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School Placement in Initial Teacher Education: Partnership or Paralysis

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Introduction

The concept of partnership in school placement is not new to the initial teacher education (ITE) reform agenda (Furlong et al., 2000). Despite its prevalence in the rhetoric on placement, the nature of partnerships, the definition of partners, and the extent to which partnerships are voluntary or enforced are all far from universally accepted facts. Harford and O'Doherty (2016) argue that the partnership metaphor has been applied very loosely to describe collaboration and consensus, without any real definition of what is meant by it.

Partnership in school placement is often discussed in policy documents and guidelines as a *fait accompli*, but when we probe the use of the word, we find it can be applied to many ways of organising collaboration between higher-education institutions (HEIs) and schools (Gorman & Furlong, 2023). It can vary in meaning depending on who uses it, whether site of practice, HEI, professional body, or student teacher. It can also be used to reflect distinct interpretations and motivations (Stuart & Martinez-Lucio, 2004).

If we cannot agree on what partnership is, how can we hope to understand who the partners are and how they should fulfil their roles? This article posits that the confusion around partnership has hindered the development of school placement into a meaningfully experienced first step in the continuum of professional development, resulting in a paralysis of reform in school placement.

True partnership

In its revised Guidelines on School Placement (2021), the Teaching Council presents a shared vision of school



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This article explores the vision of school placement presented in the Teaching Council's revised Guidelines on School Placement (2021) and asks: Who are the real partners in placement, and how do they impact on its effectiveness as the first step in the continuum of professional development? The article considers the spaces inhabited by partners – higher-education institutions and host schools – and how perceptions of roles and responsibilities can affect the student teacher experience.

placement as something that can be taken for granted as a universally accepted practice. However, does sector-wide agreement exist on what constitutes partnership? It can be reasonably argued that true partnership occurs only where is equality of responsibilities, of risk, and of reward. In the current school placement system, can this be said to be the case, or is partnership more aspirational than reality-based?

While the Sahlberg Report (Sahlberg et al., 2012) notes the need for stronger partnership between HEIs and sites of practice to support the delivery of higher-quality placement, the review of the Teaching Council's Guidelines on School Placement (2021) can be argued to reflect a failed opportunity to give more nuance and specific details to the definition of roles and responsibilities in such a partnership model.

The use of the Irish language to refer to key roles – common practice with the Teaching Council – runs the risk of acting as a barrier to inclusivity.

For example, the Guidelines introduce the Irish term for guide, *treoraí* (plural *treoraíthe*), to refer to the role of the co-operating teacher. The Council makes the highly refutable claim that this term more accurately reflects the nature of the role. Let us consider that word 'guide' further. A guide is a more knowledgeable other who has the purpose of directing or indicating the correct path to take. This clearly gives the co-operating teacher a role of authority and assumes they should direct a student teacher down a specific pathway. Does this interpretation run the risk of paralysis? In other words, does it encourage student teachers to continue to replicate the methodologies of co-operating teachers and the status quo rather than engaging in critical reflective practices? In addition, the use of the Irish language to refer to key roles – common practice with the Teaching Council – runs the risk of acting as a barrier to inclusivity.

Taking a closer look at the partner roles, the traditional view of a triad of school placement comprising the student teacher, co-operating teacher, and school placement tutor represents a narrow vision of partnership in placement. Who are the real partners, and how do they impact on the effectiveness of placement? The 'shared vision' of school placement is defined in the Teaching Council's Guidelines (2021) as one where student teachers are welcomed and supported by a network of tutors, principals, class teachers, and the school community – but how this is to be implemented is not articulated clearly, nor are there specifics on fulfilling these roles.

The contributions of student teachers are to be 'recognised and celebrated', while the student teacher reflects on their developing professional identity in an atmosphere of shared professional understanding and collaboration (Teaching Council, 2021). For these ideals to be met, certain conditions need to be expressed and negotiated, including a recognition that partners have different work norms, allocating time for collaboration and engaging in sustained work to promote partnership (Bain et al., 2017).

Back to basics

The ideal of a collaborative and welcoming environment presented by the Teaching Council is not always supported by the evidence. The status of the student teacher in the school is complex, as teachers and learners negotiate their professional spaces; there is tension for student teachers in how they self-define as they participate in school placement (Hall et al., 2012). This can impact on how newly qualified teachers negotiate power (Long et al., 2012) and position in schools.

A picture emerges of partnership in school placement in Ireland characterised by a volunteer approach rather than formal partnership, despite the existence of the Teaching Council as a professional body. Does this speak to a lack of efficacy on the part of the Council, or is it a reflection of a less restrictive or authoritarian approach to the profession than could be taken by a professional body?

Smith (2016) poses an interesting question: Is partnership between ITEs and schools true partnership between equals, or are there hidden power struggles over issues such as who leads the partnership and who makes assessment decisions? There is a need for a 'back to basics' approach of articulating a clear vision of partnership in placement, including roles, responsibilities, and the promotion of equality, if partnership is not to end in paralysis.

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Speaking at the launch of **SciFest 2023** at Clogher Road Community College in Dublin, Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, said: "I am delighted to join the SciFest team to celebrate the launch of SciFest 2023. Initiatives such as SciFest cultivate a genuine curiosity for science and STEM from an early age."

Scifest announced Climate Action as its theme for 2023 and also announced EirGrid as a new project partner.

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