



Alternative placements in initial teacher education: An evaluation

Noel Purdy*, Ken Gibson

Stranmillis University College, Stranmillis Road, Belfast BT9 5DY, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 January 2008

Received in revised form

15 April 2008

Accepted 14 May 2008

Keywords:

Initial teacher education

Student placement

Employability

ABSTRACT

The paper evaluates a programme of short alternative placements for final-year B.Ed. students in Northern Ireland, which aims to broaden student teachers' experience and develop their transferable skills. The alternative placement programme is set first in an international context of evolving pre-service field placements and then set in a local context marked by a surplus of teachers; a Revised Curriculum that emphasises the importance of employability, lifelong learning, and enterprise and entrepreneurship; and the introduction of the Extended Schools programme. The evaluation is based on feedback from the 2007 to 2008 cohort of students whose comments confirm the value of exposing student teachers to non-traditional educational environments.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

School placements have long been viewed as an essential part of teacher training offering the opportunity to develop practical classroom expertise in the context of a mainstream school. Indeed the notion of work-based learning is not unique to teacher education and forms an integral part of many other higher-level courses such as engineering and architecture. For a number of reasons however one university college of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Belfast, Northern Ireland, has in recent years introduced an additional short period of 'alternative placement', which aims to widen the students' experience and develop a range of transferable skills away from the narrow, traditional context of the mainstream school. It is necessary first to contextualise this programme of alternative placements in Northern Ireland by considering international studies of short-term placements for pre-service teachers at ITE institutions.

2. Review of international research on pre-service placements

A recent OECD report (OECD, 2005) highlights a shift in how field placements for student teachers are being conceived in developed countries, with a move towards more frequent and more varied placements throughout ITE courses. Such a shift in the nature of placements is itself seen as a consequence of the evolving and broadening conception of the role of the teacher, whose responsibilities extend far beyond the narrow boundaries of subject knowledge towards an understanding of and engagement with the child in its social context:

The pace of social change and the heightened expectations of schools have broadened and deepened teachers' roles...Countries are rethinking the role of field experiences in schools. These now tend to happen earlier in teacher education, and are framed to provide a broad experience of what it means to be a professional teacher (OECD, 2005, p.95).

Short-term placements and exchanges (especially with a cross-cultural focus) have become popular in many countries and have been the subject of much international research in recent years. For instance, Willard-Holt (2001) considers the value of short-term international experience

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 28 90 38 43 05; fax: +44 28 90 66 44 23.

E-mail address: n.purdy@stran.ac.uk (N. Purdy).

for pre-service teachers, where US students spent 6 days in Mexico visiting several schools, attending cultural events and teaching lessons in a bilingual elementary school. Willard-Holt found that the benefits to student teachers of even such short visits were manifold, from greater global awareness through to increased flexibility, greater reflection on their own teaching, and a heightened sense of professionalism as ‘ambassadors’ in dealing with the Mexican students and other teachers. Willard-Holt refers to Wilson’s (1993) diagrammatic representation of the impact of an international experience where two categories of impact are identified: gaining a global perspective (in terms of substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding of other cultures) and developing self and relationships (in terms of personal growth and interpersonal connections).

Similarly Stachowski and Mahan (1998) report on the learning gains by US students involved in cross-cultural field placements both in native Indian communities and in overseas placements in the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Stachowski and Mahan note that learning gains came not only from interaction with the pupils themselves but also from interaction with those in the broader community, such as the school cooks and maintenance workers as well as local farmers and church members. Students were also required to complete service learning projects, through which there were many benefits including a greater understanding and appreciation of how other people live, a greater awareness of the students’ own strengths and weaknesses, and a heightened sense of belonging to their host communities. Stachowski and Mahan suggest that all students, irrespective of the location of their placement school, should become more aware of the nature of the local community in which their placement school is located, and suggest several ways in which students could go from the classroom to the community to develop this important understanding. They conclude that ‘We must expand our thinking about student teaching to include immersion into the local community and culture while at the same time honing those instructional, managerial and disciplinary skills that all good teachers need’ (1998, p.162).

Other international studies (e.g. Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Ference & Bell, 2004; Finney & Orr, 1995; Gomez & Tabachnick, 1991; Jordan, 1995; Mahan, 1982; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1991; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Pohan, 1996; Tang & Choi, 2004; Wiest, 1998; Zeichner, 1992) have similarly revealed that such short-term placements can have a profound impact in terms of heightening students’ cultural sensitivity, though as Lee (2005) notes, care must be taken to ensure a maximum of student reflection on their experiences.

In the Irish context recent research by Leavy (2005) would suggest that the vast majority of pre-service teachers in the Republic of Ireland are white, middle-class, catholic and female, and have no contact with members of the Travelling community, refugees or asylum seekers. In Northern Ireland Hagan and McGlynn (2004) note the importance of student teachers experiencing other cultures, even within the divided society of Northern Ireland where almost all student teachers have

come through a largely segregated education system in which Protestant and Catholic children are taught in separate schools. Their study of a cohort of 168 final-year students reports that for historical reasons (for a detailed history, see McMinn and Phoenix (2005)) there remains ‘considerable homeogeneity in the sociocultural background and perspective of the students surveyed’ (mostly middle-class and Protestant) and conclude that ‘the desire amongst the students surveyed for increased opportunities for learning in more diverse school contexts has yet to be addressed, with the issue of limited teaching placements seemingly the main obstacle’ (Hagan & McGlynn, 2004, p. 249).

Alternative placements, which are not primarily focused on the cross-cultural dimension, are much less common. The benefits of such placements in England and Australia are outlined by Chambers (1989), Clyde (1992), and Cookson and Revill (1989). However, there remain many challenges in the organisation of alternative placements as Penny and Harley (1995) suggest. Penny and Harley (1995) present the findings from a programme where student teachers in South Africa spent 2 of their 28-week course in a range of industrial, commercial and social enterprises. Penny and Harley note that the idea for the placement programme had come from the remarks of a local industrialist who had claimed that teachers were generally ignorant of the industrial workplace and that they lacked an appreciation of the career opportunities offered to young people. The programme reviewed by Penny and Harley revealed that the previous experience of many of the education students had been limited to educational and academic institutions, and that the students learnt much about the nature of work in an industrial context and the relevance of what is taught in schools. The potential difficulties of placements were however also identified by Penny and Harley who note, for instance, that many of the participating students did *not* enjoy the manual nature of the work they experienced on the production line, some seeing it as ‘demeaning’ and monotonous. Furthermore, Penny and Harley noted (echoing Lee, 2005) that more effort was required to encourage detailed reflection on the part of the students during and following their placements. This research in particular has serious implications for the planning and preparation of alternative placements as well as the methods to be adopted to encourage precisely the kind of detailed critical reflection which Penny and Harley failed to identify in their study.

3. Recent policy developments in Northern Ireland

There have been a number of recent education policy developments in Northern Ireland and beyond which both set the local context and provide a rationale for this programme of alternative placements. These developments include the downward demographic trend in the school-age population and resulting surplus of (particularly primary) teachers; the implementation of the Revised Curriculum in Northern Ireland with its emphasis on employability, career management and enterprise and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/374627>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/374627>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)