

Fitting in and making yourself useful: strategies and characteristics of successful teacher trainee students

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This paper reports on early findings from a project that is investigating factors that lead to student success in a four-year teacher training degree course (BEd) at a university in the south-west of England. This is an area characterised by a stable school staff population and high demand for teaching jobs; the university is well-known for its commitment to widening participation, and the Faculty of Education recruits a relatively high percentage of students from the local area.

Every year, there is a pattern of around 20 students (from a cohort of 150) achieving the highest grade in their third year practical school experience. Students are assessed by university tutors and school-based partners on the three dimensions of 'professional attributes', 'professional knowledge and understanding' and 'professional skills', and reports provide a commentary on the students' areas of strengths and weakness in relation to the Professional Teacher Standards required by the Training and Development Agency for Schools.

In the academic year 2009/10, nineteen students achieved the highest overall grade, of which eighteen have agreed to participate in the research. This has involved, first, examining the students' reports on all their practical school experiences (four at the time of writing, but a total of five on completion of the course), together with the academic marks achieved during the degree. Secondly, one interview has been conducted with the students, in which they have been asked to describe their educational journey in their time at the University and to comment on the factors that they believe have contributed to their success. A second interview is planned when they return from the final practical school experience in June.

This paper focuses on exploring the experiences of these students, and examines the extent to which they share strategies and characteristics that they consider have led to their success. It interrogates the data for features of teacher education that seem to welcome these characteristics, and considers the implications of the research for teacher trainee retention.

Introduction

This paper reports on emerging findings from a project that is investigating the experiences of teacher trainees who are in the final year of their four-year BEd degree at a university in the south-west of England. Every year there is a pattern in this degree of around 20 students (from a cohort of 150) who achieve the grade of 'outstanding' in their third-year school experience. This is when they spent approximately ten weeks in a primary school in the summer term, and have the opportunity to teach, to engage with the school community and to undertake many of the tasks that are part of the qualified classroom teacher's working life. In the academic year 2009/10, nineteen students achieved the highest grade, and eighteen have

agreed to participate in the research that is exploring the factors that they believe have led to their third-year success.

The students' home university has long held a reputation for its commitment to widening participation, and many of the students studying in the Faculty of Education originate from the surrounding area. The West Country is generally perceived as an area that has the benefits of being close to the coast and moorland but still in relatively easy reach of the larger towns and cities. Teaching jobs are at a premium in this part of the country, partly because of this rural and beautiful location, but also because teaching is regarded locally as relatively well-paid and secure employment; the town itself has some of the highest deprivation levels in England and the surrounding area has high levels of rural deprivation. There is little manufacturing industry, agriculture and fishing have declined dramatically over the last twenty years, and the main employment prospects tend to lie in tourism and services. For students, this means that obtaining local employment – which many would like to do – involves launching themselves into a highly competitive market when their training is ended. School experience, then, can be a way both of 'selling' themselves to individual schools and of developing links and contacts that may help in the not-too-distant future.

The school experience and assessment

Although each student has a total of five school experiences, they are not formally assessed until the final two years of the four-year course. There are two aspects to this assessment at the end of the third year. The first is a portfolio, assembled by each student during the course of the placement, which provides evidence that he or she has worked towards and achieved a high degree of competency in a number of the 32 teaching standards that are required by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), a government agency that monitors and supports the implementation of the Professional Teacher Standards. Students must demonstrate, for instance, that they:

- Have high expectations of children and young people including a commitment to ensuring that they can achieve their full educational potential and to establishing fair, respectful, trusting, supportive and constructive relationships with them (Q1 – professional attribute)
- Know how to use local and national statistical information to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching, to monitor the progress of those they teach and to raise levels of attainment (Q13 – professional knowledge and understanding)
- Plan for progression across the age and ability range for which they are trained, designing effective learning sequences within lessons and across series of lessons and demonstrating secure subject / curriculum knowledge (Q22 – professional skills).

The second form of assessment lies with their university tutors who observe students' teaching at various times during the school experience and, in partnership with the school staff who have hosted the placement, write a detailed report on their achievements, strengths and weaknesses. Students are graded on the three dimensions of 'professional attributes',

‘professional knowledge and understanding’ and ‘professional skills’ that are required by the TDA. A student cannot pass the school experience without successful completion of the portfolio, but it is the marks given by the tutor for these three dimensions that make up his or her overall grade for that experience. It is worth noting that, although only a small proportion reach the highest grade of ‘outstanding’ in the third year, this generally rises to around 70 per cent in the next and final year. Finally, it should be stressed that students must also pass their assessed university modules to become qualified teachers; these marks, however, are independent from those gained from the school experience, and are the source of the student’s degree classification. The school experience, then, is the practical part of the degree that does not ‘count’ towards the students’ final mark.

Research methods

The research is qualitative, using in-depth interviews to explore students’ motivations for undertaking teacher training, their experiences over the four-year course and their reflections on the factors that they believe have led to their third-year success. We have also examined their university documentation that includes their academic marks, their school experience reports and the patterns of placement undertaken in the first two years. These documents provide valuable background information for each student and allowed the interviewer, who is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education and unconnected with teacher training, to focus almost immediately on the detail of the students’ experiences during the interviews. Students were pleased to be asked to participate in the research (only one refused, and that was for reasons unconnected with the project), and they have been supportive of the data-gathering process from its inception. The first round of interviews was completed before the students embarked on their final school experience, and another interview is scheduled for when they return in May / June. This paper thus represents work in progress.

The interview approach was to encourage the students to tell the narrative of their educational journey that included their recruitment to the university, their experiences at the university and in schools, and their hopes for the future. This semi-biographical approach locates each student in his or her own social context, allows us to have an understanding of the different factors that seem to motivate / sustain these students as they progress through the course and highlights the strategies that they have used – whether consciously or unconsciously – to help them in their success. Analysis of the data has been strongly influenced by Bourdieu’s concept of ‘fish in water’ that was used by Reay *et al* (2005) in their study of student university choice, and we have utilised this idea to think about the ways in which these students have managed both their relationships and their tasks during the course of their school experiences. This practical element of teacher training is a physically separate (although intellectually related) experience to the time spent on the university campus, and each different placement offers students fresh opportunities to experiment and engage with the realities of the teaching profession; the process of becoming a teacher can be likened to being / becoming a ‘fish’ in the water of primary education.

Initial experiences

The students come from a range of backgrounds and some are mature; their academic marks currently range between the 2.1 and 2.2 degree classification (i.e. 50 – 69 per cent), with a very small minority on course to achieve the highest academic grade (i.e. over 70 per cent). Recognising their educational journey to the point of university entrance plays an important part in understanding their motivations to become a teacher and their own approach to the training, and they seem to fall broadly into three groups. The first consists of those who have ‘always wanted’ to be a teacher, either because they enjoy working with children or because of (positive or negative) experiences in their own schooling that have inspired them to want to make a difference to children’s lives, and these tend to be the younger students who have entered university in their late teens / early twenties. Students in the second group have experienced a gradual realisation that they want to become a teacher, illustrated here in one mature student’s description of how, when working as a TA, she found that:

... I just loved it. I loved the environment, I loved the rapport I built up with the children and watching how I can make a difference to them and in the end I was teaching PPA [time that teachers have away from the classroom for planning, preparation and assessment]... and then covering lessons all over the place and I just thought ... I need to do this, you know, properly, as a proper teacher ... this is something that I’ve found I have a complete passion in (student 14).

Note the term ‘proper teacher’ – this student was effectively treated as a teacher by the school where she was employed, but felt that she wanted the status and higher earning power of that came with the qualification of teacher, and she describes herself as ambitious. The third group consists of students who have either started another degree or intended to study something else and who, for a variety of reasons that include health and personal interest, have switched to teaching. This could be changing from a highly academic course to one that was perceived as less challenging, seen in the quotation below:

I didn’t think I’d fail at this ... this was something I thought I could do, it didn’t scare me ... so it was a little bit of a cop-out really (student 15).

It could also be a course that potentially had more meaning; one student commented that the subject she was studying before teacher training was:

... obscure and pointless. We were doing things that I didn’t see the point in at all ... there was so much I didn’t enjoy ... so I thought I’d dive over [to primary teaching] and have been rocking it ever since (student 6).

The different routes and stories showed how most of the students had a stake in wanting to succeed in this degree; only one suggested that the first year was an experiment and that she would wait to see if she suited the teaching profession. They also show the diversity among

these students, as there was no single route to the teaching profession nor, as the following analysis shows, a guaranteed outcome of success. All the students expressed anxiety and doubt about different aspects of their degree, and/or their own personal journey in that time, and many expressed both surprise and pleasure at being graded outstanding:

I feel very proud ... because sometimes I feel like I work really hard and it never really shows (student 3).

There was general agreement that the school experiences were the high points of the course, and all the students talked enthusiastically about their time in school:

Teaching practice definitely has been the highlight throughout ... if you were to say what was the best bit each year, it's definitely the teaching practice (student 1)

Some saw it as welcome relief from the strains of the academic side of the training:

School experience has been fabulous. Every one, I've really, really enjoyed ... But [on] the academic side I have struggled quite a bit and I'm not very confident (student 14).

I think sometimes it's a bit of a slog being at uni and then I think I get into school and I realise that it is all worthwhile and that I want to do what I'm doing ... I think just being in schools makes it all worthwhile and you can see why you're doing it all (student 8).

Others drew attention to the sheer hard work of the school experience:

I don't think anyone, unless you've done it, knows quite how hard teaching is ... When you're in school it very full-on, tough, tiring. Enjoyable though. It's the best part of it [the degree], but it's also the most stressful (student 4).

As this quotation suggests, the school experience is not necessarily straightforward, and students talked about the complexity of managing their expectations, their relationships within the schools, their time and their health. They spoke of their professional and emotional journey in which they were learning to cope with a variety of different pressures while maintaining a focus on their core purpose – to teach the children in the placement class. While some clearly felt more at home in this environment than others, all felt that this was the place that they envisaged being their professional home for some time to come – all had the desire to be a 'fish in water' and all felt that this was within their grasp. The following section examines their characteristics and the strategies they employed to help them swim.

Student characteristics and strategies

The school experience is where students can absorb the culture of schools; how teachers behave in their particular environment, their professional interests, their mannerisms and their politics. It is the time in which students can develop their professional capital by active participation in their chosen educational environment, and where they learn to become 'real' teachers – where they can become people who not only have the requisite competencies and skills to succeed in this demanding profession, but who also feel at home in the environment and understand the way that the primary school system operates.

The students spoke of the multiple roles that they perform and inhabit during the school experience, and they described themselves variously as guests, trainees, apprentices, teachers and contributors to the school community as their relationships changed and developed during the course of the placement. Each required careful management, a process not unlike Goffman's (1959) description of the presentation of self in which constant self-monitoring is aimed at producing an authentic 'performance' – or in the case of these students, the gradual feeling of authenticity as someone who has the capabilities and competencies to be a primary school teacher. Key to this process were the students' judgement, flexibility and adaptability in managing their relationships, or what some of them termed the 'right attitude'; exercising judgement as to the appropriate response to the person in front of them, flexibility in approach that allowed for the appropriate action to be taken and adaptability to the multiple demands from university, school staff and pupils that can be encountered in any one day. This is not to say that our students are paragons, but rather to show that they had a sound understanding of how they felt they could fit in at their school experience and maximise the chances of its success. And success was seen as a reciprocal outcome in which they felt that they had not only learned from their experience, but also that they had become a valued member of the school community.

All students expressed a degree of caution when first arriving at the placement, as befits someone who is in the role of guest or new apprentice. They talked about the importance of finding out about the school, the relationships within it, and the structures and processes that are key to its operation. For instance:

At first you've got to watch where you sit (laughs). You go in and get your drink and you find out where they all sit ... because when you've got five seats in the and there's like six teachers (laughing) ... there's obviously a hierarchy of whether you get to sit down ... You can't go in all guns charging (student 11).

This readiness to find out about the school's hierarchy demonstrates an appreciation of the students' position; they are showing a willingness to defer to those who are established, to fit in with the school and, by extension, they are confirming their openness to learning from those who have experience. While the students generally referred to these behaviours as part of the 'right attitude', they also talked about how these messages of subordination and

openness to learning could be used to help take control of their role in the school. One student described her experience in persuading her teacher to commit to a regular meeting time during the placement:

I really wanted to plan ... a half-term's worth of literacy; being my specialism ... I thought that was the way to go. And I involved her [teacher] in it, I asked for her advice. I never said 'I don't know what to do', because I didn't want her to tell me but, you know, I asked her about different bits. And because she knew the class better than me anyway ... after a while we'd sit down on a Friday and plan the timetable for the next week and I'd say 'Can I see you here and here?'. And that worked well (student 15).

Through her actions, this student persuaded an initially sceptical and busy teacher that time spent together was productive, and that the student genuinely wanted to fit in and be useful to the school. Through the different strategies of asking for advice, reflecting and acting on suggestions, and working hard to show commitment both to the school and her own professional development, this student gave a practical demonstration of how fitting in and keeping busy was a productive strategy. This extract from her report illustrates the point:

[Name] is polite, thoughtful and prompt. She has fitted in really well to our school and has taken on the school ethos brilliantly. All of the teachers get on really well with [her] she is totally committed to her career ... [she] has been extremely proactive in her approach and came to me with ideas for progression professionally on a regular basis (third year school report).

This student changed her role from 'guest' to becoming a valued member of the school community. Here she lists other strategies taken in the course of this (and indeed, any) placement:

I try not to get involved with staffroom politics ... because I think trainees can get used in them quite a lot ... I talk; when you talk to them [school staff] you find out what's going on within the school ... Get on with it if they've asked you to do something, make sure it's done ... Be available for anything extra, which I tried to do as much as I could ... Make sure the TA feels ... that you respect them. They're your greatest ally really ... Be there early (student 15).

This student provides a clear illustration of what all agreed were the key strategies to succeeding in the school experience; throwing yourself into the life of the school, contributing in whatever way seemed to be appropriate and avoiding being drawn in to the complexities of local relationships.

It is important to recognise that the students were equally clear about what they wanted in return, namely to develop in confidence and competence as teachers and to feel that they were developing into authentic members of the teaching community. In the example below, the student describes her frustration when the class teacher was not allowing her to teach the class; apprentices should be given time and space to practise their craft, and the entitlement to teach that is implicit in the school experience was not being realised. Her strategy in this case was to demonstrate competence in areas in order to build a relationship of professional trust:

In my second year, my class teacher for the first few weeks was very kind of, it's her class ... [and] wouldn't really kind of let me in. But I just did what I could elsewhere, did the occasional lesson and then kind of just worked up to be able to take whole classes ... I think some people might kind of get annoyed. And I was getting annoyed, but I wasn't letting it come into school (student 18).

This is a critical time in the school experience that, as the student suggests, requires a degree of self-control that not all trainees may possess, and several recounted stories of other students they knew who had become disillusioned both with their placements and with teaching more generally. The strategy here was to think in the long-term; to accept the teacher's distrust, to try to understand the reasons behind it and to try to dismantle the barriers to the type of working relationship that the student wanted to create. Patience is an important attribute in this type of situation, and the students recognised that building relationships took time and that, in the course of this, they may have to overcome teachers' previous negative experiences with less competent students. In common with the student above, most felt that the onus was on them rather than the school to resolve the situation:

It takes time to prove yourself in a way. Because they don't know what you're like (student 12).

Nonetheless patience and forbearance were not always enough, and some of our students had had difficult experiences in which any amount of helpfulness did not bear fruit. This was the time to implement coping strategies that would enable the experience to be completed with professional dignity intact. One student described how she dealt with what she felt was a difficult placement in which she had received little support from her teacher. Her approach in this instance was about:

... just basically keeping my nose clean, making sure I'd got all my stuff done, my planning is perfect, my assessments are perfect, so when she [teacher] comes to see it ... everything's done (student 2).

The point here is to illustrate that these successful students did not necessarily have trouble-free placements where they were always welcomed and appreciated, but that they often had to

work hard for their success through managing (difficult) relationships with tact and careful thought at the same time that they were learning their craft in the classroom. As can be seen above, relationships were not always successful and most of the students felt the emotional lows that accompany this type of experience. Nonetheless they showed a strength of purpose in the way that they tried to – as one student put it – ‘turn negatives into positives’ while they were in the schools; all experiences offer learning potential, even if it can be painful to recognise what that might be. And they had all been in at least one placement where they felt they had achieved the reciprocal relationship that they sought, in which they had been trusted to teach the whole class on a regular basis, in which they had both learned and contributed, and in which they felt that they had been adopted wholeheartedly into the school community. The emotional high that came from this type of success was intense:

In my past practice I didn't want to go back to uni, I wanted to stay. I wanted it to be my class. I didn't want to go anywhere. I made the biggest friends with the teachers and I loved all the kids. I didn't want to go (student 16).

The next section returns to the notion of the fish in water, and discusses the issues arising from the research in the context of student retention.

Discussion

The participants in this research could all be described as ‘people-people’ who have a relatively high degree of self-awareness, are able to empathise and to communicate. This is not to say that they are all ‘naturals’, rather that they have learned to develop these skills through different processes of trial and error, openness to the different challenges that each placement provided, and learning from their mistakes. It is important to recognise that they are of different ages (in their 20s and 30s) and bring different levels of experience to their teaching practice; some are naturally shy and found – still find – it difficult to overcome the initial effort that involves talking to other staff members and getting involved in the broader aspects of school life. Several spoke of their extreme nerves when they taught for the first few times. All, however, have learned to manage the complexity of working in a primary school where juggling the different demands of teaching, work relationships, travelling and university requirements is part of the normal course of events. As they commented, it is exhausting and demanding work that nonetheless offers the potential for rich rewards.

The metaphor of the ‘fish in water’ is useful for examining the students’ experience as they have two particular seas in which to swim – the university campus, where they have the academic demands of following a degree course and most have the social demands of student life, and the school experience. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the nature of the first, but the data suggests that the second offers the students multiple chances to retreat / break out from the university campus life (where they may or may not feel at home) into an environment that offers different opportunities to ‘swim’. Schools can be an outlet for types of creativity that are not necessarily available in the degree course – some told stories of the

elaborate lengths they had gone to in order to set up a particularly enjoyable and successful lesson, for instance, including creating a murder mystery or organising a contemporary press conference for a character from ancient Greece. When the placement is working well, they have a degree of control over the space in which they are working as they can plan their lessons more or less as they wish (within curricular constraints) and are left alone to implement the plan with their pupils. They have the immediacy of children's reactions to their efforts, knowing instantly if a particular approach is engaging their pupils and, if necessary, adapting their teaching in response. Once the students overcame their initial nerves, they all reported enjoying space and the freedom to enjoy teaching their pupils; as one of the participants commented, 'you can see why you're doing it all'. In this way the placement can offer students time in which to recover their confidence if the university work is not progressing as they would like, and can help to strengthen their resolve to qualify as a teacher.

The implications for student retention concern the structures and processes that are in place to support students when they are on their school experience, and the balance between the time spent on the university campus and the placement. Here we feel it makes sense to report on the comments students made in the course of their interviews, and to highlight their suggestions. All have stressed the importance of personal relationships and, while some students felt they needed no university support when on the placement, others did – and they pointed to the centrality of the university tutor in these cases. Many met their tutor for the first time when the tutor observed their teaching, and felt that this is not necessarily conducive to striking up a positive working relationship. Student-tutor meetings, however, had been stopped due to financial constraints; this research highlights the need for them to continue.

The second point concerns the balance between university and school experience. Most of the students would have liked more time spent in school during the course, but understood the necessity of the theoretical work undertaken on campus. They suggested that the placements could be organised in such a way that there are no long gaps between the school experiences; in one case they waited for a calendar year between placements. Although there were occasional opportunities to teach in schools during this year, they felt that the long emphasis on the theoretical meant they were losing momentum with the primary teaching which, in turn, could be de-motivating.

There is a final point that we would like to raise. There may be a danger that learning to become a 'fish in water' means that students become so preoccupied with what they are doing that they lack a critical perspective on the education system in which they are involved; that we are training teachers to comply rather than to question. The Coalition government appears to be keen on moving initial teacher training away from universities into schools, which will reduce students' opportunities to reflect critically on the bigger educational picture. It may be that learning to swim turns out to be a strategy that, in the long term, invites increased political intervention and control.

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