

Opening remarks to School Placement Seminar

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Good morning, you are all very welcome to this seminar on school placement. Thank you for making the time, especially towards the end of a very busy school year, to come together and share your experience of school placement, and also to highlight relevant issues for us all to consider as we continue the process of bedding down these guidelines. I think that the attendance here today – over 100 people – is ample testimony to your interest in this issue.

So why have we come here today? To listen to the experience of others in school placement, to capture the learning from that experience, and to chart the next steps in the steady but incremental roll-out of these Guidelines.

But for many of you, this may be your first seminar on school placement. It may even be the first you have seen or heard of the Guidelines. And even if it is not, you may well be asking – *why are we going here at all? Another initiative on top of a pressurised school system. We've been doing it for years, and nobody has complained. Why all the fuss?*

This is quite similar to the question that is asked of the Teaching Council as a professional standards body. We are well aware that there are some who question the need for another body to tell teachers what they have known in their hearts for years – that they are professionals. *Why pay this fee, why all this change and upheaval to simply reiterate what we know to be true? A little*

over 30 years ago, 2 years' study was sufficient to become a primary teacher. If it was good enough then, why is it not good enough now?

I think that there is an overarching reason of professional responsibility for this. Within that, there are two “trilogies” which underpin why we are here today – learning, language, understanding; and expectation, collaboration and trust. And both sets of concepts or values apply very directly to school placement.

Shared Professional Responsibility

One of the core values of the Teaching Council is that of shared professional responsibility. This in turn stems from the model of professional leadership which supports everything the Council does. This model is predicated on the idea that all teachers are leaders of learning. In that context, there is a teacher majority on Council, whereby society and the State have entrusted teachers with the task of leading their own professionalism in partnership with other stakeholders.

This cascades down to school placement through the roles of the co-operating teacher and the principal teacher, and indeed of the other teachers on staff - all teachers working together to lead the development of the next generation of teachers. First and foremost, all teachers have a responsibility for the education of students entrusted to them. In order to support and maintain the quality of their own teaching, they are responsible for their own lifelong learning. Leading their own learning, and that of future teachers, are the dynamics that are inherent to the process of school placement. And they flow from that concept of shared professional responsibility.

Learning, language, understanding

We have all learned throughout our lives, as people as well as professionals. And we have learned even more about just how complex teaching is, and why it is that complex. Based on that learning, we have attempted to shape a new language that will more accurately describe what teaching is all about, that will explain just why teaching is the most important profession in society. And as we continue to attempt to shape and refine that language, we have further informed our understanding of the teaching profession.

Thus we have come to realise that more time and preparation, and new ways of preparing, are required to ensure that all teachers are enabled to empower their pupils and students to ask their own questions of the unknowable future. This is not to say that teachers who qualified 30 or 40 years ago are somehow less professional or any less a teacher. Such a view would betray a profound misunderstanding of the deep commitment that so many teachers have shown for years to ongoing learning, and to sharing that learning with colleagues.

As I said recently to Droichead schools, we don't teach others so that they can repeat the lives we have had. We teach them so that they can have lives that we can scarcely dream of. Your work with school placement is a very powerful example of this. In theory, we could repeat or continue the model of "teaching practice" that has pertained for decades. But we now know that that would do a severe injustice to the professionalism of teaching, and to the teachers and teaching of the future.

Expectation, collaboration, trust

This new language around tutors, these longer and "reconceptualised" programmes of teacher education, also seek to provide a framework for answering the heightened expectations that the public have of teachers.

Thanks in no small part to good teaching, our society has a better standard of education than that of our ancestors. As a result, they have higher expectations so that their children can survive and thrive. They want to know more about what goes on when the most precious gifts in their lives are left in the care of others. When you consider the extent to which teaching impacts on the lives of almost every citizen in this country, be they a child, young person, parent, grandparent etc., you come to realise the scale of the challenge of managing expectations that teaching uniquely has. Everyone has an opinion on teaching. It has become increasingly clear that the only sustainable way for teachers to manage this challenge is to do so together – to collaborate. Our collective professional ethical identity will be crucial to maintaining and enhancing the trust of the public in the face of the tsunami of expectations. At a human level, this is the only sustainable way. This echoes my earlier comments about shared professional responsibility.

School placement

So where, you may reasonably ask, does school placement fit into all of this?

There are a number of angles from which I could approach this.

Core values

Some core values that support the Council's work are collective professional confidence, shared professional responsibility and professionally-led regulation. The school placement guidelines are partly about clarifying new language to more accurately capture what happens in many cases already. It is also about enhanced collaboration between all those involved in working with

student teachers, especially other teachers, so as to enhance the quality of the overall process.

Essential to this, and indeed all of the Council's work in teacher education and professional development, is the concept of the reflective practitioner. And this applies to all of us - at a human level. For the student teacher, it means an approach to planning and portfolio that ensures that they have sufficient space and time to think, to talk, to adapt, improve and learn. For co-operating teachers, it means taking time to observe the student teacher, to think about what they have seen, to talk to the student teacher about that, and to talk to you as tutors. For placement tutors, it means taking time to observe, to think about what you have seen, and to talk to the student teacher, guide them and advise them as to how to learn and reflect. It also means that the co-operating teacher and tutor should be open to new ideas and ways of working that the student teacher may have. Or it could mean the ability to recognise the kernel of a great idea in a lesson that may otherwise have gone badly wrong for the student teacher, and guiding them to gain their own insight to that point.

In summary, reflective practice in school placement is about professional conversations between professionals to support professional development.

One of the Council's core policies is the Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education. In essence, it is about that point I referred to earlier - how teachers continue to learn throughout their lives, and how they will shortly be expected to do so. This might seem like stating the obvious. But it is clear to us in the Council already that it implies a fairly profound change in how teachers view their own profession. I would guess that nearly all of the student teachers you work with are counting the days until their final assignment, their final placement, their final exam. They can picture in their mind's eye their

graduation ceremony, and then they will be qualified. End of story. Ok, ok, they will have to be probated, but THEN, end of story.

Except that it's not. Lifelong learning means precisely that. We never stop learning so that we can always teach. We never become teachers – we are always becoming teachers - All of us. In this, there is great assurance for us all – we can learn together. But there is also great challenge for us all – none of us knows it all. No matter how experienced we may be, sometimes we can get it wrong. That's human nature!

And that is why so much of what we do with student teachers has to reinforce the message that their journey of learning, now as much as in the future, is about progression, not perfection. There is no such thing as the perfect lesson that can be dusted off the shelf by any teacher in any school and deployed without the need for careful preparation. This all points to the danger of students producing two lever arch files of detailed lesson plans which may well be heavy on content but very light on reflection. As experienced professionals, you have powerful stories to tell about how important it is to take the time to really think about your pupils and their needs, as opposed to filling in reams of paperwork “to tick a box”.

Looking ahead – opportunities and challenges

As a school principal or teacher, you may say, fine, that's the background, that's the theory, and yes, the reality of what is happening in many school placement experiences is there as well. But I still have concerns about the guidelines, time and resources are still an issue, I have lost my middle management, and the demands of new initiatives seem to be never ending. When are you going to address these issues?

Firstly, there is a common core value to all of the changes in education at the moment, including Droichead, SSE, school placement, and junior cycle reform – those at the core of the system, teachers, parents, pupils, know best how to mediate public policy in the context of their own schools. Arising from that point, we are making a strong case that the skill sets of mentors offer a fantastic launch pad for the education and up skilling of teachers for roles in each of these areas, including co-operating teachers for school placement. Although there are differences between student teachers and NQTs, there are remarkable similarities between the ways co-operating teachers and mentors work. We agree that more resources should be put into training mentors as a major step forward in up skilling for co-operating teachers in school placement.

Secondly, whatever our concerns may be, however deeply and strongly they may be held, we need to acknowledge that we are all here because we want these Guidelines to work, in spirit and in letter. This is an iterative process of policy implementation, the Council has been listening and will continue to listen; we will also challenge where that is necessary; but the core aim of this process – to maintain and enhance the quality of the school placement experience for everyone involved, student teacher, school teachers, pupils – this cannot change. Once we are clear on that, I think that our conversations can be more honest and effective.

One issue that I would like to flag from a Council perspective is that of partnerships – between HEIs and schools. We must first acknowledge that partnerships are already happening. And we want to see those partnerships enhanced and strengthened. We are happy to host this seminar, we are happy to facilitate conversations. But if you have come here today expecting the

Council to either get schools to pile into school placement, or HEIs to interact in a different way with schools, then you are missing the point. Who better to have those conversations than you! You need to have those conversations as teacher educators with each other – teachers of teachers in schools talking to teachers of teachers in HEIs. Our Guidelines provide an important framework. But the only place they can become a reality is in your schools and your colleges – working together. Today is a great opportunity to bring that process alive for each other. I look forward today to hearing what you all have to say.