



# Collaboration, dialogue and expansive learning: The use of paired and multiple placements in the school practicum



Pete Sorensen\*

University of Nottingham, England, United Kingdom

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teacher learning in paired/multiple school placements is investigated.
- The case studies show such placements can promote collaboration and dialogue.
- Careful structuring of the placement is needed to promote higher order learning.
- Expansive learning is promoted where mentors are supportive of an inquiry stance.
- There are reciprocal benefits for the school.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the way in which paired or multiple placements of student teachers in the school practicum can support learning through the promotion of collaboration and dialogue. It draws on data collected across six higher education institution (HEI)-secondary schools partnerships in England and focuses on a series of 20 case studies from one partnership. The results suggest that peer placements can support more expansive and deeper learning, especially where attention has been given to the structuring of the placements and the role of the mentor or cooperating teacher. In such cases there are also reciprocal benefits for the school.

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## 1. Introduction

Research in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in many countries has highlighted the importance of the school practicum. However, systematic reviews of work in the field suggest a lack of detailed examination of the practices that are most effective in supporting student teachers' learning. In reviewing international research on organizational structures, management processes and conceptual frameworks, Bills et al. (2007) noted some evidence that student teachers benefitted from increased time in schools and from mentoring. Moyles and Stuart (2003), in their systematic review of which school-based elements of partnership were supportive of beginning teachers' professional development, found some evidence to support the importance of processes involving feedback

and constructive dialogue and that placing two students together in a school could support the development of particular professional skills. However, both these reviews suggested the need for more explicit analysis of the nature of the structures and processes that influenced student teachers' learning during the practicum. The research presented in this paper seeks to respond to this important need.

The focus of our ongoing research has been on the efficacy of placing two or more students with the same subject specialism in the same school for the practicum. The first phase of this work, conducted across six HEI-schools partnerships over a four year period, involved collaboration between tutors, mentors and student teachers to study the characteristics of, and attitudes to, such placements, and the collaborative practices promoted. We adopted an iterative, mixed method approach, involving questionnaires, focus groups, structured interviews and observations of practice. The research initially drew on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) in analyzing how far these placements had

\* Dearing Building, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham, NG8 1BB, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)115 951 4511.

E-mail address: [peter.sorensen@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:peter.sorensen@nottingham.ac.uk).

supported the higher order learning needs, 'self actualisation' and 'understanding and knowledge', through the use of particular collaborative practices. A broad range of such practices were identified, including joint planning, team teaching approaches, observing, assessing and evaluating (see Sorensen, 2004; Sorensen & Sears, 2005).

It was clear from this first phase of research that most student teachers were positive about the gains from paired placements, with the most common reasons cited relating to the emotional and psychological support provided. Gains in terms of fulfilling higher level needs, with students acting as 'critical friends' to support development in knowledge, skills and understanding of teaching and learning, were only sometimes in evidence. However, in such cases, mentors and tutors felt that student teachers made quicker progress and learning was enhanced (Sorensen, 2004).

The importance of gaining a greater understanding of the interplay of policies and practices which are supportive of meeting higher level needs and hence enhance learning has driven the second phase of research presented here. Thus, this phase has involved detailed case studies of 20 paired or multiple placements in secondary schools (age 11–18) over a three year period. In analyzing these cases we have drawn on research literature and understandings from three broad areas: teacher education, professional development and mentoring; dialogic practices; and expansive learning within activity systems. The arguments for choosing these areas of focus are detailed in Section 2.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 2.1. Introduction

It is important to set out the basis for drawing on the particular literature that follows at the start of this section in order to clarify its relevance to the study.

The review of the literature on teacher education in Section 2.2 below suggests that:

- teacher professional development can be enhanced by models involving collaborative practices;
- in ITE, the role of a mentor or collaborating teacher is very important in determining both the type and extent of the learning;
- peer placements can serve as a model to promote more effective collaborative practices.

In order to examine the collaborative practices within the peer placements two main frameworks have been deployed in the research: dialogism and expansive learning. Arguments for a focus on dialogism are presented in Section 2.3 and for expansive learning in Section 2.4.

### 2.2. Teacher education, professional development and mentoring

A review of models of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) across much of the world indicates that the dominant models have involved a significant HEI component – seen by many commentators as a 'theoretical' one (Haggar & McIntyre, 2006) – and a school-based practicum. The most common practice has been to place a single student in a given subject area with a single 'cooperating teacher' or 'mentor' during the practicum. Thus Bullough et al. (2003, p. 57), drawing on research from North America and Europe, noted that this pattern had 'remained little changed for 50 years'. However, in more recent times, parts of the world have seen an increased focus on school-based training programmes. Some developments have been driven by a concern to strengthen the

links between schools and HEIs in order to bring theory and practice closer together, a notable forerunner of this being the Oxford Internship Scheme in England (Benton, 1990). Others have emerged through political challenges to the role of the HEI and governments seeking to take greater control over teacher education (Furlong, 2001; Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2009). A consequence of these changes has been an increasing focus on a mentoring role in schools and, where HEIs remain involved, collaboration between HEI tutors, school-based mentors and student teachers. There is now a wealth of international literature examining policies and models of teacher education, much of which stresses the value of collaborative practices (see Menter, Hulme, Dely, & Lewin, 2010; Zwodziak-Myers, Cameron, Mustard, Leask, & Green, 2010 for systematic reviews of the international literature).

Arguments for collaborative approaches in ITE parallel those visible in the professional development literature, with reviews suggesting that sustained, collaborative approaches, embedded in contexts, involving peer support, as well as that from a more experienced mentor or coach, tend to be the most effective (e.g. Cordingley, Bell, Evans, & Firth, 2005). School improvement imperatives over many years have emphasized notions of collegial intelligence and teachers learning from each other (e.g. Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Joyce & Showers, 1988; MacGilchrist, Myers, & Read, 1997) and researchers have stressed the importance of creating a culture of collaboration to support change (Fullan, 1999) and the power of distributed, collaborative leadership structures (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Thus persuasive arguments for the use of collaborative structures are visible at all levels in the system.

The common model of placing students singly in a given subject area in a school is at odds with the arguments for collaboration between peers. However, there has been a growing use of peer placement models in ITE in recent years. The innovative Oxford Internship Scheme (Benton, 1990) was one of the first in England to have paired placements in subjects at its heart and growth in the use of paired placements is reflected in emphasis given to this work by the Teacher Development Agency (Menendez & Oulton, 2007) and the Higher Education Academy (Wilson & Bolster, 2011). Research from the US has added weight to arguments for the use of paired placements (e.g. Bullough et al., 2002; Bullough et al., 2003; Manouchehri, 2002; Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Hansen, 2008). Wang (2001), in comparing mentoring practice in the US, UK and China, notes that pairing arrangements can help develop the confidence of student teachers to bring forward ideas and hence avoid some of the problems that can arise when student teachers feel disempowered due to the structural hierarchies present in many schools (Hobson, 2009).

The models of collaboration suggested in the literature reflect the fact that much of the work on teacher education, professional development and mentoring is underpinned by a socio-cultural perspective, with a particular emphasis on the importance of discourse in the promotion of learning (Vygotsky, 1987). Many authors have stressed the importance of others in the development of a sense of self (e.g. Bandura, 1986; Maslow, 1970) and being encouraged to see practice 'through others' eyes' (Loughran, 2002, p. 33) in developing the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987). In line with this, the use of coaching (involving mutual observation and peer support) has long been identified as an effective tool for professional learning (Joyce & Showers, 1988) and many authors (e.g. Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000) have argued for the importance of the role of mentoring as a force for improving the profession.

Arguments for the importance of mentoring are least weight by studies suggesting that mentoring quality is a more crucial factor in ITE than the nature of the route taken to accreditation. Looking particularly at US contexts, Feistritzer's (2008) review suggests that the most important factor of any programme is that it enables

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