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## Exciting or Turmoil: the highs and lows of teaching practice

S. Turner, N. Zanker and M. Braine

For those taking the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), the teaching practice environment can be a daunting one. Trainee teachers need to adjust to the demands of a new workplace and a complex professional role. They are faced with a range of potentially challenging interactions with pupils, parents and staff colleagues. The profession requires a rapid mastery of multiple roles such as delivering subject knowledge in well-planned lessons, preparing schemes of work and pastoral duties.

A known concern within the teaching profession is the large number of newly qualified teachers who fail to take up teaching posts or who leave the profession within five years of completing their PGCE training (Carlyle and Woods, 2002). Probing more deeply into the teaching practice experience could reveal some useful insights for teacher education and retention. In the pilot study reported, we investigate the key issues impacting on trainee teachers.

Teaching requires an emotional investment. Therefore, teachers need to *'feel right'* (Riseborough, 1981, p.15) if they are to carry out their role in school effectively. Conversing with teachers often reveals that their emotions are at the heart of teaching (Kelchtermans, 1996). Their emotional reactions are intimately connected with the view they hold of themselves and of others around them (Nias, 1996). Therefore, it is important to consider the emotional needs of teachers in the early years of their career as this could be a crucial factor in both retention and effective teaching.

Following the Secondary National Strategies pilot programme 'Developing Social and Emotional Skills' (2005), Ofsted's evaluation included the benefit of improved teacher morale. During the pilot study the initiative was renamed 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning' (SEAL). The SEAL programme is gaining momentum in the primary and secondary sectors. This requires staff and pupils to discuss and reflect on the social and emotional needs of pupil learning with a view to improving the pupils' behaviour in the classroom. The SEAL initiative focuses on five elements of social and emotional aspects of learning: self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills. It is, therefore, imperative that teachers equip themselves with the appropriate knowledge and skills if they are to develop them successfully in their pupils.

### **Method**

The purpose of the study was to investigate how science and design and technology trainee teachers settle into their teaching practices and how this impacts on their personal lives and their teaching. The study comprised of both qualitative and quantitative approaches: two questionnaires specifically designed for the study (one at the end of the first (N=42: science N=20;

design and technology N=22), and one at the end of the second (N=48 science N=29; design and technology N=19), teaching practices) and a semi-structured interview (undertaken by seven willing participants). The first questionnaire focused on:

- the reasons why the trainee had chosen the course;
- how the trainees felt they responded to independent tasks in school;
- any problems they encountered on their teaching practice;
- suggestions to overcome any problems experienced;
- whether they had continued straight onto the course following their undergraduate degree or if they were a mature trainee.

The second questionnaire focused on:

- the high and low points during the teaching practice;
- describing how they felt during the teaching practice;
- providing suggestions for future trainee teachers.

Six questions were asked in the interview:

- 1) What has been your experience of the settling in process at your schools?
- 2) What aspects of your work with pupils in the classroom has been particularly challenging/rewarding?
- 3) How has working in the school impacted upon you personally?
- 4) How closely does your actual experience of working in a school match your expectations?
- 5) What advice would you give next year's cohort of trainee teachers bearing in mind your experiences this year on teaching practice?
- 6) Is there anything else you would like to comment upon?

Before each interview the ethics and eligibility to withdraw at any point were outlined to each participant on arrival.

## **Findings**

In the cohort of trainee teachers, the most popular reason cited for choosing the PGCE course was to gain a qualification which would enable them to get a good job (85% science trainees; 95% design and technology (D&T) trainees). The other two main reasons were: the course will help to develop knowledge and skills that will be useful later on and wanting new challenges to develop as a person, broaden horizons and face new challenges (80% science trainees; 95% D&T trainees).

Due to the nature of the course requiring organisational and independent skills, we considered how trainee teachers perceived themselves when settling into school. 90% of the science trainee teachers and 77% D&T trainee teachers always or often found out for themselves showing independence within the school. 95% of the science trainees and 91% D&T trainee teachers were always/often able to automatically look for opportunities. However, 30% (science) and 36% (D&T) often needed help to carry out their plans and tasks.

Some issues were highlighted relating to settling into the first teaching practice. In design and technology (those whose education had been

continuous from their undergraduate studies) 30% of the trainees referred to feeling young and finding it hard to settle into school. In science (of this group of trainee teachers), only 43% of trainees responded to this question and 29% of comments related to issues surrounding staff.

In both subjects, on the second questionnaire, the majority of trainee teachers felt that settling into their second school was generally OK. See tables 1 and 2 for the results of how the trainee teachers described their second teaching practice. At the end of the course, trainee teachers reported the following enjoyable aspects of teaching practice were:

- Pupil relationships
- Pupils achieving well in their classes
- Relationships with staff
- Teaching
- Extra-curricular

The lowest points during their teaching practice were highlighted as:

- Lesson observations
- Workload
- Classroom management issues
- Relationships with staff
- Long days

Interviews were conducted during the final week of the second teaching practice. The main generalisations from the interviews were that:

1. Trainee teachers had positive experiences when treated with empathy and respect at Mentor, departmental and whole school level.
2. Positive experiences were also linked to those involved with trainee teachers having appropriate time to support them and were actively engaged in the process.
3. The rewarding aspects were when lessons went well and when individual pupils made progress or improved their behaviour.
4. Some trainee teachers enjoyed lessons in which they were able to teach creatively using their own ideas.
5. The challenging aspects of teaching were pupil apathy, low level disruption by pupils, constant noise/chatter in lessons and verbal abuse. This surprised most of the trainee teachers.
6. Most trainee teachers described their experience as being close to their expectations and that they were surprised at how much they enjoyed classroom teaching.
7. Trainee teachers were surprised by the poor levels of understanding and attainment of many pupils.
8. The 'Phase 2 dip' was apparent and the trainees would have found more preparation on this helpful.

How the school experience had impacted on the trainee teachers' personal lives provided a variety of responses. These all referred to either affecting physical, mental or emotional behaviours. All trainees felt that these feelings were temporary whilst on teaching practice and that it would be different when

they had their own job. Typical responses describing behavioural patterns related to:

- Loss of sleep/disturbed sleep
- Forced early nights/going to bed early
- Difficulty switching off
- An awareness of being kept going by adrenaline
- An awareness of an impact on their immune system e.g. generally feeling run-down
- A reduction in social life/relational contact time/time with family
- Changes in eating patterns – weight loss/gain, eating less healthily
- Little or no time for exercise
- Variations in confidence levels day by day
- Feelings of loneliness
- Minimal relaxation
- Difficulties in work-life balance
- Discomfort at being monitored by staff/parents/university tutors
- Making a huge personal investment linked with physical, mental and emotional exhaustion

These findings can be triangulated with the second questionnaire findings. The leap from first to second teaching practice was highlighted as more difficult than expected for 31% of the science trainee teachers and 16% of D&T trainee teachers. The interview comments relating to work/life balance correspond with the 52% of science trainees and 68% D&T trainees who found the second teaching practice exhausting and 79% science and 68% D&T who found it challenging. 31% science trainees and 11% D&T trainees acknowledged the poor behaviour of pupils in lessons as being a low point during their teaching practice and 52% science and 58% D&T trainees reflected on rewarding and positive moments relating to pupils achieving, especially if they had been naughty or special needs pupils. See Figure 1 for descriptions of how trainee teachers felt during their second teaching practice.

## **Discussion**

From the questionnaires and interviews, a crucial implication for teacher training would be greater attention given to preparing new teachers for general disruption in the classroom. These trainee teachers may possibly have been 'good' pupils when they were at school and therefore have never encountered or experienced 'bad' behaviour such as constant noise, chatter or abusive language. Equipping trainee teachers to manage these experiences confidently is paramount to their success in gaining positivity in this area. Research by Morton *et al.* (1997) found that the teaching practice did not reduce anxiety regarding classroom management; it appeared to suggest a minor increase in anxiety.

Professional relationships within the school were of crucial importance in inducting a trainee teacher into the school. The complex relationships between trainee teachers and the headteacher, pupils, parents and

colleagues can create some vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 1996) and hence the welcome and organisation of the first visits to the school are vital for future success of the trainee.

The rewarding nature of the profession reported as 'genuine satisfaction' was most reassuring. Since trainee teachers put much of themselves into their job, focussing on the rewards and positive experiences needs to be encouraged. This concurs with research by Nias (1996) who considers that,

*'When teachers feel they are effective, assisting the learning of all pupils, keeping pace with their needs, handling the complex demands of teaching with insight and fluid flexibility, they experience joy, excitement, exhilaration and deep satisfaction'* (Nias, 1996, p. 297).

Educating and supporting trainee teachers in looking after themselves could be of importance in teacher retention. This was highlighted during the interviews in which trainee teachers reflected on their teaching experiences and on the impact on their personal life. Some trainees felt that exhaustion, loneliness, not being able to switch off, difficulty in work-life balance were only temporary measures as they were on teaching practice.

*'The more committed beginning teachers are, the bigger the risk of this disappointment [not being able to make a difference]. Dealing with this professional reality implies learning to balance job commitment and personal distance'* (Kelchtermans, 1996, p. 313).

This suggests some early erosion of their 'self' at this early stage in their career, although much of this seems to have been 'out of awareness' for the trainee teachers themselves.

*'Teachers' emotions, though individually experienced, are a matter of collective concern: they are occasioned by circumstances which can be identified, understood and so have the potential to be changed, and their consequences affect everyone involved in the educational process'* (Nias, 1996, p. 294).

## **Conclusions**

In this pilot study, the main conclusion is that although teaching practice can be stressful (33%) and challenging (75%) that 65% of the science and design and technology trainees really enjoyed their teaching practices. This concurs with the participants in the interviews who all stated that they enjoyed their teaching practices. Other positive experiences related to rewarding moments involving pupil achievement and discipline, and participating fully in the life of the school.

The most common difficulty encountered, which was a surprise to many of the trainees in the interviews, was the 'phase 2 dip'. However, this was not reflected as strongly in the questionnaires (50% generally OK; 25% more difficult). The most prominent negative point related to exhaustion throughout

the year – in the questionnaires this highlighted 58% and was a focal point in the interviews along with other impacts on personal lives such as disturbed sleep, difficulty switching off, generally feeling run-down, changes in eating pattern and a reduction in social life.

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If you would like copies of the questionnaires used in this study, please contact: [S.Turner4@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:S.Turner4@lboro.ac.uk)

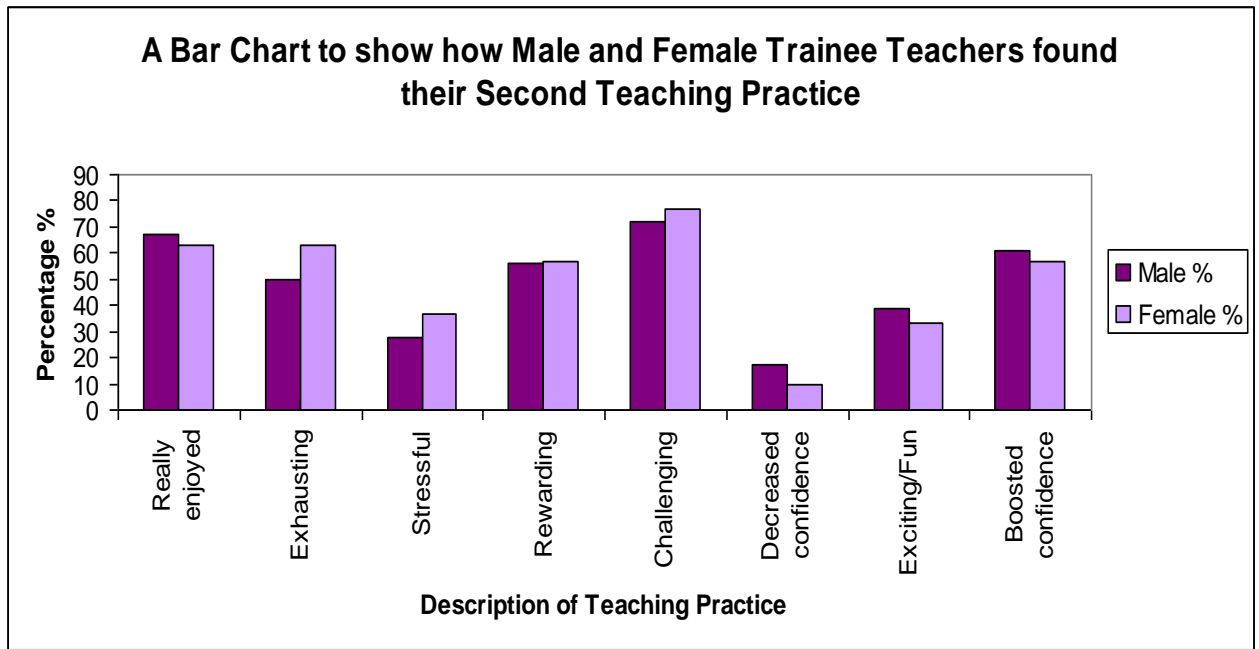


Figure 1: A Bar Chart to show how Males and Females described their Phase 2 Teaching Practice.

	Science %	D&T %	Both Subjects %
Really enjoyed it	73	64	68
Exhausting	55	55	55
Stressful	27	36	32
Rewarding	73	55	64
Challenging	91	55	73
Decreased confidence	0	18	9
Fun/Exciting	64	18	41
Boosted confidence	73	36	55

Table 1: Results from the Second Questionnaire showing how the Trainees who had continued onto the PGCE course from their undergraduate course described their second teaching practice.



	Science %	D&T %	Both Subjects %
Really enjoyed it	63	75	67
Exhausting	56	88	67
Stressful	38	38	38
Rewarding	31	88	50
Challenging	69	88	75
Decreased confidence	19	13	17
Fun/Exciting	25	50	34
Boosted confidence	44	88	58

Table 2: Results from the Second Questionnaire showing how the Mature Trainee Teachers described their second teaching practice.