

Interchange

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Towards More School Based Training?

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Research cannot make the decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education in our schools and colleges. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

It is axiomatic that every opportunity should be taken to communicate research findings, both inside and outside the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED). Moreover, if research is to have the greatest possible impact on policy and practice, the findings need to be presented in an accessible, interesting and attractive form to policy makers, teachers, lecturers, parents and employers.

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Towards More School Based Training?

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The Scottish Council for Research in Education

In February 1992, the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) invited Moray House Institute of Education to test the feasibility of a more school-based approach to teacher training. In this pilot PGCE (Secondary) course, funded by SOED, students would increase the amount of time spent in school. Other organisational changes would include the appointment of 'mentors', teachers who would have special responsibility, and time allocated, for supporting students. As the changes were seen to have wider implications for the future of teacher education in Scotland, SOED also commissioned independent researchers at the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) to carry out a concurrent external monitoring project, collecting the views of those involved in the course. Their reflections on what had been learned from the pilot may be useful to others planning changes in the light of the SOED Guidelines for Teacher Training Courses, published during the pilot year.

The pilot PCGE (Secondary)

Moray House Institute, in collaboration with the education authorities and schools, put together a pilot programme at very short notice. During the year 1992–93, 100 (40%) of the PGCE (Secondary) students were allocated at random to this pilot programme. Their training differed from that of other students in the cohort in the following ways:

- pilot students spent a total of 22 weeks on block placements in schools, while non-pilot students spent 18 weeks;
- pilot students had placements in two schools (one in terms 1 and 2, another in term 3), whereas others went to a different school in each of the three terms;
- the 10 pilot schools each received a group of 10 students, whereas non-pilot schools received between one and eight students;

Pilot students spent an additional four weeks in schools.

What can a more school based approach mean in practice?

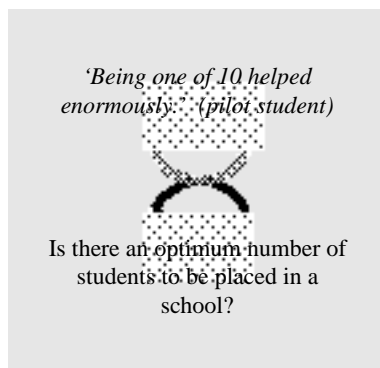
- each pilot student was ‘paired’, where possible with a student in the same or a related subject;
- a mentor was assigned to each pair of pilot students;
- four units of the course were studied in schools by pilot students, but in college by non-pilot students.

In each school, a co-ordinating mentor had overall responsibility for managing the school–college liaison from the school side, supporting the mentors in their role and managing the students’ programme. (The role of the co-ordinating mentor can be seen as a development of that of regent in non-pilot schools.)

Aims of the monitoring project

The monitoring exercise was designed to describe some of the advantages and disadvantages of the experience of the pilot from the participants’ viewpoints. The SCRE study aimed:

- to identify and describe the benefits and disadvantages of increasing the proportion of time students spend in schools, with a view to understanding how this change contributes to and influences the preparation of student teachers;
- to consider the effects of increasing time spent by students in schools on the roles and contributions of the partners (school, college and education authority) involved in training;
- to identify ways in which these partners provide support for students on placement and how this partnership could be enhanced;
- to examine the resource implications of increasing the time students spend in schools.



Research methods

Surveys and interviews were used to gather the views of students (pilot and non-pilot); staff in schools; Moray House Institute staff concerned with the PGCE (Secondary) course; and other interested parties, in education authorities, the General Teaching Council and other teacher training institutions.

The key features of the data collection were as follows:

- Three of the 10 pilot schools were designated as ‘study schools’ and visited by researchers several times each term to track the concerns of students, mentors and co-ordinating mentors throughout the year. Three non-pilot schools were also visited, less frequently.
- The research focused on issues relevant to participants: questionnaires in term 2 were based on issues which informants had raised in term 1.
- The researchers tried to avoid replicating the work of the Moray House Institute internal monitoring, or disrupting students’ intensive training by ‘over-researching’ them.

Findings

School experience

A broad consensus emerged about the benefits to students of the increased time in school and the arrangements for their mentoring. The perceived benefits for pilot students included:

- enhanced experience in school: their responses suggested that they had received more help from staff in schools than the non-pilot group; and staff in schools felt that students had become more confident and competent in classroom management than their counterparts in previous years.
- continuity: students and school staff felt that the longer time in one school had enabled students to integrate into the staff and to gain a 'realistic' experience of teaching, getting to know the pupils better and being in the school for long enough to build relationships with classes and see the learning outcomes of their own teaching.
- enhanced peer support in being one of a large group in schools.

'I don't need a variety of types of school. This is my type of school. What everyone needs is a variety of types of teachers as models.' (pilot student)

Do pilot students, with only two placement schools, see enough variety during their training? Did the benefits of continuity outweigh the disadvantage of seeing fewer schools?

Some students reported excellent support from their mentors and schools, while others were disappointed; but at least some of these benefits were reported even by students who felt that the mentoring process had not worked well for them. On the other hand, three out of four pilot students said that there had not been enough time in college to cover essential topics.

How did mentors work?

Mentors were experienced teachers given a timetable allocation to assist the professional development of two students. Mentoring relationships changed over the year as the student became more confident and competent in the classroom. In cases where the relationship developed to the satisfaction of both student and mentor, friendly encouragement and guidance in the early weeks of teaching developed into a very purposeful partnership in improving the quality of the student's teaching by the end of term 2. In term 3, students moved to a new school and mentor: in this term they appeared to be taking a more active role in defining their own development needs, but still appreciated support and constructive criticism.

Who were the mentors?

Approximately half of the mentors this year were principal teachers in their subject. In the course of the year consensus emerged that principal teachers were not necessarily the most appropriate people

With few exceptions, mentors said that the experience had helped their own professional development.

How might mentors best be selected?

to take on the mentoring role, and that this could be done effectively by other staff who may have more time available. Most students, Moray House Institute staff and school staff felt that 'out-of-subject' mentoring was less effective than mentoring a student in the mentor's own department. Mentors were selected by their headteachers, some of whom described it as a valuable form of staff development. Consensus emerged that mentors must be proficient teachers with good interpersonal skills and a genuine interest in taking on the demanding, time-consuming but rewarding role. Headteachers indicated that they would like the role of mentor to rotate amongst their staff:

'I would want the people who have made the new scheme work this year to do it again, but not in perpetuity. I would like the opportunity to let others have a chance: it is a development opportunity for staff.' (pilot school headteacher)

'It should not take over your life as it did mine ... We have to accept that we can't do everything we would like to do.' (mentor, term 3)

Is there a necessary minimum time which mentors should spend with their students?
Should there be an upper limit?

Time for mentoring

Despite allocations in their timetables, three out of four mentors reported difficulties in making time to give students all the help they wanted. Some mentors said that other aspects of their work had to be neglected or postponed. Supervising teachers in the past have had no time allocation, but also less responsibility for the student's development. Mentors who had past experience of being supervising teachers said they were using some of the same skills, but still saw the introduction of mentoring as a significant change. Students valued having a person with whom they felt they have a right to discuss their problems and progress: but the benefit to the student was sometimes gained at a cost to the mentor. Mentors and their headteachers agreed that support for students could not be maintained at this level without adequate resourcing.

Training for mentors

Moray House Institute provided three days of mentor training, including preparatory advice on observation techniques and assessment. Mentors generally found the assessment sessions particularly useful, because they brought together mentors and Moray House Institute tutors. Staff in pilot schools have, however, also learned a lot from their experience of working with students, visiting tutors and fellow mentors this year. While it seemed necessary for the teacher training institute to take the lead in providing initial training this year, both mentors and education authority representatives saw scope for involving existing mentors and co-ordinating mentors in future preparation of new mentors. More participative, collaborative development for experienced mentors and college staff was also suggested. Mentor training could play a useful part in developing partnership.

'Mentors must be highly proficient classroom teachers with good interpersonal skills.' (pilot headteacher)

What training do mentors need?

The impact of mentoring on pilot schools

Pilot school headteachers were positive about the experience for their schools, appreciating that the resourcing of mentoring had given recognition to the work which schools could do with students. They noted that the presence of a group of enthusiastic students, bringing new ideas and questions and encouraging teachers to re-examine their own practice, had had a positive effect on the culture of the school. They stressed the need to know as early as possible the subjects of forthcoming placement students, to allow timetabling for mentors and ensure that individual pupils' timetables did not include a level of student teacher contact which parents might find unacceptably high.

'Students have almost become staff.' (pilot headteacher)

Are there benefits for pupils, if the same students are in the school for two terms?

Some concern was expressed about sending groups of 10 students to each school. The scale of the pilot operation had ensured peer support for both students and mentors, and justified the time which co-ordinating mentors spent on providing seminars on whole school issues; but some Moray House Institute and school staff felt that this would create problems for smaller schools. Narrowing the range of schools which students might have a chance to experience during training — and denying smaller schools the opportunity to share in the benefits of having students — were seen as undesirable by both Moray House Institute and school staff.

Impact on Moray House Institute

The impact of the changes on the Institute are harder to assess, because the splitting of the course this year into pilot and non-pilot groups limited the time and opportunity for tutors to make changes to college-based components of the course. Staff regretted the lack of time for planning and collaborating with staff in schools.

Towards a more equal partnership?

Staff in the pilot schools saw the colleges as having a continuing important role in initial teacher education: they did not seek to usurp the tutor's role. They did, however, want a better understanding of how the work of mentors fitted into the whole course, and, in some cases, involvement in the design of course materials, especially the units which schools would be delivering. Without the provision in future of opportunities for school and college staff to work together on course planning, schools will remain the junior partners, delivering units and following instructions from the college. In both schools and college, there was willingness to develop a more equal partnership — tempered by awareness of the time and resource cost of its development.

'The system operates on goodwill, so schools must feel they are consulted on all matters.' (non-pilot headteacher)

What mechanisms are necessary for the establishment of genuine partnership between teachers in schools and college tutors?

The speed with which the pilot was set up this year limited the opportunity for mentors and tutors to work together on planning

and preparation of materials. In the course of the year, however, both groups have become more aware of what they can do to help students in the time available under the new arrangements.

Sharing responsibility for assessment

The pilot programme gave mentors increased responsibility for grading students at the end of their placements. Schools and visiting tutors produced their grades for students' teaching independently, and both assessments were taken into account in producing the final grade. After training sessions, mentors became more confident: but concerns remained, both in schools and college, about ensuring consistency of grading across schools and even amongst mentors in the same school. Co-ordinating mentors played a part in ensuring consistency of approach amongst mentors. Although most students were happy to know that school staff who had observed most of their teaching experience were responsible for 50% of their teaching grade, concerns about moderation of assessment remain amongst mentors and Moray House staff. There were some differences of opinion over grades which were resolved by discussions which all parties — student, tutor and mentor — found helpful, and others where the outcomes were deemed to be less satisfactory. In the last resort, the external examiner was available to provide an outside opinion.

'My mentor will be honest.... There will be no surprises in the assessment from the department. We are friends, but [mentor] has no hesitation in identifying "areas for development" — I call them weaknesses.' (pilot student)

Is it difficult to combine the roles of friend and assessor?

Are additional quality assurance mechanisms required?

Some concerns emerged about ensuring that all students were offered a different, but equivalent opportunity in their placement schools. If students are spending longer there, the impact of a disappointing placement with poor support from a mentor will be greater. This year, co-ordinating mentors assumed considerable responsibility for ensuring that mentors were working well with their students and for the overall quality of the pilot programme within their school. The Moray House Institute course leader and tutors fielded problems raised by students, and the project development officer, a seconded assistant head teacher who also played a leading role in mentor training, visited all pilot schools to talk to mentors. Given that the project development officer post is not permanent, Moray House Institute may need to develop new ways of collecting information to monitor the effectiveness of mentoring in future — ways which do not rely entirely on complaints raised by students, who may be reluctant to risk antagonising their mentor by reporting problems. The role of the co-ordinating mentor in quality assurance also seems likely to grow, and regional education authority representatives also suggested that the authorities might have an interest in quality assurance.

'The pilot has contributed to the development of partnership. This is because mentors make time to talk with you when you visit. The support of students is treated more seriously in schools.' (Moray House Institute tutor)

What are the characteristics of schools which are able to offer a high quality placement in partnership with college?

Future developments?

Many suggestions have been made by those involved in the pilot for improving the quality of partnership between schools and colleges, and ultimately improving the quality of teacher training.

The following list includes activities which were widely considered to be necessary, or at least desirable, if the success of the pilot is to be built upon:

- opportunities for mentors to spend time in college, learning more about what Moray House Institute tutors are providing and about the course into which mentors are trying to fit their own contribution;
- bringing Moray House Institute tutors into schools for more frequent visits to students, including opportunities for team teaching;
- closer collaboration between mentors and Moray House Institute tutors on planning the course and developing materials for use in schools;
- opportunities for mentors to discuss their experience of mentoring with colleagues from other schools;
- involvement of existing mentors in the training of new mentors in future;
- development of quality assurance procedures for mentoring.

'Looking to the future, there needs to be training for both schools and college staff. Both need to do everything — mutual staff development.'
(member of Moray House staff)

How much change will be required in teacher training institutions, to take account of the different contribution being made in schools?

Resources

Resources (£15,500 per pilot school) were made available by SOED via the education authorities this year. Most of the funds were used to provide cover to release mentors for contact time with students, for training and for other administrative duties associated with the pilot. Some schools used a small proportion of their funds for photocopying by students or to purchase a computer for use by the pilot students.

Headteachers insisted that without the additional funding their schools could not have coped. Questions were raised by school staff, Moray House Institute tutors and regional educational authority representatives about future funding. It is not a simple question of transferring funds from college to schools, since mentoring is part of a partnership, the development of which in the short term is making more demands than ever on the resources of Moray House Institute. All the activities listed above as necessary or desirable developments will cost time and money, and decisions may have to be made about priorities if resources are limited. If, for example, quality assurance procedures are designed which require a great deal of staff time in school and in college, students may find that their mentors have less time to help with their development.

Conclusions and implications for the future

1. School experience

Students can benefit from increased amount of time spent in schools during their training, balanced by time in higher education to reflect on educational practices and their underlying assumptions.

2. Mentoring

A scheme which gives time and added recognition to the mentoring process empowers mentors and students.

3. Balance and partnership

Changing the nature of partnerships in teacher education entails change for all members of the partnership.

4. Resources

Innovation raises everyone's expectations that teacher training will be enhanced but this is dependent on resources being available for each party to fulfil its responsibilities.

5. Supporting structure

A network of people is involved in school based training and the underlying structures should provide both support and quality assurance.

6. Teachers' professional development

Spending nearly two thirds of initial training in schools only makes sense within a coherent concept of teacher development. This should extend from the beginning of training, through the attainment of the competences required of the newly qualified teacher, to sustained professional development during and after probation.

Important changes in teacher education are under way in Scotland, There will need to be a continuing and far reaching debate on the best ways to implement these changes. These discussions will have implications not only for students in training but also for staff in schools, the education authorities, teacher training institutions and the SOED. They will all need to contribute to the debate and be prepared to adapt their own actions to the changes.

Further reading

The full report of the research, *Monitoring the Pilot: the Moray House Institute PGCE (Secondary) 1992-93*, is available from the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR, price £9.50.