

Team Teaching Pilot Project – Research summary

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Title: *Facilitating co-teaching and resource sharing: developing a professional learning community among co-operating teachers and student teachers on School Placement*

Key words: initial teacher education, co-teaching, collaboration, school placement, technology, professional learning community

General description

Moving from an era of policy development to its translation into practice within initial teacher education in Ireland, the roles and responsibilities of the various partners in schools and higher education institutions are in transition. Initial teacher education for post-primary teachers has been extended to a two-year Professional Master of Education (PME) programme, allowing additional focus to be placed on the central component of school placement and carrying with it an opportunity for teacher educators to question, revise and revitalise the approaches we use to encourage student teachers to become critically reflective practitioners.

While the extended time on school placement enables student teachers to gain a wider repertoire of experiences and further develop their pedagogical practice in preparation for a career in teaching (Teaching Council 2013) the changes to curriculum and assessment (Department of Education 2012a) and an emphasis on “teachers as researchers” (Kincheloe 2012, Grey 2013) make further demands on them to articulate their personal theories of teaching. The forthcoming digital strategy for schools in Ireland which seeks to promote creative and integrative use of technology in a context of cross curricular, collaborative work presents challenges as well as opportunities to teachers and teacher educators to develop digital literacy (Butler et al. 2013) and the capacity to critically evaluate available technologies. One of the key objectives of the recently introduced school self-evaluation procedures in schools in Ireland is to promote peer dialogue and collaborative professional review among teachers (Department of Education 2012b). However, research indicates that participation in co-teaching and active professional collaboration (practices that are associated with progressive professionalism) remains a challenge for many teachers in Ireland (Hogan et al. 2007; OECD 2009). Literature pertaining to the use of technology to support deep learning by student teachers also notes the complexity of that task (Jenson 2011, Oakley et al. 2013, O’Keeffe and Donnelly 2013) and the need for it to be explicitly taught (Jenson and Treuer 2014).

Such were the factors that prompted us to develop a participatory action research project, the central guiding question of which was: *How can we facilitate effective co-planning, co-teaching and collaborative reflection among student teachers and their co-operating teachers?*

The purpose of the project was to facilitate the development of co-teaching skills among individual student teachers and their co-operating teachers, and to share the learning from the process more widely. It is envisaged that this initial stage of the work will inform a wider research project in 2015-2016 around co-teaching and professional collaboration with increased numbers of Year 2 PME students and co-operating teachers.

The project also probed the following sub-questions:

- What were the hopes and fears of student teachers and co-operating teachers in relation to engaging in co-teaching?
- What support infrastructure and preparations were necessary for co-teaching to be effectively employed as a methodology in classrooms?
- How would a social notetaking/archiving tool facilitate planning for co-teaching and support the sharing of resources among teachers?
- How could communities of practice be developed among participating teachers and schools to embed and develop practice into the future?
- What professional spaces could be developed to allow for professional conversations and the sharing of learning from the project with other teachers?

Methodology

Taking a view of learning as culturally situated and socially constructed (Brown et al., 1989), our approach was characterised by an emphasis on the value of peer interaction and critical reflection (Barnett, 1997). The research design was participatory action research and it evolved to ensure that it responded to the participants' needs and was shaped by their choices. Prior to formal contact being made with the teachers, 15 partner schools were visited and the research initiative was explained and discussed with teachers and school leaders. These professional conversations were used as a method to refine the research design and questions further. The designated co-operating teachers were then invited to participate in the project alongside their assigned student teacher (30 participants in total). Two workshops were organised in the university to support co-operating teachers and student teachers to participate in the project. Participants were actively encouraged to share their professional experiences and concerns and were enabled to become actively involved in the design and format of the project. Following this, each pairing (co-operating teacher and student teacher, with the exception of two schools where the pairing was two student teachers) taught a lesson/series of lessons. During the second university-based workshop participants engaged in active structured reflection on the lessons taught, distilled the key learning from this, and planned a presentation to be made to colleagues within their schools and to the wider educational community in the university.

The project culminated in a showcase event and seminar in the university, which provided an opportunity for teachers to formally share artefacts and insights from their lessons in poster format; to articulate their views on the co-teaching experience and to inform practice that would extend beyond the research project.

Expected outcomes

The research project had a number of aims to benefit students, student teachers, co-operating teachers and the wider professional practice of schools. Specifically, the main expected outcome was to gain insights into the process, supports and conditions that facilitate co-teaching.

In the course of this research we explored the impact of the project on:

- Deepening student teachers' and co-operating teachers' understanding of and capacity to use co-teaching methodologies,

- Enriching the learning experiences of students by meeting their diverse needs in an inclusive and collaborative environment,
- Reducing teacher isolation by providing a context/ safe space for participants to engage in professional conversations around core aspects of teaching and learning,
- Establishing an online platform that supports “honest talk” (Lieberman and Miller 2008) and the sharing of pedagogical resources among participants,
- Sharing learning from the project participants with the wider staff of the Department and with the principals/teachers in participating partner schools,
- Encouraging the further use of co-teaching methodologies and develop the capacity of participants to become proponents of co-teaching methodologies in their schools/ embed co-teaching in the culture of schools,
- Promoting the creation of a professional learning community to continue the conversation and share resources into the future.

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