

An Chomhairle
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Title of Research Project: Student Teachers' Collaborative Experiences during School Placement: Barriers and Opportunities

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Summary:

Teacher collaboration entails two or more colleagues working and reflecting together, for a shared purpose. In doing so, a range of positive outcomes may be garnered, such as heightened moral support and communication, improved teacher effectiveness and confidence, and reduced workload and personal isolation. Yet, obstacles may stifle its success. A lack of universal endorsement, teacher competitiveness, conflict, decreased autonomy, time limitations, increased workload and pressure to conform, can be challenging. Further adding to these mixed findings, most focus on the qualified teacher, with a paucity of research on the nature of student teacher (ST) collaboration. The purpose of this study is to explore ST perspectives and experiences of collaboration during school placement (SP).

A mixed method approach (i.e. sequential explanatory design) was adopted in this two-phase study. Participants were full-time, undergraduate STs, studying a BA PME programme in one third level ITE institution. Purposive sampling was employed. Phase 1 entailed STs (N=119) completing a questionnaire on their understanding and perceptions of collaboration to date and intentions for collaboration during SP. Phase 2 was conducted two weeks post SP. All phase 1 participants were invited to complete a second questionnaire (n=38) and one focus group. Both instruments explored STs experiences and perceptions of collaboration during their recent SP.

Findings demonstrated that STs enjoyed collaborating, citing many benefits: contributed to their development, professional skills and effectiveness, expanded pedagogical approaches, offered new

perspectives on effective teaching, and reduced uncertainty. Collaborations occurred with several colleagues, in particular the co-operating teacher. The purpose of these varied (i.e. practical class preparation, class set up, supporting behavioural management, developing student profiles, and creation of resources). Interestingly, STs' collaborations concentrated on the immediate class and/or themselves and less on learning, learners or the wider school. Most collaborations occurred between lessons and during lunchtime. Time availability and lack of awareness of collaboration at the school level, were considered problematic. Ironically, the themes of forcing collaboration, as well as, responsibility for its' initiation and continuance by others, thereby devolving STs of responsibility, suggested a misunderstanding of collaboration by STs.

The current study helps to inform SP policy and practice in the ITE institution and contributes to the understanding of the role of SP in influencing attitudes towards collaboration. Further input on the nature and importance of collaboration is recommended, particularly at early stages of ITE programmes, thereby developing STs' competencies during this time. The study also formed a basis for further expansion of school-ITE institution partnerships, to enhance SP experiences. Existing research, along with our findings, suggests such partnerships are not universal, with ST experiences varying. In line with this, research with co-operating teachers and other SP personnel is proposed, in order to gain a wider view of collaboration during SP.

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