Partnerships within a Paired Teaching Placement and Support for the Trainee Teachers’ Professional Development

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Abstract

The focus of this study was the collaboration within partnerships between trainee teacher pairs and their mentors during a short paired teaching placement and how this supported trainees’ early professional development.

Mentors who were able to model and discuss their own practice facilitated peer collaboration, increased trainees’ confidence in the classroom and gave them a greater insight into the role of the teacher. Collaboration supported assessment of children’s learning. Individual trainee development was supported when mentors were able to identify appropriate achievable challenges. Potential for significant professional development through peer partnership at an early stage of training was indicated.

Key words: Partners, collaboration, professional development, needs

Introduction

Since 1992 initial teacher training in England and Wales has been subject to government requirements specifying the time that trainee teachers should spend in school during their training and the Standards that must be achieved to gain qualified teacher status. This training, which plays a significant role in their learning, has become increasingly school-based. Primary postgraduate trainee teachers (trainees) currently undertake teaching placements of approximately 18 weeks within a one-year training programme (DfES/TTA 2002).

The role of teacher mentors (mentors) in the professional development of trainees during school placements has been the focus of attention by many authors such as Kagan (1992), Maynard and Furlong (1995). Whilst studies on mentoring in initial teacher training (McIntyre et al 1993; Allsopp and Benson 1997) have sometimes involved pairs of trainees they have not had specific focus on the mentors’ interactions with the two partners. Studies of paired placements have often focused on small numbers of trainees in situations designed to facilitate monitoring of interactions (Manchouri 2002 and Smith 2002). This study provides a view of a whole cohort of trainees in a paired placement by exploring the partnership between the trainees and that between mentors and trainee partners.

Trainee Teacher Development

Learning to teach is a complex, interactive and idiosyncratic process. Novice teachers have to establish their professional identity, construct their practical and professional pedagogic knowledge, consolidate personal subject knowledge and develop their interpersonal skills to
work with children and other professionals. Their professional development involves a transition to pedagogical reasoning which allows them to make sense of, interpret and come to control aspects of classroom life (Fuller and Bown 1975; Carter and Doyle 1987; Maynard and Furlong 1993).

**Teaching Placements**

During teaching placements trainees increase their participation in a community of practice and come to define for themselves what it means to be a teacher through undertaking professional roles and tasks and interacting with professional situations, practices and practitioners (Caires and Almeida 2005). In this apprenticeship model of learning they start by being on the edge of the community (the teaching profession) carrying out short teaching episodes which are informed by observing experienced teachers and carrying out tasks undertaken as exercises to support their eventual role. As they move increasingly inwards they are expected to carry out activities “authentic” to the role of teaching (Lave and Wenger 1991). Pre-existing beliefs about teaching and learning, individual personalities and personal biographies influence the process and their interactions during teaching placements (Kagan 1992; Smith 2005).

Early teaching placements provide a socialisation process for trainees in their first contact with the realities of classroom teaching. In their early days in classrooms trainees are challenged by the difficulties of “seeing” and disentangling the complexities of teaching and of understanding the processes involved (Maynard 1997). Trainees, including those with considerable previous classroom experience may experience tension between their personal and professional selves as they adjust to themselves as teachers (Maynard and Furlong 1993; Tang 2003; Cairies and Almeida, 2005). Initially they are likely to focus on their own survival in the classroom and the development of strategies for class management is a key concern. Teaching skills are developed as strategies integrating management and instruction are internalised and become increasingly intuitive (Kagan 1992). As trainees begin to acquire knowledge of children there is an attention shift and they begin to focus on children’s learning. In moving from “acting as a teacher to thinking like a teacher” they develop their problem solving skills and increase their range of repertoires to deal with complex classroom situations (Schon 1991; Maynard 1997). Further stages include development as more independent reflective practitioners with increased metacognition and moving from comfort with practice to criticism of practice (Maynard and Furlong 1993).

**Mentor Role**

The partnership between trainees and mentors in school placements plays a significant and influential role in the development of trainees’ professional identity and practical knowledge base through the management of their situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). The mentor’s role is complex and multifaceted containing structural, supportive and professional dimensions (McIntyre et al 1993; Yeomans and Sampson 1994). Mentors can support trainees by “guiding their seeing” as they begin to form concepts about their practical work and help them see the implications of various ways of working (Schon 1992; Maynard and Furlong 1993). Mentors help trainees to construct practice through demonstrating, suggesting, modelling etc. They also assist them in the deconstruction of teaching sessions through observation and reflection, explaining, modelling and questioning so the trainees can begin to reconstruct their version of effective practice. However there is a potential conflict for mentors resulting from their dual functions of facilitating trainees’ learning and assessing their teaching.
Paired Teaching Placements

Paired placements in which two trainees of equal status are assigned to work with one mentor offer the potential for a supportive learning environment. Trainees can share their problems and concerns reducing the feelings of isolation experienced on single placements. (Hawkey, 1995; Smith, 2002). Peer partnership can provide experience of collaborating to improve practice and participating in a team in the classroom. Partners may learn from each other in a way they might not from their mentors as they share their differing interpretations of school experience. Trainees may need enthusiasm and commitment to make the pairing a success, to adjust to working with a partner, to take account of them in day-to-day planning and teaching and to overcome any incompatibility.

An added complication in a paired placement, is that of the mentor, who has to establish a working partnership with both trainees and cope with their differing personalities, backgrounds and ways of working and then has to assess them as individuals.

Study

This study is of a short paired teaching placement early in a one year postgraduate primary initial teacher training course in one higher education institution in England. It was designed to find out:

1. What ways do trainees in an early paired teaching placement collaborate?
2. To what extent are beginning teachers able to support each other’s professional development?
3. How do mentors manage the paired placement to support both trainees’ early professional development and cater for their individual needs?

Methodology

This study adopts a social constructivist perspective (Richardson 1997) to provide a view of a whole cohort of trainees in a paired placement.

Data Collection

Pre-placement questionnaires (N=80) were used to select a sample of trainee pairs and their mentors (N=10). The strategies and activities adopted by these trainees and mentors during the placement were monitored using semi-structured interviews. Post-placement questionnaires provided additional information on a larger number of trainees (N=80). Analysis of the trainees’ questionnaires and interviews of mentors and trainees teachers was supplemented by observation of a small number of feedback sessions between mentors and trainees to provide insights from all partners and feedback from university tutors.

Findings

Trainee Partners’ Collaboration

Analysis of the data indicated that most partners were providing mutual support and developing working relationships which facilitated extensive collaboration in planning and preparation, during teaching and through evaluation and reflection.
a. Planning and Preparation
Partners utilised their strengths to support each other’s subject knowledge. They asked for clarification, provided explanations and shared research findings. Teamwork for required tasks boosted trainees’ subject knowledge in English, Maths and Science. Discussions included consideration of what children should be learning and how trainees’ personal understanding might be utilised in their interactions with young children. Wide-ranging collaboration involved sharing and modifying ideas for teaching to ensure consistency; to make improvements and shared the preparation of resources and organisation of the classroom environment. In some cases individual planning followed discussion of ideas. Ideas about effective classroom management were informed by observation of practising teachers, discussion and feedback. The feedback fostered awareness of the potentially positive effects on class management of careful planning decisions such as the selection of appropriately targeted and motivational resources and activities. Negotiation between partners facilitated experimentation of new ideas and strategies in their planning. Together they considered differentiation through discussion of individual children’s needs and planned for their partner to work with particular children to support or extend their learning.

b. Teaching
Trainees adopted a variety of supporting roles when their partner was teaching including monitoring children’s responses and intervening where necessary. They referred to themselves as providing an “extra pair of eyes, hands and ears”. Directed tasks helped to structure observation and reflection and to focus trainees’ attention on children’s learning and provided a shared perspective which was greater than could have been managed on their own. Assessment when teaching was facilitated by partners undertaking a significant classroom management role. Peer observation during teaching was sometimes focused on specific areas identified in advance.

c. Reflection
Partners shared and compared observation notes and marked work to try to gauge children’s progress. They talked about what they might have done differently and how to extend children’s learning. Some were able to make use of assessment information to inform planning for future teaching and considered assessment as an integral part of planning. Feedback provided for partners frequently focused on behaviour management but did also consider children’s learning.

d. Giving Feedback
Whilst most provided oral feedback a minority decided that written feedback would provide the benefit of a lasting record. Where partners were able to incorporate both positive and negative feedback they were then able to raise any issues for discussion. Some pairs had established ground rules in advance covering: honesty about observations made, being critical without offending, being supportive and tactful, being positive but giving advice. This encouraged more varied feedback. Working with a partner involved compromise but trainees were able to learn from their differing personal styles. Mentors modelling constructive feedback informed trainees’ approach to peer feedback.

Analysis of questionnaires and interviews indicated that the nature and extent of peer collaboration was influenced by partners’ personal confidence, previous experience, compatibility of working styles and their willingness to collaborate. The strategies adopted to facilitate collaboration, mentor expectations and the nature of interactions between trainees
and mentors were significant in influencing the nature of their professional development through the placement.

**Benefits of Working with a Partner**

In both questionnaires and interviews most trainees reported that peer collaboration increased their confidence in the classroom and gave them a greater insight into the role of the teacher (eg planning and behaviour management strategies). This reflects early stages of teacher development and professional competency (Furlong and Maynard, 1995; Caires and Almeida, 2005). A few did also appear to have developed a more sophisticated view of their role emphasising their collaboration in supporting and assessing individual children’s learning reflecting the findings of Burn et al (2000). The areas identified by trainees as facilitated by paired teaching, collaborative strategies employed and benefits for their professional development are shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas Facilitated by Paired Placement</th>
<th>Collaboration by:</th>
<th>Benefits for Professional Development</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal support</td>
<td>- Discussion</td>
<td>Boosted confidence and reassured.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Team working</td>
<td>Fostered constructive criticism that formed part of the developmental process.</td>
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<td>together to teach, review</td>
<td>Provided experience of working as a partner in a professional team</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Negotiation for working together in the classroom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Feedback from partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning for teaching</td>
<td>- On-going discussion about teaching and learning</td>
<td>Discussion with partner allowed clarification of objectives, consideration of children’s motivation, structuring of teaching and deployment of resources (including adult support).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Planning together</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Preparation of resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for subject knowledge.</td>
<td>- Discussion</td>
<td>Increased confidence in a number of curriculum areas.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Questioning</td>
<td>Awareness of mediation of personal subject knowledge in interaction with children</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Explaining</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for class management</td>
<td>- Observation of mentor and partner</td>
<td>Helped trainees to: cope with practicalities; pre-empt problems, identify pitfalls, consider the level and nature of content and style of delivery, develop a greater awareness of children’s participation and response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Debrief</td>
<td>Children’s response to partner informed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Analysis</td>
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own practice and enabled comparison with themselves. Learning from their partner’s particular expertise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaboration on assessment</th>
<th>- Comparison and joint interpretation of observations of children.</th>
<th>Focused trainees on assessment of children’s learning. Increased understanding from observation and assessment when their partner was teaching.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Differentiation            | - Discussion  
- Observation  
- Support for children  
- Feedback and Reflection | Developing understanding about identification of objectives and outcomes, evaluation of individual learning needs, assessment of children’s learning and progression. |
| Identifying areas for improvement | - Discussion  
- Feedback  
- Reflection and review on practice | Supported trainees’ reflective analysis and identification of areas for development. Input from partners complemented and supplemented that from mentors. Partners’ views were particularly valued as, unlike mentor, they were not in an assessment role. Partners were able to learn from each other’s comments, consider the success of strategies, identify areas for attention and consider changes, which informed subsequent teaching. |
| Achieving more             | - Team working  
- Negotiation  
- Planning  
- Team teaching  
- Observation of experienced partner | Working together in the classroom allowed partners to undertake more ambitious activities than a single placement. Inexperienced trainees gained confidence from observation of experienced partners to try things they might otherwise have assumed would not work. |

**Figure 1 Collaborative Strategies and Benefits for Professional Development**
Constraints on Collaboration

Some trainees were reluctant to give negative feedback focusing only on positive aspects of their partner’s work. A few did not value feedback from partner considering it to be bland and not particularly constructive. Limitations of observations and feedback were identified by a few trainees who felt their partners had had a supportive, but an informative, role and considered they gained more from observing their mentor than their partner. Differing styles resulted in some initial tensions but in most cases were resolved by gradual compromise. Lack of collaboration was evident where: partners had not been able to develop a working relationship prior to the placement; there were extreme variations in confidence, competence or approach to planning or teaching or where partners were unable to compromise. For a few pairs differing teaching styles and varying levels of planning meant that teaching during the same lesson was not that easy or successful. For some conflicts between collegiality and autonomy (Bullough 2003) reduced peer collaboration. They did not consider support from their partner to be important and indicated concern that having a partner held them back when they wanted support from mentor, to teach more or to establish themselves on their own. Some trainees questioned the value and purpose of a paired placement indicating that in their view sharing teaching was in someway unnatural. This stance possibly reflected lack of acceptance of the process of legitimate peripheral participation in the community of teachers’ practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). This is an interesting and possibly legitimate perspective as each partner’s progress is assessed individually. A very small number of pairs failed to collaborate. Interestingly in two of these cases one partner subsequently left the course.

Mentor Support for Early Stage of Professional Development

Nature of Mentor Support

Most mentors valued the presence of two additional adults in the learning team in the classroom and integrated trainees through group work and took the opportunity to gain greater insights into the children in the class. Mentors supported trainees’ professional development by modelling and discussing their own teaching practice and undertaking collaborative planning, teaching and analysis. An overview of strategies employed by mentors to support professional development is shown in Figure 2. Most pairs indicated they had received positive, supportive and encouraging feedback from mentors. Both trainees and mentors identified the importance and value of: prompt feedback; honest constructive criticism; identification of specific areas for improvement, strategies that might be employed and support for their implementation. Mentor feedback which encouraged trainees to reflect on their teaching to improve and set personal targets or which challenged them, was considered of the greatest help in improving practice. Many mentors provided frequent feedback with on-going commentary and dialogue about teaching. Others responded to requests or queries from the students. Trainees expressed differing views about how mentors should provide feedback to partners with some preferring individual feedback whereas others felt they benefited from listening to feedback to their partner. More independent trainees tried to identify targets in preparation for a weekly review meeting indicating that this helped them to reflect on lessons and teaching strategies. They valued mentors identifying targets which they may not have considered. One trainee summed up the mentor’s feedback as “helpful in terms of offering an outside, informed but positive perspective on what often felt rather personal and emotional”
Meeting Individual Needs

Mentors who were sensitive to the trainees’ individual needs negotiated in advance to discover personal preferences about individual or joint feedback meetings to discuss individual professional development targets. Successful mentors embraced their role as teachers of adults and considered the differentiation required and were able to build confidence, tailor activities and broker a range of opportunities to address the different goals of the trainee partners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies employed</th>
<th>Notes and Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Modelling teaching</td>
<td>All trainees had the opportunity to observe their mentor teaching but less than half identified their mentor modelling specific aspects of teaching. Mentors gave trainees ideas and strategies to think about but did not always provide explanations or principles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative planning</td>
<td>Undertaken through trainees: participating in team planning meetings; discussing or planning with mentor or planning with partner with mentor available if needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative teaching</td>
<td>Mentors arranged different teaching combinations (eg lead and support and team teaching) of themselves and trainees for trainees. Mentors enabled trainees to work with other teachers and adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion about teaching</td>
<td>Trainees reported examples of discussion with mentors to consider the best strategies for class management, assessment and differentiation within the class. Reported as most effective when the mentor appeared confident, willing to talk about and able to explain practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of feedback</td>
<td>Mentors attempted to give regular constructively critical feedback and which identified specific areas for improvement, guidance on possible strategies and support for their implementation. Some feedback encouraged trainees to reflect on their teaching to improve and set personal targets and which challenged them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target setting</td>
<td>Mentors set targets for or with trainees. Some mentors encouraged independence in trainees to set their own targets.</td>
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</tbody>
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**Figure 2 Mentor support for early professional development**

Mentors’ support for trainees’ individual needs is summarised in Figure 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of mentors supporting individual needs</th>
<th>Strategies employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive of individual difficulties</td>
<td>Providing appropriate help, encouragement and challenge Giving more praise to boost lower confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good insight to personality / style</td>
<td>Setting specific targets which were attainable and relevant to individual development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodates partners’ differing experience</td>
<td>Greater challenge for more experienced partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facilitates individual progression, Providing opportunities for trainees to progress at their own rate
Discusses areas of subject preference or weakness Encouraging participation to extend expertise or develop confidence
Ensures fairness of opportunities Establish a programme to allow both trainees a range of appropriate experiences
Available for support as needed Answering questions, providing specific feedback

Figure 3: Meeting individual needs

Constraints on Mentoring
Trainees reported that mentors who only focused on positive aspects provided feedback which was lacking clarity and detail which was not helpful and they expressed disappointed when mentors did not engage with target setting or their own targets were merely endorsed by their mentor. Indeed some mentors who lacked experience had difficulty providing appropriate feedback and setting precise targets and appeared to need further support.

“My teacher-mentor was very supportive and encouraging, but I felt that I could have benefited from some constructive criticism. I feel that I could have benefited from some more support in this area. I tended to set my own targets and some other suggestions would have been useful”

When mentors were reported to have treated trainees as a pair rather than individuals, to have set the same targets for both partners they appeared to have shown little awareness or sensitivity to individual needs. These appeared to have limited understanding that their role as a mentor included teaching adults with the identification of learning goals and the facilitation of opportunities to achieve these. Mentors identified the particular difficulties of their role as: uncertainty about reasonable expectations within a first teaching placement; lack of time for management of the partners and individual discussion, the differences between students (experience, attitude, confidence); gauging the appropriate balance of trainees’ collaboration and independence and moving students forward from unequal starting points.

Reflection

Partner Collaboration
Paired teaching placements are a structural form of collaboration presenting partners with opportunities to plan and undertake a rich range of shared classroom activities. In this study trainees benefited from observations of a partner at a similar stage of teaching and from joint reflection and evaluation. There was extensive professional discussion between partners. Most coped with personal differences managing to work collaboratively and productively within the professional learning teams they encountered. Active collaboration by trainees at an early stage of their training provided a foundation for their increasing participation in a community of practice and to the collaborative problem solving capacity of professional teaching teams (Buchberger et al 2000). Some tension between collegiality and autonomy was evident. Trainees wanted opportunities to test their own ability and ideas yet each wanted critical feedback and opportunities to talk about their teaching. However most came to appreciate the value of working closely with others when learning to teach as found by Bullough et al (2003).
Collaboration between partners was sufficient to make most feel confident, purposeful and authoritative in the classroom. In addition the opportunities for risk taking both singly and in pairs fostered confidence, provided greater insights to the role of a teacher, extended repertoires of planning, classroom organisation, teaching strategies, and behaviour management. Trainees’ attention on children’s learning was focused on assessment of children by required tasks. Sharing assessments of focus children was helpful at this early stage of development and allowed the partners insights they might otherwise not have gained. Practice was informed by feedback on observations and sharing ideas for improving their teaching. Through joint analysis of teaching trainees were able to help each other to look at their own practice which provided opportunities to learn about and better understand teaching and learning as found by Bullough et al (2003) and Manoucheri (2002). Discussion with partner helped to clarify thoughts about aspects of teaching and considerable pedagogical gains were achieved through peer planning, observation and feedback. Peers served as a valuable external reference point for trainees’ own evaluation (Tang 2003). Peer discourse has the potential for developing teaching knowledge (Vygotsky 1968) and this was sometimes enhanced when trainees were working with a partner with differing beliefs and practices experienced cognitive dissonance (Kagan 1992) which assisted their resolution of self-image as teacher and facilitated professional development.

**Mentor Role**

Peer collaboration appeared to be facilitated by mentors who were confident to model and discuss their own practice, collaborate with the trainees and demonstrate how to give constructive feedback. These practices also supported trainee’s early professional development. Mentors with higher order mentoring skills (Yeomans and Sampson 1994) and some understanding of professional development were able to scaffold trainees’ learning in a way that was tuned to their needs and offer an appropriate mix of challenge and support for professional development. Challenge allowed trainees to experience the cognitive dissonance necessary for growth whereas support made trainees feel safe, recognised as valued individuals whose professional judgements are meaningful and are willing to take risks. Mentors who question and reflect on pedagogical beliefs facilitate integration of new knowledge with pre-existing beliefs (Tang 2003).

Individual trainee development was supported where mentors negotiated about practice and procedures, identified clearly defined roles and responsibilities for activities, provided constructive feedback and identified appropriate achievable challenges. Mentors who recognised the trainee partners as individuals with differing experience and needs tended to give each of them time, guidance, support and goals relevant to those needs and encouraged independence without undermining collaboration. Collaboration between partners reduced pressure on mentors. A consistent concern for all mentors was the need to assess individually.

**Implications for Practice**

The study has indicated the potential for considerable professional development through peer partnership at an early stage of training but suggests guidance may be needed to support both mentors’ and trainees’ analysis of practice. Reflections and discussion between partners might benefit from collaboration with, input from, and management by, mentors whose experience puts them in a better position to offer constructive advice. Provision of a more formalised structure of focused observation might foster critical observation enabling trainees to move beyond description towards more analytical critical reflection (Manoucheri 2002). This might
be supported by guidance on questioning practice and structured observation and feedback to support greater analysis relating to children’s learning and decisions made. Further guidance for mentors might include the need for constructive feedback as well as praise and encouragement. The importance of negotiation in preliminary planning to underpin both peer collaboration and mentor-trainee interactions and the clear definition of roles and responsibilities in all exercises needs to be emphasised. A short early placement might be seen as a good induction opportunity for new mentors—who are sometimes relatively inexperienced teachers. However the complexity of working with two trainees with differing might indicate otherwise. This may form the basis of a future study.

References


