

## Teaching Council response to #Edchatie discussion on school placement on 24 February 2014

The recent #edchatie discussion on school placement was described by some contributors as one of the most energetic for some time. It certainly was comparable to the discussion held on CPD last year. Fred Boss, the moderator of #edchatie, has kindly agreed to post this response to the discussion on school placement, and I would like to record my thanks to him for that. Why would the Council wish to do so on this particular topic?

Firstly, like CPD, school placement is an important aspect of our work in supporting the process of lifelong learning for teachers, which we also refer to as the continuum of teacher education. School placement is an area where the formal college-based process of teacher education interfaces in a very real way with the daily reality of teaching and learning in schools. As such, and as is clear from the #edchatie discussions, it involves a lot of people – student teachers, school placement tutors, co-operating teachers, other teachers on the staff, school principals, pupils, parents... With so many people, it's no wonder that student teachers feel under pressure in the context of a process that will be assessed and graded. There can be so many different, and sometimes competing, expectations. And the student teacher is at the heart of all of this.

This is one of the reasons why the Council produced [the Guidelines on School Placement](#) – to help bring about a greater degree of consistency in the experiences of student teachers on school placement, and thereby to enhance the benefits of that experience for them as “beginning” or “becoming” teachers. (A quick reference summary of the Guidelines is available [here](#).)

When we saw the transcript of the discussion, and the many issues that were raised, we thought it would be a good opportunity to highlight some of the key messages from the Guidelines, and hopefully reassure people as regards some of the concerns which were raised.

Another reason why we wished to post this response is summed up in this quote from the Guidelines:

*The guidelines will be subject to review and change, as informed by further national and international research on ITE, and the voices of all partners, particularly those of student teachers and co-operating teachers.*

In so far as the #edchatie discussion is a clear example of the articulation of many of the voices of those involved in school placement, we would like to demonstrate in a practical way what statements like the above actually mean.

### **Key issues raised in #edchatie discussion**

The following emerged as key issues in the course of the #edchatie discussion:

- 1. Terminology / language** – e.g. the use of “school placement” instead of “teaching practice”. We also noticed many people referring to the college supervisors or placement tutors as “inspectors”.
  - a.** Language is crucial to everything that we do, especially in teaching and learning. Teaching can be viewed as the translation of a given body of knowledge or insights by teachers in order to enable or empower learners to make their own of that. As such, teachers know instinctively how important it is to take time and care to think about what they are going to say, and how they are going to say it. The same applies to the work of the Council.

**b.** People may well wonder at the need to “make up new words” to describe what teachers have done for decades, if not hundreds of years. The reason can be summed up in two words – learning, and understanding. Over time, we have come to learn a lot more about just how complex teaching is, and why it is that complex. We have therefore come to understand a lot more about the breadth and depth of teaching as a profession. And we have come to realise that the language of the past, which served the purposes of the past quite well, is no longer adequate to describe teaching today. So, in consultation with all stakeholders, we have worked on new language for school placement, as one aspect of teaching, that seeks to give a clearer insight into what should happen for the student teacher, and the role that each person can play in making that experience the best it could possibly be.

**c. Key terms**

**i.** As some contributors noted, “school placement” was chosen to reflect the fact that the life of teachers in schools extends beyond the classroom door. And if we want student teachers to have the best possible preparation for the realities of daily school life, then their experience of it during their time in college should give them every chance to engage with that broader life of the school.

**ii.** “Co-operating teacher” was chosen to refer to the experienced teacher who mentors the student teacher and works closely with him or her to ensure the placement is the type of supportive experience it should be. This was

chosen over “host teacher” because we feel that it better reflects the sense in which the class teachers can work with, learn from and teach the student teacher. As many contributors noted, this happens in many, if not most, cases anyway. This therefore is a good example of making explicit what has been implicit for quite some time.

Indeed, many of the tweets referred to how important it is that the co-operating teachers support the student teacher on their placement. As one person put it, “The most supportive teachers are the most memorable and the ones I learned the most from.” There were also some good examples of co-operating teachers explaining to student teachers who were observing them, why they were doing what they were doing as they went along. One teacher tweeted about an excellent co-operating teacher who informally evaluated their teaching and provided feedback. There were also references to co-operating teachers learning from student teachers. These are all practical examples that clearly demonstrate how a co-operating teacher can support and help a student teacher. The fostering of relationships, based on mutual respect, trust and inclusion, is vitally important for effective school placement, as it is for teaching and learning in general.

One key point that is worth clarifying here is the issue of assessing the student teacher. It is important to note that

the co-operating teacher does not have a formal role in assessing or grading a student teacher.

They do have a valuable role to play in giving feedback to the tutor, so as to give a more rounded picture of the student teachers' engagement in school life over a prolonged period, rather than a snapshot of their practice during one visit. And as #edchatie showed, they have done this in many cases for a long time. As one teacher said, in relation to feedback to a placement tutor, "I've always been honest whether it's good or bad news..." But this is not the same as assessing or grading the student teacher.

- iii. Finally, "placement tutor" has been chosen to refer to the person who formally observes the student teacher on behalf of the college and awards them a grade. While we understand the historical reasons for the use of the word "inspector", we don't think that that is an appropriate or accurate term. Firstly, there is an Inspectorate in the DES, and they have no role in assessing student teachers on placement. Secondly, for reasons similar to the term "co-operating teacher", we are keen to make explicit the implicit supportive role of the tutor. Yes, they do formally assess. But if that was all they did, and they gave no

feedback at all to help the student teacher reflect and learn, the process would be a very poor one indeed for the student teacher. So our Guidelines clearly envisage a person who will give detailed feedback to the student teacher in a prompt and accessible way that will enable them to reflect and learn. “Tutor” is a phrase that would be familiar to the context of third level institutions.

1. **Exhausting experience** – There were some comments to the effect that school placement was an exhausting experience, and also to excessive paperwork. We would share people’s concerns on these issues. Behind many of the changes which the Council is trying to bring about in teacher education is the core concept of the reflective practitioner. What this means in practical terms is that people would have the space, time and support to think about what they are doing and to change what they are doing as a result of that reflection, as necessary. Clearly, if people are exhausted at 11 pm having completed reviews of the day just gone, and plans for the day to come, they will not have much inclination to reflect. This is not in anybody’s interests – student teacher, school, and above all, the pupils they will teach. Rigorous standards must apply to every aspect of teacher education. But we must ensure that those standards apply just as much to the nurturing of the reflective practitioner as they do to any other aspect.

2. **Consistency and connections between tutors, colleges and schools** – As one tweet put it, “A little more communication would be helpful all round!” This statement applies to so many aspects of teaching and learning, not just in the context of school placement. Other comments referred to the following aspects of this particular issue:
- a. The challenges of effective communications with the right people in schools. For example, there was a reference to a letter being sent to principals but the co-operating teacher not getting it.
  - b. Some contributions talked about a lack of connection or communication between the school and the college.
  - c. One teacher found that greatest degree of inconsistency was not between tutors but between co-operating teachers!

In terms of the consistency between colleges, the Council has put in place [Criteria and Guidelines for the Review of Programmes of Initial Teacher Education](#). This document sets out the standards which every programme of ITE must meet in order to be given professional accreditation by the Council. The Guidelines on School Placement are an addendum to that document. If a programme failed to meet the standards set out by the Council, its graduates could not register as teachers. In this way, the Council is working to bring about a greater degree of consistency in the experiences of student teachers. Please note, however, that greater consistency does not mean that every student will have exactly the same experience. Just as each school has its own culture and traditions, yet teaches to a national curriculum, so each college has its own ethos, culture and traditions, and thereby brings its own unique contribution to the education of teachers.

In terms of communications between tutors, co-operating teachers and student teachers, the Guidelines on School Placement seek to clarify each of their respective roles, and to help them form a shared language so that they can have professional conversations with each other. Clearly, it would be expected that the tutor would consult with the co-operating teacher on the experience of the student teacher. If nothing else, this would be fairer for the student teacher as it would enable the tutor to form a more rounded picture of them that they would not necessarily see based on a small number of visits to the school.

### **3. School Placement is not representative of daily school life.**

- a. Some tweets emphasised the point that no matter what way it is approached, school placement is not the same as having full responsibility for your own class(es) as a qualified, registered teacher. This is clearly true. That is why induction and probation are so important. But in terms of school placement itself, this is also one of the reasons why the Council has required that the final block of placement be 10 weeks long. We acknowledge that this can be difficult to organise. But we feel that it is critically important in terms of the transition from ITE to your first teaching post in a school. Having a solid 10 week block, where you are in the school from the beginning to the end of the school day, gives student teachers the greatest possible opportunity to observe and engage with the daily realities of school life, which can change so much from one day to another, never mind from one week to another.

### **4. School Placement needs to be reflective of the spectrum of school types**

- a. Some tweets made reference to the importance of experiencing a broad and diverse range of school types. We would agree with this.



Hence the Guidelines contain the requirement that student teachers should experience at least two different settings over the period of their ITE. The reason we have not specified more is in acknowledgement of the huge pressures on all parties to this process – principal, teachers, schools, student teachers, colleges – and how difficult it can be to ensure more than this. We would hope in time to revisit this and revise it as appropriate.

## **5. Portfolio for School Placement**

- a. There were differing views in the #edchatie discussion on whether electronic or hard copy was the best format for this. The Council is looking closely at the portfolio in the context of Droichead. All we would say at this point is that the cloud based approach is definitely more conducive to the notion of lifelong learning throughout your career. It would be easier to take with you as you progress throughout your working life as a teacher.

## **6. Importance of school policy**

- a. Some people emphasised the importance of having a school policy on placement. Again, we would agree with this. To save principals' time, we have produced a [template policy](#) in Word format which you can use if you wish and adapt for the context of your own school. (On the note of saving time, a quick reference summary of the Guidelines is also available via [this link](#).)

## **7. Key quotes**

There were many memorable lines in the discussion, but a few in particular which resonated strongly with me were:

- a. “Don’t be afraid to ask for help and support and remember we learn from our mistakes!”
- b. “...I still think we all have a responsibility to allow students to learn on the job. We all had to!”
- c. “Students – ask the class teachers for pointers, and take them on board. And teachers can learn from you all too!”
- d. “Never be afraid to ask questions.”

In many ways, these quotes sum up the essence of what we mean when we say that at the heart of a great teacher lies the heart of a great learner.

8. We recognise that implementation of these guidelines will be challenging for schools and HEIs. There are many complexities which will need to be addressed. Time will be required for the guidelines to bed down and for all involved to fully embrace the benefits which the new collaborative models can bring. It was heartening to see many comments which said that teachers had learned so much on school placement, especially when they had a supportive co-operating teacher. Such comments bode well for the future of a collegial profession.

### **General Updates on the work of the Council:**

1. Remember that all registered teachers have free access to the EBSCO collection of online education research through your registered teacher log in on the Council website. More information [here](#).

2. The Council's phone lines are now open 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday.
3. We have now issued an open call for presentations / proposals for this year's FÉILTE (Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching Excellence) to mark World Teachers' Day. Please check your most recent email from the Council for further details.
4. We are continuing to accept expressions of interest for participation in the Droichead pilot. NIPT is commencing its planning for next year's phase of the pilot, so the sooner that schools make contact by emailing [droichead@teacherineducation.ie](mailto:droichead@teacherineducation.ie), the better.
5. In the autumn, we are hoping to begin a consultation process on teachers' continuing professional development so we will be keen to hear your views. More to follow later in the year.
6. Don't forget to follow us on twitter @TeachingCouncil, for ongoing updates on our work.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

Director

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