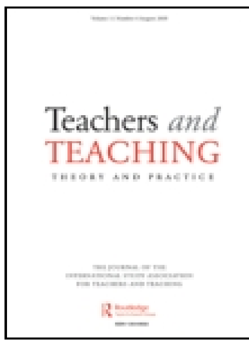

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Novice teachers as 'invisible' learners

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The present study focuses on the way novice teachers, who are part of a one-year postgraduate diploma in post-primary teaching, have opted to negotiate their status as school teachers. In particular, it asks why novice teachers prefer to hide as they scramble to learn how to teach. On the basis of three separate interviews spaced out though the teaching year 2009 (January, March, May), a team of university-based tutors probed for student reactions to competence-based issues. Adopting a sociocultural perspective, this study drew upon roughly 10% of the pre-service student cohort ($n = 17$), each in a different placement location. The study looked, in particular, at their negotiating power, particularly the effect of school supports for their reality as learners. Findings suggest that without quality mentoring support, our pre-service teachers prefer to become 'invisible' as learners. Three pre-professional stances are identified: fragile, robust and competitive. The key finding is that none of these pre-professional stances mitigate pre-service students' lack of negotiating power. On the other hand, informal school-based supports can help students considerably.

Keywords: pre-service teacher preparation; school placement; negotiating status; novice teachers

Introduction

Although there are several ways of becoming a secondary teacher in Ireland, sometimes through the concurrent models of a bachelors degree, sometimes through a specialised post-degree Diploma, this study concerned the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (currently renamed the Professional Diploma in Education) which is roughly equivalent to the Postgraduate Certificate in Education in the UK and which consists of a one-year post-degree programme. Our programme observes the protocols adopted by many of the former National University of Ireland colleges, now separate universities following the 1998 *Universities Act*. This involves a nation-wide competitive application procedure, managed by the Postgraduate Application Centre in Galway. In 2010, there were 2754 applications for 870 places in

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The *Learning to Teach Study (LETS): Curricular and Cross-curricular competences in Initial Teacher Education* was funded by a Research and Development grant (2007–10) from the Department of Education and Skills (Ireland). The research team consisted of Paul Conway (PI), Rosaleen Murphy (research fellow) and the other members of the research team (in alphabetical order) were Michael Delargey, Kathy Hall, Karl Kitching, Fiachra Long, Jacinta McKeon, Brian Murphy, Stephen O'Brien and Dan O'Sullivan, all in the School of Education, UCC.

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the four colleges/universities concerned, namely, the National University Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM), National University Ireland, Galway (NUIG), University College Dublin and University College Cork (UCC). Candidates normally require a score of 2.1 or higher in their degree to qualify for entry; some allowance is given for work experience but paradoxically, unqualified teaching time is not counted. Candidates need to apply by 1 December of the year preceding their intended year of study and the most recent university results count as the benchmark. Once a candidate has applied online and has been successful, receiving their first preference choice of location, then they face lecture patterns and timetable patterns that differ from place to place. Some programmes offer a block release placement structure and some a continuous placement structure: each university has found its own way of linking with local schools. At University College Cork, successful pre-service students teach about three hours per week through the year, attending lectures in the afternoons. They are normally subject to interview in their chosen placement school. They undergo police vetting before normally signing a contract, supported by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, binding them for one year to the school. Because of the collective entry procedure across the former NUI colleges, we do not interview candidates.

Secondary teacher education in Ireland follows the general norm, dividing into two complementary parts: the university experience with tutorials, lectures and workshops and the school placement experience. Ireland might be described as being at the early stage in the development of university/school partnerships with the result that contacts between university and school are generally informal. Besides university-appointed tutors, who visit every pre-service student on five occasions through the year, our programme depends for its success on the voluntary work of established teachers in school sites. These teachers act voluntarily as mentors or guides and sometimes offer their lessons for observation purposes. However, sometimes our pre-service teachers seek placement in schools where these support structures are minimal and so there is a lack of uniformity across the spectrum. If a skilled mentor can bring to students a feeling of welcome and acceptance, if he or she can present a good role model, mediating a supportive learning environment (HMIE, 2005, p. 15), what does the absence of these features signify? To improve matters, there are moves to make these links more formal in imitation of the models elsewhere. Indeed findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-led Teaching and Learning International Survey cross-national comparative report strongly suggests that, in the absence of formal structures, deep professional collaboration is rare in schools (Gilleece, Shiel, Perkins, & Proctor, 2009). Along these lines, a document issued by Ireland's Teaching Council on the *Continuum of Teacher Education* (2011) is currently under discussion suggesting a more formal model and this aspiration has lately been repeated in Teaching Council's *Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providence* (June 2011). Nevertheless, there are no guarantees of success even with a formal structure (Blauvelt and Spath, 2008; HMIE, 2005; Ketchlermans & Ballet, 2002; Phelan, McEwan, & Pateman, 1996). And as things stood at the time of this research, mediation patterns with the schools were informal and uneven. Hence, pre-service student teachers often had to negotiate their status as learner teachers with the school authorities in unpredictable ways. They were obliged to act in the front line on many issues.

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Focus

Unlike contexts of intensification where elements of a teacher's life come under ever increasing scrutiny, leading to highly formalised reports accompanied by its own consequences of low teacher morale and problems with self-efficacy (Day, 1999), our pre-service teachers exhibited contrary problems, due to a lack of formalisation. In our interviews, we expected to find details of the strategies our students used to negotiate their role as teachers in schools. We were interested in these because they might provide pointers towards the development of mediation structures between university and schools in the years ahead. Instead, what we unexpectedly found was that rather than having a list of strategies at their finger tips, most students were quite unsure about how to negotiate their identities as professionals. Indeed, if given the choice, many preferred to remain 'invisible' as learners. Many of them wanted to glide past without anyone noticing, consequently preferring never to confront their own learning needs as teachers. They felt that they were required to be not only 'invisible' but also invulnerable from the start like normal teachers! But what did that say about their view of normal teachers? Did it confirm what Kelchtermans found when, following on Blase (1989), he proposed that 'as this experienced vulnerability grew, teachers developed several protective coping strategies that resulted in conservative micro-political actions aimed at preserving the status quo' (Kelchtermans, 2005, p. 997)? Quite definitely. Briefly our particular concern was to learn how pre-service teachers achieved a competence to teach in contexts of haphazard support. But what seemed to emerge were a number of pre-professional stances that responded to the status quo, thereby leaving it intact.

Another concern, given that the current mediation structures in this programme are in transition to more formal arrangements and despite current severe austerities across the public sector affecting pay and infrastructure, was how to entice teachers to involve themselves in teacher training. Britzman's study pointed to how teachers remembered their own teacher training often in a negative light and continually restated the mantra that it is the classroom that counts, not the lecture hall (Britzman, 2007). Sometimes, they could even see themselves as potential saviours of the benighted pre-service teacher by downplaying the importance of the 'ivory tower' advice emanating from the university. However this basic inquiry, though relevant, did not feature in our research.

Most people recognise that to mediate change, the situation is not simple. At least four agencies have to move together to make any qualitative difference. The Teaching Council is implicated by the way it supports or manages the continuum of teacher education; the government is implicated by the way it provides resources; the providers, such as ourselves, are implicated by the way we facilitate better quality mediation between university and school; and the schools are implicated by the way they facilitate the mentoring process. Despite this complexity, one reviewer of an earlier version of this paper pointed out the key responsibility of providers to remove the conditions which allow negative attitudes to fester. Providers, after all, design the programmes. It is they who must stand over their programme quality. It is they who must stand over the quality of school-based supports. It is becoming clearer that a more formal support system agreed by all partners would be ideal. For a start, it might dispel some long-standing assumptions about learning to be a professional teacher.

From the point of view of student teachers, these questions begin to come into sharp relief when some signs of vulnerability begin to show. If pre-service teachers

get the impression that established teachers have no vulnerabilities and do not need to update themselves continually, then it means that 'learning to teach' is not a part of teaching itself. This impression feeds into a static view of teachers and teaching that is at odds with the pre-service teacher's own experience. If Britzman (2007) is correct and they are very much exposed to the thought: 'That is okay for the University but this is the real world and this is the way things work around here', how are they to move to a more open inquiry attitude? That is the challenge. In an environment where novelty is appreciated, then the lack of experience of pre-service teachers is also respected and learning to teach does not become a professional obstacle. Such learners are 'visible' as learners. But in other situations, where teachers are thought to be 'natural' and 'ready-made', our initial teachers want to remain invisible. Pretending to have no problems when they actually do have problems, they want to hide and take refuge in the 'mirror of make-believe'.[1] The problem for us as members of the Teacher Education team is how to break this spell.

Then, from the point of view of a cooperating teacher or mentor, the issues of motivation and support are central. Feiman-Nemser reported reluctance among American teachers to see themselves as teacher educators, 'responsible for helping novices learn to teach' (Feiman-Nemser, 1998, p. 64). And this may mean that because established teachers may have had from the beginning preferred to 'work alone in the privacy of their classrooms', our pre-service teachers may also have to make do with little more than a few introductory moments – the photocopier is here, the classroom is there and you are basically on your own after that. Behind it all our pre-service teachers may have come to believe that real teachers have to swim when asked to do so and not sink and that real teachers need not expect anyone to throw them a lifeline.

Recognising that the identity of pre-service teachers is best situated in communicative contexts (Hall & Murphy, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991), our research team accepted the view that learning processes should incorporate working alongside others. This happens already for nurses in our teaching hospitals and there are moves now to include accountants and engineers in this collective learning process at an early stage in their career (Eraut, 2007). Engineers appreciated what they called the 'wisdom of practice' (Walker, Brophy, Hodge, & Bransford, 2006, p. 49) while Bransford (2007) found that the opportunity for collaboration and learning in team settings proved especially important in promoting innovation and adaptation. By contrast, we reckoned that relative isolation in initial teaching impacts heavily on many identity issues, including the novice teacher's ability to find relevant solutions to problems (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

There is a general consensus in the literature about the value and importance of early career supports. What did our study find about the social supports helping our initial teachers to learn? As one might expect, the results were quite uneven.

Method

This study arose out of a wider research project known as Learning to Teach Study (LETS) that was an empirical research project funded by the Government of Ireland Department of Education and Skills. This broader project set out to examine how students on the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE, now named the PDE or Professional Diploma in Education) developed teaching competence as post-primary teachers. Adopting an interpretive approach (Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007;

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Mertens, 2005), the overall study involved the collaborative development of three interview protocols and a series of support meetings by the research team. We aimed to interview approximately 10% of the student cohort of 220 but ended up with 17 students. On three separate occasions, a member of the team interviewed the same volunteer who was not his or her student. After each round of interview, team meetings were held to decide on the focus of the next interviews and several meetings were held at the end to review concepts and themes. The interviews conducted involved students working in 17 different teaching contexts. Consent was understood to be ongoing (Simons & Usher, 2000), that is, students were free to withdraw at any time from the study.

Analysis of the interview data consisted of the team individually and collectively reading and annotating the transcript data and identifying (tentatively) key themes emerging from the evidence. Transcript analysis was based on the phenomenographic methodology outlined in a description of a similar study in Australia by Huntly (2008) but adapted to the circumstances. The theme discussed here emerged as an important issue only after the normal iterative methodology which involved taping and transcribing interviews, verifying their anonymity, sharing the tapes and interviews with colleagues, identifying emerging concerns at regular meetings, sifting for common themes and eventually coming to agree to a collective account of the interpretation of the evidence. Acknowledging the highly charged emotional nature of teaching practice (Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1989; Conway, 2001; Roehrig, Pressley and Talotte, 2002), our method operated a process of 'constant comparisons' (Silverman, 2000) and involved the comparison of transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994) before finally coming to the theme discussed here. The focus of the study was to examine the data for evidence of 'negotiation' but the emerging issue in this question was the theme of 'invisibility'.

Discussion

Our basic argument is that initial teachers under pressure and without support sometimes fall back on a number of pre-professional stances which they think will help them negotiate their status as teachers. They favour one stance to the exclusion of others. They then use this preferred stance as a way of concealing their own vulnerability as people learning how to teach. Normally, the stance is precipitated by the sense of being shut out from other staff and by what we are calling here *information* gaps. From our sample, three examples of this 'shut-out' came to light. Fiona's comments are typical of students trying to negotiate an 'information gap'. We can see the student being abruptly returned to a 'private' space, a 'do-it-yourself' stance, where she becomes quite simply a *bricoleur* (Hatton, 1988), someone who pieces her professional life together without any general plan:

> Interviewer: Ok that is grand about mentors. So is her practice representative of what is in the school?

> Fiona: It would be I imagine, like the communication … they had a class cancelled and I didn't know until I came in and it was only written up on the board this morning so I had no way of knowing. And it is a lovely school, like the ethos is very nice there but communication-wise they are just not good. And there is actually deliberate exclusion of Dips [*sic*][2] from staff meetings which I don't think is entirely necessary. (Interview 1, p. 3)

Fiona's politeness prevents her from speaking directly about her frustrations to a third party.

While it is likely that no one in the school knew that the lessons would be cancelled either, i.e. they all suffered the same information gap. Unlike established staff, Fiona did not know that such events were regular occurrences and so were liable to happen from time to time. The information gap troubling her was evidence of being excluded from knowing about the inner workings of the school and of not having access to information normally available to other teachers. An experienced mentor might have put her mind at ease. Instead, she is obliged to work out this pattern for herself and, in addition, to cope with the possibility that her tutor/supervisor might arrive to supervise her cancelled lesson. She notes not only the information gap but also a general lack of communicative energy and this recognition effectively makes her sense of isolation more acute. Her stress and anxiety is not shared but increased. She must learn to cope in private with her stress, scrambling in the university's handbook for a number to call in order to forestall a possible visit from her tutor, for instance, or draw implications for her scheme of work which had now been thrown out of alignment. By being cast as an outsider, she is unable to position herself as a 'professional' in context. Her negotiations are liable to be unmediated, pragmatic and atheoretical (Hatton, 1988).

Another student, Aisling, noted the static positioning of staff in the staff room at her teaching practice school:

> Interviewer: So it seems like the majority of the teachers who have always been in the school are adhering to long held practices.
>
> Aisling: Yes they sit where they normally sit, kind of all the women together and the men together, that kind of thing.
>
> Interviewer: Meanwhile there is a new principal who has some different views on the matter and you guys from the PGDE course are piggy in the middle.
>
> Aisling: Yes, so it is hard to know what to do. (Interview 2, pp. 25–26)

It is clear that unwelcoming practices induce a number of 'private' stances that are crucially pre-professional. Established teachers at the school already needed to deal with this staff-room issue but for them, the force of habit and accumulated months and years working in the same environment had inured them to these closed practices. Almost immediately, these stances positioned the newcomer to be a 'private' visitor, an outsider, not a fellow professional and yet there is an obvious lack of a rationale for the behaviour of staff. Other teachers had needed to deal with this staff-room issue long before but the pre-service teacher currently needed a space to welcome her tutor on a possible supervisory visit to the school. The pattern of behaviour favoured by the established staff seemed to indicate a lack of welcome for anyone and a resistance to change of any kind. The pre-service teacher had to handle this undeclared reality on her own. Once again, there is a gap but no explicit measures to mediate it. The brashness of routines effectively dis-empowers negotiation and the novice teacher senses this quite early. She is expected to know the school routines and pick up quickly on what is happening.

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Aisling's account is about to get worse because she makes the demoralising discovery that she had not been included in information about the Christmas test. As there is a common Christmas test for all class groups, this situation is potentially alarming. The *information* gap not only constructed her as a pre-professional teacher, a Dip [*sic*], a person who might make it or not into teaching, but someone who could not be trusted with the secret information available to full teachers. She is being constructed as one of *them*:

> Interviewer: But she never showed the questions to you?
>
> Aisling: No and I knew all the other teachers had the test …
>
> Interviewer: That is, the permanent teachers?
>
> Aisling: Yes, the staff teachers, and I did ask one of them because I wanted to make sure I didn't leave these students in the lurch.
>
> Interviewer: So it wasn't coordinated to any extent like that.
>
> Interviewee: No, there was definite secrecy, they were afraid the Dips would give away all the questions. (Aisling, Interview 3, pp. 10–12)

What is the effect of such a construction on her as a pre-service teacher? The absence of a mentor means that she has no advocate among the staff. She is unable to reverse the feeling that she is not a professional in training but rather one of the kids. She is obliged to adopt the role of being an outsider to the school team, an 'invisible' contributor to her own class group's Christmas test. Management practices in the school have led to a kind of intolerance towards her, a kind of professional unfriendliness which seriously compromises her ability to negotiate her professional identity at a sensitive stage in her professional development.

Pre-professional stances

From the profile of our interviewed students, it seemed that a gap in information, however it manifests itself, impelled them to revert to earlier pre-professional psychological stances. Our intuition suggests three such pre-professional stances, although there could be more. One is to expose them to their own fragility and to encourage them to see themselves as *fragile* learners. Of course, this could be compounded by direct contact with a negative mentor.

In one of Phelan's case studies, Karen, despite close mentoring with an established teacher, June, began to lose faith in herself. Time and again, the feedback she received was so negative that it caused her to concentrate on her own inferiority, which simply compounded her inferior cultural status as a member of a minority group. She eventually left the programme (Phelan, McEwan, & Pateman, 1996, p. 342). In our case, however, the sense of inferiority comes from a lack of relevant feedback. No one is there to tell them that they are part of the team, that setbacks are to be expected and that progress itself can be uneven. The sense of inferiority can be overwhelming.

We also noted a second stance, somewhat the opposite of the first. In this stance, the 'sink or swim' rationale began to prevail. Some pre-service students developed a brashness and a dogmatism, which may not have been real, but carried them through as *robust* learners. A third, equally damaging stance, was to position

oneself as a winner in a competitive game. This *competitive* stance is well familiar to students who are academic high achievers and it manifests itself negatively as an ‘I don’t need to learn’ stance. All three pre-professional stances eclipse the need to learn how to teach. Some examples taken from the interviews might illustrate the effects of these stances on the negotiating powers of our students.

Discussion: stance 1 – the fragile student

Siobhán is a fragile student, a student whose learning must remain ‘invisible’ lest she lose all status in her own eyes. She would rather go through the day without anyone noticing her. She feels that she is something of a burden on the system and on the school and she expresses this feeling as a ‘pressure from within’. She feels that she has stepped into a ‘hall of mirrors’ with all eyes looking at her but in this ‘hall of mirrors’ she must always appear to be perfect. She is excessively polite, saying that everyone is so friendly but, in fact, she experiences a high level of stress resulting from her isolation and also concealed anger. She is very concerned to make a good impression and to leave the school with a good reference and so she is over sensitive to what others think. Others act as mirrors in the absence of her own self-confidence. She is likely to be very vulnerable to the comments of any ‘subjective’ mentors, i.e. idiosyncratic mentors (Britzman, 2007). She imagines that if she remains ‘invisible’ as a learner teacher, she will enjoy maximum authority in the classroom. Pupils will respect her as a fully qualified teacher and for this reason her imagined status will be sustained. She would rather avoid being ‘outed’ as a learner teacher and so presents herself to the interviewer as someone *fragile* and needing support. The irony, of course, is that this teacher is very visible as a learner both to other teachers on the staff and the pupils whom she teaches:

> Siobhán: Yes I think a lot of the pressure comes from yourself because, like that, you are only beginning but you don’t want to be seen as weak and you don’t want your own authority within the classroom being decreased or anything so that is definitely the absolute major thing. And also the concern on how to deal with it and feeling that maybe you don’t have enough strategies to actually deal with discipline … (Interview 1, p. 10) …
>
> Siobhán: In my school there is no system of mentoring which I think, especially at the start you would find very helpful. I mean the teachers in my school in general are very helpful.
>
> Interviewer: But there’s no specific person?
>
> Siobhán: But there’s no specific person and again at the start I wouldn’t have felt comfortable even asking for help because like that you were afraid you would feel weak and things like that. *Maybe you don’t want to draw the extra attention on yourself*. [emphasis added] …
>
> Siobhán: Exactly so you do feel very separate from it I think especially when there is no set person that you can go and talk to.
>
> Interviewer: And do you think that would have been a help?

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> Siobhán: I definitely feel that would have been a help. Like in my school everyone was doing their own thing and you also don't want to annoy teachers because you know that they are busy and they are doing their own things so you don't want to be an extra burden to them either. (Siobhán, Interview 1, p. 12)

Because Siobhán is liable to imagine that learning how to teach is vaguely unacceptable in this environment, she may react defensively to all detailed criticism of her performance when and if it occurs. She is unsure how to negotiate changes in her imagined self-image; she is unsure how to admit any weakness. The school needs to help her to negotiate the truth about herself by granting her permission to be a learner teacher. If teachers do not take the initiative in this, her progress will be slow. Unsure how to step forward, Siobhán feels that she must defend a fiction about who she is supposed to be. She spends energy trying to keep her own learning needs *invisible* so that this make-believe image of herself can be sustained. She tries to defend herself against the nameless teachers who, she imagines, are keeping her under surveillance. She takes it as an achievement when her needs do not show. And yet what she needs primarily is authentic mentoring. What she needs is the quality of interaction defined by Bozeman and Feeney (2007) as the:

> informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom or experience (mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less …', (p. 317 as cited by Phillips and Fragoulis, 2010, p. 201)

We will see some benefits of proper mentoring later in the cases of Kevin and Marissa.

Stance 2: the robust student

Julie represents another type of student – the *robust* student. She also needs a mentor but, at the time of the interview, she positions herself as firmly in control; she admits that in the beginning she was much more 'wishy-washy'. She expresses some surprise at the detail required to set the behaviour standards for her classroom group and hence to 'negotiate' a disciplinarian identity that was not 'wishy-washy'. This attention to detail has paid off for Julie who recounts that she is then able to assume the authority needed to carry through with her lessons, despite some resistance from a group of second years. She has stepped in at the 'deep end' and has come out on top. She is now able to establish her authority and negotiate her presence, despite being 'outed' as a pre-service student teacher. Despite admitting that she had to learn things, she prides herself on having been able to do this independently and pretty much out of the view of others on the staff! Julie's robust style means that she has taken her destiny in her own hands:

> Julie: Learning the names of all the pupils was hard at the start. What I didn't realise was a challenge but I have discovered it since, it is really a challenge at the start to start your routines and your discipline, let them know what you want of them and how you want them to behave and what will happen if they don't and what will happen if they do. And I didn't heed that challenge at the start and it has been harder for me. Things are going smoothly now because I didn't know what I wanted at the start,

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I didn’t know I wanted the students to come in, sit down, take off their jackets and take out their books. (Interview 1, p. 16)

Julie’s account of her own learning betrays a strange kind of monologue. No one else is mentioned as having contributed to her learning to teach. She presents herself as someone who does not need to be helped but could learn simply by doing. She has learned to ‘swim’, not to ‘sink’.

Robust negotiators, like Julie, position themselves as ready and willing to negotiate with the established boundaries of the school, horizontal boundaries, marking relations with other teachers, vertical boundaries marking how to relate to discipline heads, form masters, deputy principals, principals etc. They appear quickly to be the finished article but in practice, they are still quite isolated and are not trusted by established staff.

Listen to Fiona whom we met earlier and who suffered from information gaps in her school. When she suggests something, she finds that she does not have any status to do so. She now has to negotiate the design of her history test with an established teacher because they both share the same class group:

Interviewer: Have you had any opportunity to co-teach then in your subject with a teacher in your school?

Fiona: I haven’t actually, no, and that is an issue at the moment because they have just given me the summer test for the history and it’s nothing like the tests I give … I guess I am kind of working up the courage to say something because there are three of them kind of saying, ‘are you ok with that there?’ And I am the Dip coming in with her new ideas.

Interviewer: So that is a bit of an issue then.

Fiona: Yes because we have never co-planned anything before and now I feel like I am being really annoying, maybe I am not, I mean they are very nice people and they would probably be open to it and I am just intimidated myself.

Interviewer: It puts you in a bit of a position.

Fiona: Yes it does. (Fiona, interview 2, pp. 11–12)

Aisling’s robustness is similarly compromised. Even though she is clear in her criticism of teachers not opening to newcomers in the staff room, she has only subsequently assumed a robust stance. She is, nevertheless, left out of the real conversation about her curriculum area. Her robustness is irrelevant when real negotiations are taking place:

Interviewer: And what opportunities have you had to co-plan in either of your two subjects with teachers from your school?

Aisling [*mishearing*]: Yes, unfortunately I have recently and it just worked out really badly because I am sharing a class with one teacher, he does two a week and I do one a week … This teacher now wants the class to do the same topic in linear fashion, so say he wants them to just have rivers the whole way through. He does two classes a week with them and then he tells me where he leaves off with them on a

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Thursday and then on Friday I pick up where he left off.

Interviewer: The same topic.

Aisling: The same topic. So I suppose that is kind of co-planning but it has been very difficult to organise where I will get very late notice of what I am doing and then sometimes I will go into class and start teaching it and they say, 'oh Mr. X did this already.'

Interviewer: When you say late notice, do you meet with him?

Aisling: No, you see, well he says he'll text me, but he doesn't text me so I have to text him on Thursday and he will normally get back to me on Thursday night, so it could be 7:00 or 8:00 on Thursday night for an 8:50 class on a Friday morning. So it is late enough. And I just feel then that I go in unprepared and the last few classes I have had like this … (Aisling, Interview 2, pp. 18–19)

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Stance 3: the competitive student

On first contact, Maebh comes over as a robust negotiator but on closer examination, she positions herself as an arch *competitor*, claiming privilege over other students because of her previous experience in the classroom, her capacity to come through because of special circumstances. Competitors do not admit that they need to learn and so their learning progress is often left unidentified. They risk becoming dogmatic instructors due to a compulsion to be perfect always or else superior. If others need help, they do not need it; if others do not need help, they are not afraid to ask for it. But the central theme is the one of competition. They are also effectively in competition with other pre-service teachers in the same school and will consequently isolate themselves from others of the same status. This stance simply exacerbates their isolation:

Maebh: But I think every Dip's experience in the school is totally different and it is up to you to avail of the opportunities there. With the 5 other Dips in my school and I was subbing there before so I would have known more staff and I knew the layout of the school and I knew a few students, which other Dips wouldn't and I suppose in that sense, I wasn't that caught, I didn't mind asking someone for help. I said, ok this is my course it is up to me to do it but other Dips would be reluctant and they would pick who they'd ask certain things. (Maebh, interview 2, pp. 14–15)

Interviewer: So the biggest worry about next year?

Maebh: As I said establishing myself in the classroom and in the school. Even the groups that I am not teaching, I still want to be seen as a professional teacher instead of just a young new teacher. So that would be a major thing for me that all students would respect you as a teacher. Like even this year if I wasn't in the classroom or a more experienced teacher walked into the same classroom, you know, the response that they would get, you know, so that would be a major thing. (Maebh, Interview 3, p. 13)

Maebh's competitive stance is configured in her mind in terms of how she is seen by others. Success in her eyes is measured by claiming the normal or superior position. Recognition by others is her primary aspiration. The esteem of others animates her competitiveness. The more normal she appears in their eyes, the more a winner she

feels. So as a learner, she is invisible. Caron too shrugs her shoulders and dismisses her status as a pre-service teacher, claiming a special position in view of her age:

> Caron: In fact in the first week they suggested that the teacher be in the class for the first week but from the start I didn't want to undermine my authority so I chose to go in and I felt confident amongst the kids, and I felt confident enough because I am an old one as compared to the younger aged Dips! (Caron, Interview 1, p. 3) …

Discussion

Most established teachers recognise how hard they found it to establish themselves in a school. The negotiation has to be *real* and has to be renewed by every teacher who wants to benefit from its power. Established teachers can choose to be 'visible' for disciplinary reasons in situations that are not strictly within the confines of a classroom. Switching between being 'visible' and being 'invisible' represents the kernel of their authority. In a similar fashion, established teachers can help novices negotiate their own authority power stance. In view of these considerations, they could point out that it may not be wise to be invisible *all the time* and if our novice teacher drifts along the corridor secretly claiming an authority, she has not negotiated, she should expect to learn her true position in the resistance by children to her hastily barked orders. Established teachers could suggest that an entire grammar of 'visibility' is at work that requires the skilful negotiation of authority. But to avoid this negotiation might leave them, in the words of Phelan and colleagues, 'divested of any means to argue their cases for fear of appearing outlandish, unprofessional, or insane'. Student teachers learning in isolation can be easily caught between the dogmatisms of school practices led by workers at the 'coalface' and the seeming abstractions of university lectures. Established teachers need to intervene to shatter the two-sided myth of the 'born teacher' and the 'irrelevant theorist' so that something new can happen both for the novice teacher and for the profession.

Observation or team-teaching of some kind might be construed as the intermediate step between a system without mentoring and a system with mentoring and yet, these collaborative teaching patterns require a lot of flexibility in staff and pre-service student alike. The individuals representing the three categories of *invisibility* discussed here – the fragile, robust and competitive – each tended to avoid collaborative learning, for quite different reasons. They all took observation to be equivalent to exposing themselves to potential weakness which they did not want to admit in public. Their enforced or self-selected isolation meant that they might never learn about the established power borders within a school. Instead, they found themselves victims of a kind of 'mundane violence' undermining the optimal 'territory' upon which both the initial teacher and the profession of teaching itself depends (Butler, 1999). Taking an isolated stance, they had become vulnerable to 'subjective' mentors of the kind Phelan described and as a result easily discouraged from the teaching profession (Moore Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Although, in our case, students do not generally drop out of the programme, they can develop instead a cynical attitude when no help is forthcoming and this consequence can be long lasting and ultimately counter-productive for teacher education generally (Britzman, 2003; Florio-Ruane & Smith, 2004). Remembering Britzman's insight about teachers who learn to despise their own vulnerabilities and, in doing so, also learn to despise the vulnerabilities of others, our initial

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teachers run the risk of becoming unsympathetic when the roles are reversed, i.e. when they become the mentor and not the novice. For this reason, young staff members are not necessarily the most suitable to act as mentors. They may have so many unresolved issues themselves that they want to hide their own vulnerabilities from novice teachers. Similarly, novice teachers who are isolated can be unsure about ideas that are not mediated in the school practice site and, when offered the security of concrete school practices as an alternative, they can easily be persuaded to leave not only theory but novelty aside. They may even accept the norms of current practice as definitive (Levinson in Mordechai, 2001). Perhaps in years to come, these novice teachers will remember with hatred these hidden feelings of vulnerability and their own reactive responses, which they may have successfully hidden from themselves and others:

> Teachers may say to newcomers: 'My teacher training was irrelevant, the real experience is here in my classroom, and theory is not useful.' Teachers and student teachers may believe that the university idealizes theory and ignores school constraints. (Britzman, 2007, p. 8)

Expressed in more colloquial language, Fiona expresses a similar thought, although there are still traces of idealism in her voice and attitude. Her robustness holds her ideals in place but rather than 'keep alive the sacred spark of wonder' which Dewey (1938, p. 34) speaks about, these ideals are likely to be quenched by the early waves of cynicism:

> Fiona: It is unclear to be honest, I suppose there is the staffroom so there is a lot of, let's say if any of us were running around with anything vaguely unusual, they'd be, 'oh that will all be over next year, aren't you mad?' Like there definitely wouldn't be any support or anything like that and they would all be making jokes about their classes. But at the same time I am sure they don't practice what they preach either, it is kind of bravado, ha, ha, we just go in and do nothing. (Fiona … Interview 2, p. 16)

A formal mentoring system might be a possible antidote to these pre-professional stances because the mentor solves the information gap problem as well as the inferior status problem in negotiating about tests and curriculum. The mentor can also become a teaching aide because despite excellent work from outside supervisors, the real 'learning to teach' needs of that student teacher may only be met in the details known to the school. Without mentoring contact, the students we interviewed came to analyse their own problems as unusual or annoying and, as feedback on performance was generally unforthcoming, they came to establish an empirically unverified set of assumptions about themselves. Further research is needed to determine the relative mismatch between student self-knowledge under such circumstances and their evaluations by experienced tutors. Indeed, the voice of established teachers is significantly missing from our research.

Some positive signs

Luckily, in an environment where mentoring support is neither formalised nor required, the picture is not all black. Some novice teachers managed to find staff with whom they forged a meaningful working relationship as novices learning to teach, even if the particular relationship with a mentor took time to develop. Even

though he came to the programme with some previous experience, Kevin needed time to forge a relationship with the teacher who was to mentor him in several ways. Although two teachers came forward to help in different subjects, it was clear that only one of them actually accepted Kevin's needs as a learner teacher. The first teacher simply introduced himself, gave him some indications and guidelines and then basically disappeared. The second mentor introduced himself in the same way but kept coming back. In this case, the mentor guided the student in the learning process. There were meaningful conversations, trusted observations and the sense of steady progress. Conversations were iterative: the student came back to topics already discussed when the time was right – timeliness plays its part. Advice could be requested and offered even about small things. Listen to Kevin as he explained these two types of mentor contact and the effect they had on him. In the first case, he suggested that one of the non-national pupils needed extra language support:

> Kevin: I have referred it to the first year class teacher [*i.e. first mentor*] but I am not sure, I mean I am not sure whether he is responsive to it or not or whether he takes … I think he more or less kind of brushes my recommendations aside kind of …
>
> Interviewer: Because you are only starting, is it?
>
> Kevin: Yes I think so, I am not sure, he kind of entertains me but he doesn't really take me seriously … (Kevin, Interview 1, p. 14)
>
> Kevin: … I mean before Christmas and even after Christmas to a certain degree I kind of made a big deal about homework at the start to make sure that everybody had their homework and it kind of took up the whole class more or less. People giving me excuses about why their homework wasn't with them and stuff like that. Whereas he [*i.e, successful mentor teacher*] suggested that I take up the copies and bring them away with me instead of trying to correct them in class. It was a collection of simple advice that I took on board, that came together and had a positive reaction. (Kevin, Interview 2, p. 10)

Now listen to Marissa, another novice teacher, who also benefited from observing a more practised teacher. For her, it was the general tone she had set with her class group that she needed to change. This had turned into an acute need by the time she observed the science lessons mentioned. Tone and teaching style had become more important to her than individual planning and the procedure of the lesson:

> Interviewer: What have you learned from [observations of Science Lessons with a more experienced teacher]?
>
> Marissa: With? In the other class?
>
> Interviewer: Yes.
>
> Marissa: Just managing group work and I suppose the most important thing is when I went in initially, I was very cross and strict and the whole '*Don't smile 'til Christmas*' thing, but he had a different way of approaching it, being friendly and making sure everyone was ok and it was just a different way of teaching and it just gave me insight into different ways of managing a classroom. (Marissa, Interview 1, p. 4)

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Conclusion

The reader may have got the impression that this study has been unduly negative in its portrayal of the teaching practice site. It is true that this study noted the consequences of learning how to teach in certain unfavourable circumstances and tried to theorise these experiences on the basis that 'atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). But we have not assumed that the experiences of students mentioned here are typical of the programme's teaching practice that school supports or of our cooperating schools in general. We have simply illustrated the marked difference in our students' circumstances as learners if they are supported by sympathetic mentors in schools.

One could draw the distinction between a reactive stance and a reflective stance and we could call the three pre-professional stances identified, namely, the fragile, the robust and the competitive as reactive stances. They are reactive because they actually inhibit reflective engagement in the daily practices of teaching. They are reactive and not reflective because they originate in an artificial isolation that fundamentally runs counter to what teaching and educating is about.

In our sample, the majority of the novice teachers began by being professionally isolated and they needed to negotiate their way out of this isolation. We have noted that such isolation is generally out of step with training in other professions. We have linked the effect of this isolation to the phenomenon of the 'invisible learner' in students, none of whom achieved the authority they might have wished in negotiating tests, class sharing or curriculum design. Our interviews showed that they would have preferred in such circumstances to have been 'ready-made' teachers or 'natural' teachers but yet they derived no ultimate benefit from this pretence. What they arguably revealed in their tones and expressions was a resentment caused by the many missed opportunities to learn from actual teachers. This resentment expressed itself in angry outbursts, followed immediately by concessional remarks about the nice ethos in the school or teachers being very busy.

In other respects, our findings corroborate a vast literature in support of good mentoring practices in schools. Helped by sympathetic teachers, our novice teachers began to negotiate their identities as professionals and to manoeuvre through the 'micro-politics' of school issues. Behind each small issue stood the belief that it is okay to learn these things. It is okay to learn about the daily realities of being a full time teacher – setting homework, distributing copies etc. The message which the established teacher communicates is that it is okay to learn how to teach, to take on new ideas, to learn how to communicate better, to organise better and to become a better educator. Much progress can be made if energies can be deployed towards 'making a teacher' rather than finding a ready-made one; this would be the ideal.

One serious recommendation is that staffs of schools and university providers need to accept vulnerability as part and parcel of the teaching life. Earlier, we referred to Kelchterman's (2007) work on the micro-politics of staff relations in schools. For established teachers who admitted a certain vulnerability, the antidote to withdrawal behind the status quo seemed to require putting in place good working conditions for good work performance.

There is clear evidence that our pre-service teachers were sensitive as learners to supportive staff-room practices. Indeed, despite initial gaps in knowledge and predictable naivety, they needed to express their vulnerabilities in order to make progress in

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teaching. This is more difficult in school contexts where the micro-political energies do not support the vulnerabilities of established staff. Predictably, the defensive postures which Kelchtermans identified in certain established teachers, deprived of opportunities to learn how to teach better are likely to become established in pre-service teachers' thoughts about teaching both during initial teacher education and later on. For pre-service teachers, the effect will be to close ranks and conserve some past state or status, even one that is purely imaginary. It may well mean the withdrawal into a private space and the development of a negotiating strategy which is unlikely to work. Something is missing from a system when pre-service teachers have little option in the face of acute vulnerability but to withdraw to where their learning needs have to remain *invisible*.

In view of these dangers, there is a need then for policy-makers, government officials, providers of teacher education and schools to work together to allow vulnerability to become a normal feature of initial teacher training. One cannot but conclude that the support in the staff room is a key element while programme providers also need to take a more urgent and closer look at their own responsibilities in this matter.

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Notes

1. The notion described here as 'make-believe' refers to Jacques Lacan's famous notion of a mirror stage in the child's development. Besides representing the body image of the child (*Ecrits*, I, 90), this development constantly marks the development of the self, situating 'instances of the self, even prior to its social determination, along a line of fiction which is never reducible for a single individual' (Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, I, 91) [*my translation*]. In other words, 'make-believe' is our term for the more adult version of the 'mirror stage' which Lacan defines as a stage in infancy in which the infant sees its reflection in the mirror and 'assumes an image' of a whole self as the true self.
2. Dip is the colloquial phrase meaning a pre-service teacher or student of the Diploma.

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