or varying levels of support received from mentor teachers or HEI tutors (Caires et al., 2012; Kilroy, 2016).

Following programme and policy reform, significant efforts have been made by all stakeholders in Ireland to enhance student teachers' learning and development during their school placement. As described earlier, modifications include the extensions of programmes and placements, new research elements and increased emphasis on reflective and enquiry-based practice (Teaching Council, 2011a, 2011b, 2020). As reforms have been implemented and the length and focus of school placement extended and broadened, the role of partnership between higher education institutions and schools has come into sharp focus. This study will provide new insights into the perspectives and experiences of student teachers regarding their extended ITE school placement in Ireland. Special attention will be paid to student teachers' experiences with key stakeholders and school structures and their interpretations of the role these factors play in their professional learning.

Methodology

Research Design

This study set out to explore the school placement experiences of the Professional Master of Education Year 2 cohort of 2018-19 (the last cohort to conduct their full ITE programme, including their extended school placement, prior to the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic) at one Irish university. The following overarching research question guided the study:

What are the school placement experiences of *second year* Professional Master of Education students following the reconceptualization of postgraduate ITE programmes from one-year Higher Diploma to 2-year Professional Master of Education programmes?

Research sub-questions included:

(i)   What are student teachers' experiences and perspectives of the (new) PME Year 2 school placement? In how far, and in what way, do they perceive their school placement in Year 2 as different and/or valuable?

(ii) What are student teachers' perspectives regarding the factors that influence their professional development while on school placement?

(iii) What supports are available to student teachers while on school placement and how effective are they?

(iv) What role do the main stakeholders (mentor teachers and other school staff, university tutors, peers) play in student teachers' experience while on school placement?

The research was designed as a mixed-methods case study employing a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were first conducted with seven student teachers followed by a questionnaire incorporating 27 closed and open-ended items. The questionnaire was designed based on findings from the qualitative interviews as well as existing literature (Hall et al., 2018; Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Kilroy, 2016; O'Grady, 2017). Questions were predominantly of a qualitative nature, exploring student teachers' perspectives regarding their learning and development during their Year 2 school placement, student teachers' perspectives regarding the link between education theory and practice, their relationships and experiences with different stakeholders and pressures experienced during school placement. The quantitative questions related to contextual information including age, sex, gender, size of school, workload, school placement hours, substitution hours and supports available.

Sample and Data Collection

A non-probabilistic purposeful sampling strategy was applied to recruit the seven participants for the qualitative part of the study to ensure that interviewees performed school placement across different schools, with different characteristics (single sex and co-educational settings, students from different socio-economic backgrounds) and in different geographical settings (city/rural). The online questionnaire was distributed to the entire PME Year 2 class population in one Irish higher education institution. The questionnaire achieved a 45 percent response rate (N=58, 21% male and 79% female).

Analyzing of Data

Audio files from the seven interviews were transcribed verbatim. During the initial data analysis, grounded theory open coding, constant comparison and memoing techniques were employed (Denscombe, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The data was then organised into categories and reduced until the final themes/key concepts emerged (Denscombe, 2017). Open-ended questionnaire data was also analysed using a grounded theory constant comparison approach. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to gain an insight into frequencies regarding participants' school placement contexts and the occurrence of different experiences and practices. Findings from both data sets were triangulated and integrated to establish the final three themes for analysis.

The capability approach (Sen, 2000) has been adopted as an overarching theoretical lens to interpret the findings and to draw some significant conclusions. Walker (2008) emphasised that the 'capability-based approach to evaluating student learning (and pedagogy) in higher education offers a rich language of well-being and quality of life to challenge contemporary arrangements in teaching and learning as being primarily for human capital development' (p. 488). Sen's two key concepts of 'functionings' (the various things a person may value doing or being) and 'capabilities' (our freedom to promote or achieve valuable functionings) have been considered in the interpretation (Sen, 2000, p. 75). An important element of this approach is recognising each individual's agency which, as Walker (2008) outlines, "is one's ability to pursue goals that one values" (p. 106). Another aspect which is important to highlight is the conceptualisation of conversion factors as elements determining the way people transform available resources into real capabilities. Applying this theoretical lens to initial teacher education provides the opportunity to recognise and explore the role that personal, social and institutional and/or cultural structures and practices may play in determining student teachers' abilities to develop their learning and agency which, in turn, impact their ability to achieve their potential. In teacher education,

capabilities could thus be understood to be the set of real opportunities student teachers have to do and be what they want and value on school placement. In this study, the capability approach provides a conceptual framework for a discussion of how context and circumstances on school placement can play a significant role in student teachers' flourishing (development of their capabilities).

Findings

The analysis process has resulted in the categorisation of findings into three overarching themes which will structure the representation of findings in this section:

- Theme 1, 'The Journey', will outline student teachers' perspectives on their personal and professional development during PME programme Year 2, and the role school placement played in their learning.

- Theme 2, 'School Structures and Culture', will explore students' experiences with regard to the levels and types of support they received in their placement schools and the impact of differing school structures and cultures on their perceived professional learning.

- Theme 3, 'Coping with the Pressure', will outline student teachers' experiences of managing school and college workload and the role financial stability played in their school placement journey.

The Journey

Most questionnaire respondents (85%) indicated that they were happy with their decision to pursue a teaching career. However, a small but significant number (N=15) stated that they were unhappy with their career choice and/or future prospects. A number of open-ended responses indicated that student teachers were not as assured when it came to their future career prospects. Of the forty-seven respondents who indicated that they were happy with their career choice, only fifteen indicated a similarly positive outlook regarding their future employment prospects. Participants' apprehensive outlook regarding their job prospects were mostly related to the lack of job security (N=16) and pay disparity for new entrants (N=4).

Students' perspectives regarding their teaching ability were overwhelmingly positive with the vast majority being confident to enter the teaching profession despite concerns over increased workload. Respondents were prompted to think about their experiences on school placement with a special focus on personal development and how their school placement experience in Year 2 differed from their experience in Year 1. All interview respondents described the school placement as the biggest contributing factor to their learning, "the main thing is being in the school teaching" (Alice).

Student teachers identified significant differences between their Year 1 and Year 2 school placement experiences and nearly all respondents outlined clear benefits to experiencing two different school settings despite initial feelings of insecurity and nervousness when entering a new school context at the beginning of Year 2 and a yearning to be back in their previous Year 1 school. According to the respondents, experiencing a second placement school offered them a 'greater variety of opportunities' and a 'broader experience'. At some point during the two-year PME programme, 57 percent of respondents performed school placement in the secondary school which they had attended as pupils. Interview respondents highlighted positive aspects (familiarity with the schools' structures, positive prior relationships with staff) and negative aspects (familiarity with school population, negative prior relationships with staff) to returning to their old school. When choosing their school for the Year 2 school placement, student teachers are required to pay attention to the gender of their pupils so as to ensure that they have, over the course of the 2-year programme, gained experience teaching both genders. Respondents detailed that the experience of teaching different genders benefited their pedagogy and classroom management as they were faced with differing classroom dynamics and discipline structures.

Many student teachers considered the Year 2 placement a 'more authentic' experience compared to their Year 1 placement. The length of the placement was considered a key factor, 'spending more time in school resulted in greater opportunities to experience the teaching profession for what it is' and many participants described their Year 2 placement as a 'more real experience' (Open-ended, Q10). Many respondents felt that their self-perception had been positively transformed during their Year 2 school placement. The term 'real teacher' was used by many interviewees and questionnaire respondents (N=11) when considering their development during PME Year 2. Some respondents developed their answers indicating that they were given more responsibility in Year 2 (N=7) and thus felt that their roles had been enhanced compared to Year 1. The data suggests that schools expect Year 2 PME students to be involved in the wider school community. Many respondents felt that a greater level of trust towards them by school management was due to the extended ten-week block which also resulted, for many, in their greater sense of belonging, improved relationships with both staff and students, development of long-term planning and classroom management skills and overall significant improvement in their teaching competencies.

Student teachers who took on additional teaching hours outside of the typical ten to twelve school placement classes required per week felt that this was a major factor in their development. Twenty percent of respondents outlined that they had taken on additional paid teaching hours while on school placement. Seventy-one percent of questionnaire respondents indicated that they performed a minimum of three hours of additional substitution per week and felt that

this was a great opportunity to improve their pedagogy and to develop stronger student-teacher relationships. Overall, the great majority of student teachers considered school placement, and particularly the Year 2 placement, the biggest factor in their professional development. As emphasised by one of the interview participants, 'being on placement forces you to learn' (Emily).

School Structures and Culture

Student teachers experienced different levels of support while on school placement with some schools having well established structures in place and other schools having none or failing support structures. Support structures and practices identified by student teachers were:

- initial interviews with student teachers

- information packs for student teachers/new staff outlining school policies

- introduction to staff and initial tour of the school

- open invitations to participate in school events, including in department and parent-teacher meetings

- designated liaison person/PME coordinator

- regular meetings with PME coordinator, initially weekly and reducing over time.

Many participants highlighted that established and effective school placement structures instilled feelings of confidence, trust and safety. The assignment of a designated PME coordinator was reported as a common feature (52%) of schools with established structures. While the roles and responsibilities of PME coordinators varied from school to school, student teachers clearly recognised them as key to their school placement enjoyment and professional development: "It (PME coordinator support) is invaluable. In hindsight I didn't realise how positive it was" (David). PME coordinators were nurturing student teachers' development of pedagogical knowledge and skills, providing a communication bridge between staff and student teachers and a vital support in cases of perceived abuse of power by mentor teachers or school management.

While experiences with PME coordinators were predominantly positive, some student teachers expressed concerns regarding the lack of clarity of the PME coordinator role and, in a small number of cases, a lack of support and/or interest by the PME coordinator in the student teachers' concerns resulting in conflict. Rachel, for example, outlined that her school had appointed a PME coordinator for the first time but, in her opinion, it had not been successful. "I don't think she really knows what the role is, she seemed to think it is to defend the teachers against us [...] There has been a lot of conflict because it hasn't been executed well."

While many students described benefits associated with their participation in staff meetings, parent-teacher meetings or department meetings, some respondents noted that *not* being invited to school meetings resulted in feelings of isolation and rejection. Rachel, for example, explained that she was told not to attend meetings: "I've been told very clearly to come nowhere near it".

A positive working relationship with mentor teachers was described as an important contributing factor to the enjoyment of school placement by a number of respondents (N=15). Working as a team with the mentor teacher was perceived as a key factor in fostering a positive working relationship and sense of belonging. Such teamwork was often described as the sharing of resources and/or asking one another for advice on subject material. Furthermore, student teachers appreciated mentor teachers who recognised that they were well versed in modern pedagogy. They also regarded open discussions with mentor teachers about class groups and their needs, including with regard to students with special educational needs, very valuable and important.

Fifty-three percent of questionnaire respondents (N=31) outlined that their mentor teacher was their first point of call if an issue arose. The questionnaire data illustrated that student teachers had positive experiences with their mentor teachers with 76 percent of participants confirming that they were supportive. Despite the generally positive feedback, some respondents reported major issues with their mentor teachers, including mentor teachers relinquishing power of their class groups which resulted in poor working relationships. Sarah detailed her first meeting with her mentor teacher describing him as extremely confrontational. "He went crazy because he didn't know I was coming. He said that he did not know I was coming and that he would not be giving me any classes". She outlined that she did not gain access to the teaching group until "he left at Christmas".

Other issues which were perceived as negatively impacting students' relationships with their mentor teachers included lack of collaboration, lack of feedback, the mentor teacher remaining in the classroom during all classes taught by the student teacher, confrontational/dismissive demeanour, giving student teachers additional work and/or mentor teachers inhibiting student teachers from trying out different methodologies. Alice detailed that her mentor teacher had treated her poorly while on school placement and was unwilling to work with her until the PME coordinator intervened. She outlined that from the beginning she had felt unwelcomed: "as soon as I met him I knew he was dismissive of me...he

just didn't want me to be there I think". She continued to describe how their relationship was purely professional: "we would only discuss what we were teaching each week and that was about it and it ended there". One aspect of the relationship that upset Alice was that when she needed to ask him for assistance in relation to a student he made the situation uncomfortable for her: "I could just tell that he almost got pleasure in me having to ask for help or something happening in my class".

All of these issues heavily impacted student teachers' school placement experience, both in terms of their personal and pedagogical development. Feelings of being unsupported or isolated were commonplace when respondents outlined the impact of a poor relationship with their mentor teacher. A number of student teachers (N=8) highlighted that they did not have a mentor teacher for their subject as they were the primary teacher, with contracted hours, for a subject/class. These respondents indicated that not having a mentor teacher was challenging and resulted in a 'steep learning curve'.

Overall, questionnaire data revealed that 78 percent of student teachers felt supported to some degree by school management while on school placement.

> In my school, I have to say that management supported us throughout placement. They recognized that we were under financial pressure and tried to give us as many hours as possible so we would have some money for ourselves (Open-ended, Q26).

Negative commentary on relationships with school management was not very common, however when it did arise it was worrying:

> It was hell, the aim was just to survive each day. Placements need to be inspected more in terms of schools not abusing PME students (Open-ended, Q10).

Key issues raised by participants included not feeling accepted in the school community, concerns related to pay for additional substitution work (explored further in the next section), student teachers feeling exploited and/or obliged to take on additional unpaid work, and lack of support with discipline and classroom management. A number of questionnaire respondents (N=4) furthermore outlined that "toxic staffrooms" or "politics" were major issues they faced on school placement.

Analysis of the data clearly showed that respondents who described their schools as 'open', 'welcoming', and 'nurturing' evaluated their experience on school placement as positive. The relationship between school culture and student teachers' confidence was noted by many respondents (N=14); those who experienced an open supportive culture indicated that they felt more trusted and were given more responsibility, resulting in a greater sense of school community and belonging. In contrast, less welcoming and supportive cultures often resulted in students feeling 'isolated' or 'being rudderless'. Instances of student teachers feeling unwelcome in staffrooms were reported by interviewees as well as questionnaire respondents. Some student teachers outlined that a negative atmosphere 'inhibited their ability of becoming part of the school community' and gave rise to 'disillusionment about the teaching profession'.

Coping with the pressure

The factors most commonly causing feelings of pressure and/or stress while on school placement were school workload, college workload and financial worries.

> Balancing workload. Keeping on top of lesson planning as well as college work, having to work for financial support and balancing that with school and college requirements (Open-ended, Q9).

Questionnaire respondents (N=18) outlined that the level of preparation required for teaching was a factor that caused a significant amount of stress that they did not envisage prior to their school placement. The pressure felt by many resulted in negative emotional and physical outcomes:

> It is emotionally demanding… by the end of the day, especially at the beginning I was so tired, you would be so drained… You are always on" (Megan).

Ninety percent of respondents reported that they had extra-curricular commitments (sports teams, homework clubs, drama clubs, etc.) while on school placement which added to their workload. Of the forty-nine respondents who detailed the number of hours spent on extra-curricular activities, thirty-eight performed 2-3 hours per week.

The number of non-paid school placement classes assigned to student teachers by their placement schools varied significantly with 40 percent having a timetable with more than the recommended ten to twelve classes of teaching time per week. Similar results were found relating to the number of additional substitution classes that student teachers took on, with 20 percent of respondents reporting more than ten hours per week on average. Thirteen respondents outlined that they felt obliged or pressured to accept substitution work, with some student teachers highlighting that it negatively impacted their college performance:

> When time set aside for college work is jeopardised by having to teach/cover additional classes that are unplanned it can put pressure on the PME teacher" (Open-ended, Q24).

However, the majority of respondents (N=29, Q24) thought that engaging in substitution/cover had a positive impact on their school placement experience as the paid work alleviated some of the financial pressures. Overall, questionnaire data suggests that 20 percent of student teachers were engaging in contracted hours while on school placement, taking on responsibility as primary teachers for some of their class groups. For many (N=14) managing their college workload, "keeping everything going! Thesis, portfolio and lesson plans" (Open-ended, Q9), while on school placement was a significant challenge.

Ninety-one percent of the questionnaire respondents stated that they were under financial pressure. Different factors were highlighted in contributing to financial concerns, including varying levels of paid (or unpaid) substitution work during school placement, socio-economic background, personal background and ability to earn money while on school placement. Substitute teaching work was, in this context, considered to have both positive and negative impact on student teachers' school placement experience. The majority (N=29) of respondents welcomed additional substitution work.

> The substitution work this year has been a great help to my financial situation, without it, I would be under serious financial pressure" (Open-ended, Q25).

Despite the significant number of students reporting that substitution work supported them financially, some students (N=5) explained that they could not rely on it as a consistent source of income. There were also some students (N=6) who did not receive any payment for additional substitution work, with one of them sharing that they:

> Worked a full timetable most weeks between my classes and subbing. None of these were paid and it was expected that I did it, no questions asked (Open-ended, Q24).

Apart from additional work in school, the questionnaire data illustrated that 24 percent of respondents (N=14) engaged in other part-time work. Eight respondents stated that holding down their job was their biggest school placement challenge while ten outlined that having a part-time job negatively impacted their health. Ten respondents outlined that they felt maintaining a part-time job had a negative impact on their educational performance. Respondents outlined that the combination of financial obligations (loans (N=2), family (N=2), rent (N=6)) along with unforeseen costs (travel (N=5), school materials (N=8), clothing (N=3)) made the school placement experience significantly more pressurized than initially expected:

> I loved my school placements, but I found myself close to quitting four times over the two years due to the financial strain. You are aware of cost of fees etc. and that's fine, but when you start placement the assortment of books, technology, materials, travel and clothes spiral so quickly that the stress is phenomenal. I went for most of the two years without home heating and proper food in order to afford the cost of my placements (Open-ended, Q26).

Five participants outlined that they received financial aid while on school placement. One student explained that they came from a lower socio-economic background and that the financial burden for them was overwhelming and negatively impacting their personal life.

> I work 18-24 hours a week to support my course payments, rent, bills etc. as I come from a lower socio-economic background. There are supports in the Student Financial Aid Fund, but realistically it is not enough. Not only does financial struggle add to the stress of being a 2nd year PME, but also working hours that could be used to better my portfolio. Because of this, I don't see my family members months at a time, which can be very hard in times of need, in terms of even just talking about coping with the stress (Open-ended, Q25).

Twenty-eight percent of questionnaire respondents stated that they would first discuss any issue that they had with a fellow student teacher while on school placement. Peers acted as a support network in assisting with pedagogy, navigating school structures and helping each other through the highs and lows of school placement.

> I guess it is just to help each other out and share ideas and even just if you have a problem you realize it is not just yourself and that we are all in this together. We even learn from each other; I find that it is the only way I find out about things (Alice).

In cases where student teachers did not have a mentor teacher or had a poor working relationship with their mentor teacher, the role of peers was elevated. Not having peer support on school placement was emphasised as a barrier to settling into a new school environment.

Discussion

This study has focused on the experiences of student teachers in Ireland following significant initial teacher education (ITE) reform resulting in extended ITE programmes and school placements. Findings reaffirm the importance of school placement (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Farrell, 2021; Hall, et al., 2018; McNamara et al., 2014; Munby et al., 2001) for student teacher development with the majority of participants considering the extended placement the most significant factor in their development. Of particular relevance are student teachers' perceptions regarding the benefits of experiencing two school settings, a new requirement established by the Teaching Council (2017). Experiencing different

school types and school cultures was regarded crucial to student teacher development and confidence and to their understanding of the wide range of opportunities that exist within the profession.

This new opportunity (and requirement) of gaining experience in different schools is particularly noteworthy and important in the Irish context where previous research has demonstrated the common occurrence of student teachers conducting school placement in schools they had previously attended as pupils (Heinz, 2011). While no substantial research evidence exists as to the learning experiences and/or outcomes of student teachers completing their school placements in very familiar versus unfamiliar school contexts, two studies from Ireland (Heinz, 2011) and Finland (Lauriala, 1997) have demonstrated a number of advantages and disadvantages of both scenarios. In Ireland (Heinz, 2011), student teachers who completed their school placement in their former second-level schools reported mixed experiences in these very familiar contexts. While they often appreciated the familiarity with school buildings, teachers and the ethos of the school, they also faced challenges on an interpersonal level with their former teachers who were 'now almost colleagues'. Indeed, a small number of student teachers regretted their decision to return to their old schools as they felt that their own and/or their former teachers' and schoolmates' memories of them as pupils undermined their status and/or complicated their relationships and professional development (ibid. p. 269).

In contrast, Lauriala's (1997) Finnish study identified benefits of innovative school placements in unfamiliar contexts for student teachers' professional knowledge. Her qualitative study showed that experiences of Montessori placements encouraged 'student teachers to critically examine their often tacit assumptions about education, supporting them in restructuring and reflecting on their professional knowledge' (267). The benefits identified by student teachers in this study support Lauriala's argument in favour of unfamiliar (and/or various different) placement experiences to broaden perspectives, enhance problem solving and coping strategies and, ultimately, deepen understanding of teaching and learning.

With regard to the time spent on placement, the longer experience in school during year 2 of the Professional Master of Education programme was perceived as more realistic with many participants reporting that they felt more like 'real teachers' who were trusted and truly integrated in the school. While the positive experiences were not representative of all student teachers, overall our findings point to higher levels of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Cobb et al., 2018; Lave & Wenger, 1991; O'Meara, 2020) and significant professional growth during the extended Year 2 placement which, in turn, enhanced students' sense of belonging in their placement schools and in the profession more broadly as well as their self-efficacy and agency during this crucial time of development.

Time on placement alone did, however, not always result in students feeling connected and growing in confidence. School culture and the quality of relationships with experienced teachers had a strong influence on students' ability to pursue and achieve the goals that they valued. This study has clearly demonstrated that student teachers on school placement with a 'welcoming' school culture felt more confident due to receiving 'trust and faith' by members of their school community. Conversely, negative and/or closed or 'toxic' school cultures resulted in some student teachers feeling unwanted and isolated. Findings from this study strongly suggest that negative and/or unwelcoming or overly controlling school cultures significantly restrict student teacher agency and development possibly damaging their perception of the teaching profession and their own abilities. They support and extend previous research identifying school culture as a factor which can inhibit or promote peripheral legitimacy, agency, confidence and even wellbeing (Caires et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2018; Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2023; Rorrison, 2010).

Workload pressures were reported by many participants as another factor having a significant negative impact on their development. It is important to note, however, that contrasting evaluations of additional substitution work in schools as very or even 'the most beneficial' experience illustrate that the relationship between some contextual factors and student teacher development is more nuanced and dependent on personal circumstances, possibly attitudes and coping mechanisms. Some of the tensions and contradictions apparent in the findings regarding workload and substitution serve to caution us to consider the differing experiences, contexts and development needs of individual students on a case-by-case basis.

Time management was a key concern for student teachers with college and school workload, personal circumstances and financial pressures all influencing their ability to fulfil academic course requirements. Interestingly, this study showed that many student teachers were surprised or shocked by the heavy workload of the programme indicating, perhaps, a lack of awareness on behalf of ITE applicants regarding the requirements of ITE programmes. Many participants outlined that school placement was significantly more expensive than they anticipated with costs of school materials, clothing, travel and rent spiralling out of control. Substitution work was outlined as a significant factor providing financial support. However, it was also considered undependable and some respondents were not paid for substitution work. Often these student teachers felt that they could not raise any concerns, due to their position and their fear of retribution. These findings echo those of Hall et al.'s study (2018) and raise concerns regarding the equity of school placement experiences and opportunities.

It is important to recognise that, in Ireland, many schools have only recently started to implement a variety of support structures for student teachers. In this context, 'teething issues' were described by participants when discussing their PME coordinators who offered 'just a little support' while they often needed to navigate the initial settling-in period

independently. The data demonstrated that support structures currently vary greatly between schools positioning student teachers in schools with little support and/or poor school placement management at a clear disadvantage often inhibiting their confidence, performance and enjoyment on school placement. Worryingly, the data showed evidence of cases where poor working relationships between mentor teachers and student teachers and/or the perceived complete absence of support led to feelings of isolation, lack of agency and/or powerlessness on behalf of student teachers who were reluctant to raise or remedy any concerns as they navigated heavy workloads and the ups and downs of school placement on their own. In addition, the very high percentage of students raising financial concerns which often resulted in work overload, lack of free time and, in some cases, wellbeing and/or mental health issues is an alarming finding of this study.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into student teachers' complex, diverse and multifaceted initial teacher education and school placement journeys. Findings related to the impact of school culture and relationships with stakeholders (mentor teachers, school management, university tutors) as well as issues related to student teachers' positionalities and inequitable experiences, and their impact on student teachers' capabilities, were explored. Rather than focusing on traditional outcome measures for student teacher achievement, in this study we have explored the perspectives of student teachers regarding their experiences and professional learning and whether they have been enabled to freely pursue their goals while on school placement. A variety of factors that could both promote or inhibit student teachers' development and their reaching of 'self-orientated functionings' (Sen, 2000) were explored.

Findings from this study have clearly demonstrated that students' school placement is not simply a goal orientated journey but rather one which is emotional, often unpredictable, characterised by many concerns and some significant barriers. The data clearly showed that school placement experiences vary significantly. However, while contextual variations are a recognised feature of ITE placements, this research emphasised the need to further explore and work towards more *equitable* school placement conditions. Given the clear connection between the presence and/or absence of positive external and relational factors (school structures, school culture, mentor teacher-student teacher and peer relationships, financial pressure etc.) and the quality of student teachers' experience and development, more attention needs to be paid to the quality of school placement structures and supports as well as to the nature of school-university partnerships (Farrell, 2021; Heinz & Fleming, 2019).

Participants of this study generally reported enjoyable experiences where becoming a 'confident' 'real teacher' and receiving 'trust' and 'opportunities' resulted in a high degree of legitimate peripheral participation and agency. The extended school placement and, in particular, their experience of two different school settings over the course of their two-year programme played a major role in participants' pedagogical development resulting in a significant reconfiguration (and often strengthening) of students' *teacher* identity. School culture was identified as a key factor in student teachers' experiences and professional learning. Schools with established support structures were found to best support student teachers facilitating their agency and ability to pursue their personal goals thus enabling them to develop and thrive.

Essentially, the open and supportive cultures described by many student teachers shared many characteristics of communities of practice: "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Conversely, findings from this study highlighted that negative closed cultures resulted in student teachers feeling unwanted and isolated during their school placement. Participants in adverse school cultures detailed experiences of toxic staffrooms, poor relationships with the school community, feeling uninformed and, in rare cases, mistreated. This study's findings therefore suggest that school culture represents an important conversion factor which heavily influences student teacher experiences and development as it can promote, constrain or inhibit peripheral legitimacy, agency, confidence and even wellbeing.

Further factors, related to school culture, impacting on student teachers' capabilities to develop and flourish include the quality of the relationship between mentor teachers and student teachers, student teachers' financial and personal situations as well as the level of workload (including additional and possibly paid teaching hours) they are balancing. Peer networks played a significant role and potentially protective function in student teachers' learning and development.

This study confirms findings from previous research regarding the significant financial pressure experienced by student teachers (Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2023; Prendergast et al., 2019; Ryan, 2023) which was considered the biggest challenge and negative impact factor on personal development during school placement. Some questionable practices were reported regarding additional unpaid workloads for student teachers who felt pressurised to do everything they were asked to do, clearly feeling constrained in their decisions.

Recommendations

Overall, this research has confirmed the pedagogical benefits of the extended school placement for student teacher's professional growth. However, the study has also highlighted a number of factors inhibiting, or negatively impacting,

student teachers' professional learning as well as their wellbeing and, in some cases, their physical and mental health. It is imperative for the future success of extended ITE programmes that all placement schools establish appropriate support structures for student teachers, monitor and carefully negotiate their workload and ensure that they are acknowledged in the school community and supported by suitable experienced mentor teachers. ITE providers should increase their efforts to support student teachers in building peer networks throughout their initial teacher education to enhance students' enjoyment, sense of belonging, wellbeing and, ultimately, professional development.

Policy makers must acknowledge and address the financial pressures which many student teachers face while on school placement, the impact it has on their wellbeing, on the ongoing teacher crisis as well as on the composition of teaching cohorts in Ireland (Burns et al., 2023; Keane et al., in press; Prendergast et al., 2021). There is an urgent need to review school placement structures, supports and requirements to identify pressures and practices leading to inequitable experiences and/or outcomes. Paying special attention to how different factors impact student teachers' capabilities to develop as teachers (positively or negatively), this paper has brought attention to the importance of monitoring individual students' situations and experiences carefully so that appropriate and individualised supports can be offered. Given the critical role played by school placement in student teachers' professional learning and attitude towards teaching as a future career, careful attention to support structures and cultures in schools can make a significant contribution to teacher recruitment, development and retention as well as the creation of a more diverse, equitable and inclusive teaching profession (Heinz, 2015; Heinz et al., 2023; Keane et al., in press).

Sustainable school-university partnerships need to be developed and properly resourced (Farrell, 2021; Heinz & Fleming, 2019; Higgins et al., 2013) to ensure that recently reconceptualised and extended ITE programmes enable all partners to provide the best possible start to new teachers in Ireland. Given the centrality of relationships in professional learning (Murray et al., 2020), we argue for further guidance and support for schools and mentor teachers so that appropriate mechanisms for appointing, preparing and supporting suitable mentor teachers can be developed. Clearer guidance regarding the role of the mentor teacher as well as regarding approaches to observation and feedback is also needed to ensure more equitable support practices and outcomes for student teachers.

In order to build more equitable school placements supported by effective and meaningful partnerships between all stakeholders, future research should focus on further reviewing current, and developing and evaluating new approaches to school placement support and ITE partnership. Collaborative practitioner research studies may be particularly suitable as they offer opportunities for democratic participation of all stakeholders which may, in turn, deepen mutual understanding and nurture the development of a common professional language and shared sense of professional learning and responsibility (Farrell, 2021).

Limitations

Findings from this study need to be considered with care as they are based on a small scale case study conducted with one cohort of student teachers undertaking a specific initial teacher education programme (the Professional Master of Education) for second-level teaching in one Irish higher education institution. School placement arrangements and practices as well as approaches to school-university partnership vary across national and institutional contexts and requirements for and experiences of school placement may differ significantly in different education and school sectors. An additional limitation of this study is that it lacks a longitudinal analysis of how student teachers ultimately progressed into teaching careers and/or performed as independent qualified teachers. Furthermore, this study has not included data from school and/or ITE programme staff, the other actors involved in school placement; it therefore represents the perspective of only one stakeholder group. All data has emanated from participants' self-reports regarding their school placement experiences. While respondents may not have 'set out to obfuscate their true feelings or beliefs or seek to provide answers they perceive as socially or professionally acceptable' this may well have occurred, intentionally or unintentionally, on some occasions (Alexander, 2008).

Authorship Contribution Statement

Hanly: Conceptualization, design, data collection, data analysis, writing.

Heinz: Supervision, conceptualization, review of analysis and manuscript, editing.

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