

‘Stepping on the teacher’s toes’: Student teachers’ experience of a one-year postgraduate teacher training programme.

Abstract

Student teachers engaging in periods of training in the classroom, supported by experienced mentors, is an accepted model for teacher training. This qualitative study adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach to establish the lived experience of a group of postgraduate primary student teachers across their teacher training year. A community of practice theoretical lens (Lave and Wenger 1991) was applied and findings suggested that in *some* cases student teachers can be regarded as legitimate peripheral participants (LPP) in a primary school context and learning gains made. However, learning and successful outcomes were still shown to take place even when the student teachers might not be regarded as LLPs. There are therefore limitations to the community of practice model. Attention paid to student teachers’ individual circumstances might better contribute to their self-efficacy and subsequent motivation to enter the teaching profession. There are implications for mentor training and further research.

Keywords: communities of practice; mentors; student teachers; teacher identity; descriptive phenomenology.

Introduction

Teacher recruitment and retention is a focus for many countries around the world (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS) 2016). Without a regular supply of new entrants to the teaching profession educational provision is put at risk and life chances for children are jeopardised (UNESCO 2014). Across the European Union, ongoing concerns about the ageing teacher population and low rates of qualified teacher retention prompting action at policy and systemic levels across European nations (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018). In addition to in-service teacher retention, student teacher recruitment and dropout is also of concern across the European Union (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2018) and the global teacher training sector (Smith

and Gorard 2007; Hobson et al. 2009; UIS 2016). Supporting student teachers to develop a strong sense of teacher identity and commitment to the profession is therefore a priority.

In England there is a variety of routes into teaching, university-led routes and school-based routes. The main difference between the two is that school-based routes provide a more immersive experience with the student teachers spending up to 80% of their training year in school with relatively fewer periods of centralised training compared to university-led routes. Tensions exist between the two approaches and whilst the school-based route provides for an experience that better reflects the reality of teaching, there are concerns that the pedagogical and theoretical elements are less of a focus. In contrast, the HEI-led route is often criticised for a lack of authenticity with outmoded notions of the modern classroom and, as such, neither route adequately prepares teachers for a sustainable, long-term career (George and Maguire, 2019).

To better understand how the HEI route into teaching shapes student teachers' identity, motivation and commitment to teaching as a career, this research focuses specifically on a group of postgraduate student teachers engaged in a one-year PGCE (Primary) programme (n=8) at one Higher Education Institution (HEI) in England. The Lave and Wenger (1991) model of workplace learning provides the theoretical lens through which the student teachers' perceptions of their experiences were viewed.

Teacher training programme design and challenges

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2014) highlighted the importance of well-structured pre-service teacher education programmes that include periods of in-classroom experience as student teachers. School settings are important in helping to provide an authentic training environment that engenders a sense of belonging through mutual interest, shared reflections and shared practice between the student teacher and the wider school

community (Ussher 2010). It is also widely accepted that high-quality mentoring that supports the student teachers during the classroom-based periods of their training improves outcomes for pupils (UNESCO 2014). With regard to this, UNESCO recommends that teacher educators and mentors should be well-trained and experienced classroom practitioners to provide the best quality support and guidance for the student teachers. This model of teacher training is widely adopted across many countries.

The school-based element of a teacher training programme brings with it a variety of challenges and being made to feel welcome in a school setting is an important first stage to avoid the feelings of ‘alienation’ (Bathmaker and Avis 2005, 60) that can accompany entering a new environment. Whilst the culture within a setting can contribute to how welcome student teachers feel, their own personality and disposition can also contribute to how effectively they integrate into the school setting has been widely reported (Raffo and Hall 2006; Mundia 2010; Aydin, Bavli and Alci 2013; Haq and Mundia 2013; Reichl et al. 2014; Biermann et al. 2015; Pollitt and Oldfield 2017). Furthermore, student teachers who naturally exhibit higher levels of self-confidence tend to feel more confident in their abilities as a teacher (Aydin, Bavli and Alci 2013) and better equipped to cope when faced with any adverse situations that might arise (Reichl et al. 2014). However, the impact of poor relationships between school staff and student teachers is a recognised concern that impacts negatively on student teacher wellbeing and motivation to enter the profession (Maguire 2001; Sewell et al. 2009).

Developing a teacher identity

Over time, teacher identity has been defined and discussed but different interpretations have led to calls for an explicit definition within studies (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009) and an acknowledgement of the interplay between personal and professional identities (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop 2004) in order to recognise its ‘multi-faceted and dynamic nature’

(Beauchamp and Thomas 2009, 177). For the purposes of this study, teacher identity is considered from the student teachers' perspective taking on board emotional responses to their own personal construction of what it means to be a teacher and how their ongoing realities match with this; reconciling differences between 'the ideal self and the actual self' (Lauriala and Kukkonen 2005, 213).

Early development of teacher identity can be viewed in terms of different identity 'orientations' (Hsieh 2015, 188) in which pedagogical approaches range between inflexible, through to experimental and adaptive. It follows therefore that exposure to authentic teaching practices is an important precursor to the development of a teacher identity (Hong 2010; Sutherland and Markauskaite 2012). During school placements, if student teacher activities are limited to observations or do not reflect the full repertoire of a teacher, then this can have a negative impact on the construction of a teacher identity through an 'unreality of rehearsal' (McNamara et al. 2002, 875). However, opportunities to teach and fully engage with mentors leads to a greater range of teaching and reflection skills (Hudson 2016), and development as a professional (Alemdag and Simsek 2011; Ingersoll and Strong 2011; See 2014; Zhao and Zhang 2017). Teacher identity is a constantly changing concept for the individual (Johnson 2003) and practical experience is what facilitates this (Zeichner 2005; Valencia et al. 2009). Equally, student teacher hesitancy to exploit the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in the classroom can stifle their sense of teacher identity (Tonna, Bjerkholt and Holland 2017). Furthermore, a lack of opportunity to teach when on placement constrains student teachers' practice and can impact negatively on the motivation to join the teaching profession (Tang, Cheng and Cheng 2014). Moreover, receiving positive and useful feedback cannot be underestimated (Fives et al. 2007; Bruinsma and Jansen 2010; Yuan and Lee 2015), and this leads to increased levels of teacher self-efficacy (Devos et al. 2012). Adopting a more dialogic approach to the mentoring relationship can strengthen student teachers' reflective

ability and encourage a greater sense of teacher identity (Hobson et al., 2009). In the longer term, shared reflection with mentors (Timošćuk and Ugaste 2010) that includes opportunities to reflect on earlier experiences regarding the social context of teaching (Dahlgren and Chiriac 2009) can also better prepare them for becoming members of the teaching community. An environment that includes ‘informal collegiality’ (Patrick et al. 2010, 287) with mentors and other professionals is also important for teacher development. The risk here is that the relatively short duration of some school placements can reduce opportunities for collaboration between student teachers and their mentors and therefore limit the development of teacher identity (Skinner 2010).

To fully access the learning opportunities that schools provide means that student teachers need to form professional, working relationships with different people within the placement school settings, and contribute to pupil learning and progress (Bullough and Draper 2004; Patrick et al. 2010; Cuenca 2011). The extent to which the formation of strong working relationships is achievable is both dependent on the context of the school (Flores and Day 2006), and the skills and knowledge of their mentors (Tang, Cheng and Cheng 2014; Sandvik et al. 2019).

Mentoring

During the mentoring process, experienced teachers provide the formal support and guidance for student teachers when they are engaged in school placements (Korthagen, Loughran and Russell 2006; Teaching Schools Council 2016, 7). However, the mentoring process is not straightforward and some of the challenges that student teachers face relate to conflicts between classroom teachers’ and mentors’ obligations and goals for their own pupils and the needs of the student teachers (Skinner 2010). This role conflict has the potential to contribute to student teachers’ sense of uncertainty regarding their own and their mentors’ roles and expectations (Hamman and Romano 2009). Whilst there is an opportunity for shared learning (Patrick

2013), the complexity of the roles and the relationships should not be underestimated (Ambrosetti and Dekkers 2010). The notion of ‘performativity’ (Hall and McGinty 2015, 5) in the teaching profession has relevance here and ‘competitive individualism’ (Hargreaves 1994, 170) is a threat, not only to collaborative approaches within school settings but also to the retention of student teachers and motivation to enter the profession (Smethem 2007).

This tension between the role of school mentor as ‘assessor, adviser, trainer and “partner”’ (Jones 2000, 73) can further impact the relationship between the student teacher and the mentor. This strain can create issues which are ‘potentially destructive of trust’ (Hobson (2010, 314) and lead to distress and frustration (Hascher, Cocard, and Poser 2004) particularly when assessment outcomes mean that the student teacher might fail to enter the teaching profession. To this end, mentors can be regarded as having the power to act as a ‘gatekeeper’ (Cuenca 2011, 118) to the teaching profession and their skills, experience, mentoring approach, and attitudes towards student teachers, are pivotal for student teacher progress (Laker, Laker and Lea 2008).

Open and informal dialogue through collaboration with the mentor results in increased levels of student teacher learning and better progress (Flores 2004; McCormack, Gore and Thomas 2006; Mukeredzi and Mandrona 2013; Sorenson 2014; Maskit and Orland-Barak 2015). The nature and quality of the support, and the extent to which the needs of the student teachers are recognised and met, is crucial to their sense of teacher identity. There are many studies that highlight that it is inconsistencies in the mentoring approach that can have a detrimental effect on outcomes for student teachers, particularly where specific needs are not taken into account (Anderson 2007; Valencia et al. 2009; Long, van Es and Black 2013; Jaspers et al. 2014; Sorensen 2014; Davis and Fantozzi 2016; Mena et al. 2016).

As teacher identity development suggests, the different styles and approaches to mentoring range from a ‘mimetic approach’ (Valencia et al. 2009, 311) or ‘apprenticeship

model’ (Smith and Avetisian 2011, 337) where the student teacher is expected to recreate the mentor’s style of teaching, and a ‘coaching model’ (Smith and Avetisian 2011, 345). In the latter, experimentation is encouraged and reflected upon jointly by the host teacher and student teacher (Smagorinsky et al. 2004). Where there is an imbalance in the student teacher and mentor relationship, with over-dominance by the mentor, student teacher progress can be diminished (Hyland and Lo 2006). However, where mentoring *does* give the student teacher the freedom to experiment but provides little support this contributes to an environment interpreted by student teachers as one of ‘benign neglect’ (Valencia et al. 2009, 311). High quality mentor selection and training is an essential pre-requisite for student teacher training to ensure that guidance remains personalised (Smagorinsky et al. 2004; Anderson 2007; Valencia et al. 2009; Sandvik et al. (2019) and support extends to emotional as well as instructional guidance (Davis and Fantozzi 2016).

Student teacher mentoring in England

In parallel with many international studies, the quality of mentors in England has been under scrutiny in recent years (Hobson and Malderez, 2013). Evidence suggests that variability in recruiting suitably experienced teachers to mentor roles, providing appropriate training and quality assurance has led to calls for a more rigorous mentor recruitment process that increases the status of mentors (Carter 2015). In response to this, the role of the mentor is fundamental to the most recent Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Core Content Framework (Department for Education (DfE) 2019a) and to the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019b) in England which state that student teachers and early career teachers should be supported in their development by ‘seeking challenge, feedback and critique from mentors and other colleagues in an open and trusting working environment’ (DfE 2019a, 29).

Applying a communities of practice model to teacher training

A ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, 74) is defined as one in which group learning occurs through joint ventures that require members of the community to work together to achieve a common goal through interaction and reflection. New members joining established communities of practice are referred to as ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, 64). The quality of group learning is determined by the formation of relationships, commonality of learning goals and the extent of their engagement with community activities (Lave and Wenger 1991). However, a community of practice without shared goals, approaches to practice and shared priorities can render the community ‘dysfunctional’ (Wenger 1999, 98) and may diminish the quality and extent of the learning.

The previous sections highlight the importance of mentor support and guidance in the development of teacher identity within this context. On one level, the Lave and Wenger (1991) model of a community of practice suggests broad relevance to the teacher training environment and presents a compelling theoretical perspective. This original communities of practice model has been applied to primary school settings Maynard (2001); Woodgate-Jones (2012) and Solomon et al. (2017); a secondary school setting (e.g. Johnston 2016) and a medical student context (e.g. Cornford and Carrington 2006). However, in a study into workplace learning, Fuller et al. (2005) recognised that whilst secondary school student teachers can be regarded as legitimate peripheral participants in their placement schools, the significance of ‘interrelationships’ and individual ‘dispositions’ (63) were something only partially addressed in the original Lave and Wenger (1991) work. More recently, Johnston (2016) also suggested that the secondary school teacher training context might also be considered a community of practice albeit with the risk that the student teachers lack the time to become fully immersed in the wider, functioning school community. Cornford and Carrington (2006) question the original notion of *legitimacy* of participants on the periphery when applied to how medical students on placement in a general practice setting negotiate the complex social relationships

within that community. Time constraints, hierarchies and individualism can also present an additional challenge to school community of practice settings (Kerno 2008). Where there are differences in professional expectations and learning goals this can result in teachers being reluctant to accept student teachers into their classrooms further questioning whether the student teachers can be regarded as legitimate (Sandvik et al. 2019). This focus on limitations to the original model offers a more realistic, pragmatic evolution of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of organisational stability whereby newcomers learning would ultimately tend towards the organisational norm. Indeed, Fuller et al. (2005) suggest there is a need for organisations to welcome newcomers as individuals with their own knowledge, skills and attitudes that can equally influence and shape the community they seek to enter. Hughes (2007) suggests that it is important to test the theoretical model *in* practice rather than accept it as a recommendation and template *for* practice.

Research questions

1. What is the lived experience of student teachers on an HEI-led PGCE (Primary) teacher training programme, and how does this influence their sense of identity and their motivation to join the teaching profession?
2. To what extent can a primary school setting be considered a community of practice in the PGCE(Primary) teacher training context?

Methods

This study is based on a typical English HEI-led model of teacher training that comprises an initial short two-week period of school placement in autumn that increases to a final ten-week placement in the summer term. The level of student teacher autonomy increases over the programme with a 50% timetable comprising periods of small-group teaching, short whole-class inputs and observations of experienced teachers at the outset, up towards an 80% timetable by the end. Each participant was assigned a mentor for each school placement.

Mentors had all attended the mandatory half-day university induction session; any follow-on mentor training is recommended but not enforced by the university.

An important consideration in deciding the design for this study was that different student teachers might well have different interpretations and reactions to their experiences brought about by their own dispositions (Raffo and Hall 2006). A case study approach to the research design applied the notion that the ‘situated nature’ (Elliot and Lukeš 2008, 112) of the researcher and participants helped to create a narrative that elucidates the ‘contemporary phenomenon’ (Yin 2014, 16) and ‘complex relationship between factors’ (Denscombe 2014, 5) of the educational context within which the research took place.

The method of analysis used to determine the lived experience of the participants was based on a descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi 2009) a deeper, psychological understanding of experience is generated from the ‘conscious’ (4) perspective of an individual. Phenomenology establishes the nature of human experience from individuals’ perspectives (Spinelli, 2005) and ‘how people describe things and experiences through their senses’ (Patton 2002, 105). Individual student teacher accounts of their experiences and a descriptive phenomenological approach to the analysis of the data provided the opportunity to establish the collective voice of the student teachers and an insight into their experiences.

Institutional ethical approval was gained before data collection took place. Participants provided their informed consent before each interview and were assured of their anonymity and right to withdraw their data up to the point of analysis.

Participants (n=8) (Table 1) were volunteers recruited from the whole cohort (n= 147) PGCE (Primary) student teachers. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted at the beginning of the programme, and then after each of the three subsequent periods of school placement, the first of which lasted for two weeks in the October/November, followed by five weeks in January/February in the same school and then ten weeks between April and June in a

different school. During the post-placement interviews, the participants were invited to report on their experiences during their school placements in terms of how well their expectations for the placement had been met and how their experience had contributed to their sense of progress.

As part of the phenomenological approach, prior-knowledge and prior judgements by the researcher should be ‘bracketed off’ (Denscombe 2014, 99) so that the integrity of the phenomenon can be maintained. In this study, bracketing of interviewer prior assumptions and judgements was achieved at the data collection stage by participants being encouraged to report freely on their most recent school placement. A constructivist approach to interviewing was adopted and avoided ‘irrelevant, superficial, or forced questions’ (Charmaz 2006, 32). Interjection from the interviewer took place only when clarification and elaboration of certain points was needed to gain a fuller picture of the experience. This provided the ‘thick description’ (Ponterotto 2009, 543) and a feel for the ‘cognitive and emotive state of the interviewee’ (547) necessary for the subsequent descriptive phenomenological analysis.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant name (alias)	Gender	Age (years)	Interviews
Andrew	Male	23	4
Chloe	Female	23	3
Edward	Male	24	4
Amy	Female	25	3
David	Male	27	4
Karen	Female	27	4
Jane	Female	43	3
Susan	Female	44	1

Interviews generated 620 minutes of audio recording which were transcribed prior to analysis. The interviews lasted between 15 and 50 minutes. Of the eight participants who engaged with the study, Susan dropped out before engaging in any school placements (after one interview) and Jane dropped out after the second placement (after three interviews).

Findings

In the first stage of the phenomenological analysis, transcribed interviews were read and reread to identify the objects or events that prompted a psychological or emotional reaction to the participants' experiences. Further bracketing helped mitigate the risk of imposing assumptions about the different participants' experiences by taking the accounts at face value and not ascribing meaning to them (Giorgi 2009). Common focuses of situations or objects that initiated psychological or emotional responses were established through phenomenological reduction and collated into nine thematic statements (Table 2). The final stage in the phenomenological analysis was to take the thematic statements and to determine the 'invariant psychological meaning' (Giorgi 2009, 100), the 'psychological essences' of the experience (103). This produced three phenomenological themes: 1. Building relationships; 2. Constructing a teacher identity; and 3. Reconciling personal identities and values. These represented the collective voice of the participants and gave sense of their 'lived experiences' (Cresswell 2007, 57). It is important to note that despite the emergence of the three themes they cannot be considered in isolation, and this is indicative of the complexity of this human experience. A colleague who was not part of the research checked the thematic analysis against the thematic statements and phenomenological themes using extracts from the interview transcripts (n=150). Parity was achieved in 93% of cases with 7% of statements requiring further discussion before full agreement was reached.

Table 2. Synthesis of the thematic statements into the three themes

Thematic Statements	Themes
Relationships with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • peers • host teachers • mentors • other school staff 	Building relationships
Opportunities to teach and workload Quality of feedback Quality of support and guidance	Constructing a teacher identity
Expectations Personal identity Values Beliefs	Reconciling personal identity and values

Details of the three themes that emerged follow with examples provided from participant accounts.

Theme 1: Relationship formation

Relationships with class teachers and mentors were a particular focus. Jane spoke about feeling ‘apprehensive’ about forming relationships with staff at her placement school particularly when her class teacher had not been welcoming. Jane also explained that she felt disadvantaged because she did not have regular contact with her peers and did not have a ‘support network to ask anything’ making her feel lonely. She also found that not having anything in common with her younger, male mentor meant that she felt isolated and ‘in the wrong place’.

David described having ‘no relationship’ with his class teacher in his second placement and explained that ‘she didn’t ask me anything about my home life and didn’t really speak to me throughout the day’. This left him ‘guessing at every turn’ about how to teach. He spoke of receiving negative feedback about his first formal lesson observation. His recount of a

meeting between him and the headteacher and mentor highlights the power differential at play as he describes his recollection of this:

I had my intervention meeting with her [the mentor] and the headteacher the day after I had had that first appraisal and things weren't going well. I sat there in the office with them both just sort of like attacking me. It was quite awful really; it was really bad. I sat there while they basically told me how rubbish I was and that I wasn't doing enough work, I wasn't doing this, I wasn't doing that; Why aren't you doing this? Why aren't you doing that? ...and it just made me feel like a complete and utter idiot.

Edward's recount mirrored those of Jane and David when he said that he got the impression that he was not wanted in the classroom and had not been offered the support that he felt he needed. His mentor told him that he was not allowed to seek help from other teachers in the school. The effect of this was to make Edward feel like he was 'blindly fumbling through' becoming angry, disappointed and confused. It was only in his final placement that Edward spoke more positively feeling like he 'really meshed' with the staff there. Amy spoke of feeling 'awkward' about the close-knit relationships between parents and staff at the small village school where she was placed. She felt the need to distance herself and maintain a 'professional boundary' but accepted that this was 'probably just because they know each other so well and they've grown up in the community together'.

This reported difficulty in relationship formation led to some participants feeling unable to respond and ask for help. David felt that interactions with his mentor made him 'feel stupid' but he 'just sat there and took it'. Karen explained how she felt that her class teacher viewed her as 'naïve' and 'an uppity university student'. She had the sense that she was 'stepping on her teacher's toes and had to do as she was told'. Chloe too felt that she had difficulty forming a relationship with her classroom support assistant who she felt regarded her as someone who was 'stealing her children'. In contrast, Andrew and Amy felt that they *had* been able to build

good relationships with their mentors in their placements and this had contributed to their sense of progress. Andrew also had a sense of improving relationships over time when he reflected on his first placement and said

Looking back, I can appreciate now that the staff were maybe quite cautious with us at first, however, because now we've been able to strike up a good relationship, it's been really enjoyable.

This theme highlighted that the formation of relationships evoked both positive and negative emotions impacting not only on participants' sense of belonging within both the classroom context and their place within the wider school community. The interview data indicated that having the time to establish meaningful relationships was an important factor but there was also an expectation that the class teachers and the mentors would be enthusiastic and welcoming; something that was not always felt to be the case.

Theme 2: Developing a teacher identity

In part, the interview data suggested that teacher identity was measured against the participants' own self-judged baseline and this brought into focus their different support needs. Decisions that the participants made about the quality of feedback and support that they received impacted directly on how they viewed their experience.

The opportunity to teach was a key feature for all participants and a lack of opportunity created negative feelings that impacted on levels of confidence and sense of agency. Jane explained that her opportunity to teach was limited:

We spent quite a lot of time watching, which was quite interesting, and we learned a lot through that, but I felt I really wanted to get my teeth in having a go; I felt like I was going to go back having had a very minimal experience of teaching. I think I could empathise; we'd been put in her class and she didn't want us there, she was under pressure herself to maintain her children's performance.

Jane's lack of teaching experience meant that she found the increased workload in her second school experience overwhelming and explained that her confidence took a 'real nosedive'. This lack of confidence meant that Jane was nervous during her lesson observations and her response to receiving poor feedback was that 'it almost completely finished me'.

Time was also clearly a factor in helping to develop teacher identity but as Karen suggested, despite feeling a sense of achievement, she compared her final placement with her previous ones and felt that it had been more 'business-like' this time and 'I forgot how to enjoy myself'. Amy felt very well supported by her mentor and they got on well together, but she felt like 'four weeks isn't enough to get your head round it all. I was just getting to grips with it and then I'm back at university again!'.

Participant accounts revealed that those who were given a variety of different opportunities, and the flexibility to experiment, felt trusted and confident in their developing practice. Aligned with this, when feedback was deemed to be useful this contributed to an improvement in teaching quality, and a positive reaction to the experience. Consequently, the sense of teacher identity increased, and participants felt increasingly able to take control of the classroom environment. For example, Andrew felt that he had made progress because he felt 'trusted' to explore and trial different teaching approaches which was a 'real confidence boost' and helped him to increasingly view himself 'less as a student teacher' and more 'a part of the team'. Both Amy and Chloe experienced opportunities for shared learning with staff in the school. Chloe had taken the lead during phonics sessions and been observed by a member of staff inexperienced in phonics teaching and Amy took the opportunity to share resources with her class teacher which helped them to feel valued in the school.

In contrast, where the level of feedback and support regarding teaching quality did not meet expectations, negative feelings ensued that influenced their view of themselves as a teacher:

I think my mentor was trying not to be too critical, but I needed something more specific. She said I was very organised, but my mum could have told her that! I felt feedback was too vague and generic, I didn't find it very useful. (Karen)

I was in a Year 5, Year 6 class for my introductory placement and found it quite difficult to get used to the level that they were working at - I don't think I had enough input from the class teacher as to what I should be doing; what the children can and can't do. The mentor just looked at me and said 'you should be looking this up for yourself, and I was once again feeling like an idiot. (David)

Just not very helpful, overly critical of everything. The whole time not a single positive comment. My mentor was unapproachable and didn't really offer any advice about how I could develop. I also felt I couldn't ask the teaching assistant for help because when they're in that position, a bit older than you and they've been doing the job for 20 years or more, it's awkward. I was slightly angry at first but now I'm just really disappointed to have failed my placement. (Edward)

Theme 3: Reconciling personal identity and values

At the beginning of the programme, the participants had a view about how much experience they had as a teacher and how well this would prepare them to teach. Comparison with previous experience as a teaching assistant or more informal experience provided a baseline to measure against.

The experience of working in a school and being a teaching assistant and having to deal with a child with a problem is useful preparation. (Andrew)

The skills of being a teaching assistant are quite different to those of a teacher, but it does give me a little bit of confidence to stand in front of the children. (Jane)

I have many hours experience as a parent helper but I'm just hoping that I get on with the adults in the placement school. I think I've got a good chance of because I'm quite easy to get on with, but I still believe there's a certain amount of personality lottery involved. (Susan)

Ultimately, Susan felt unable to reconcile the expectations of the programme against her parental role and the responsibility towards her family that she held because of this. Similarly, Jane also experienced a conflict with her personal identity that went beyond her

family responsibilities to also include her beliefs about her own attributes and skills. Jane's notion of the reality of teaching made her feel that she could not reconcile these differences causing her to lose confidence and motivation to persist with the programme.

My whole family life was falling to pieces and when problems with relationships with staff occurred this was really just a self-fulfilling prophecy because of the way I am, but obviously this is a very personal thing and somebody else might have coped fine. (Jane)

The extent of these reflections following school placements revealed that some of the participants were beginning to feel like they had more control over their experiences. Karen began to realise that she could say, 'I'm not that person, and that's not how I'm going to be' when faced being told by her mentor that she should have shouted at a child for misbehaving. The self-reported ability to deal with challenging situations also revealed differences between the participants. Both Andrew and Chloe felt that they worked best when there was a certain amount of pressure with Andrew saying that he was 'not a flapper' and Chloe saying that she was 'not fazed' when situations became difficult. Other responses gave an indication that self-perception of their own attributes shaped their reactions:

I know I'm not much of a talker, so it made me close off even more when I felt got at by my mentor. (David)

I usually get on well with people which is why I felt confused and unhappy when I didn't get on with my mentor. (Edward)

However, despite David's and Edward's challenges in their early placements, David reflected on his experience saying that by the end he felt like he was "a ten times better teacher" as he moved into his final school placement. Having failed his early placement, Edward said he was determined to succeed because he felt that he *had* developed as a teacher and 'felt more positive' moving into his next placement.

This theme illustrates how interwoven the participants' thoughts and feelings were about themselves and how this shaped their views about the quality of their experiences on the

programme. Interview data indicated participants' pre-conceived ideas and beliefs about what primary schools and being a primary school teacher were like led them to construct ideas and expectations against which they compared their experiences. The extent to which the participants came to terms with and reconciled the difference in, and challenges to, their personal identity and values resulted in differing levels of reassurance, confidence and of determination to persist and be successful. Whilst each participant exhibited differences in what they valued, be it family related or from a more personal perspective, feeling valued by the schools was an important feature.

Strong, collaborative relationships help build student teacher resilience and, as Amy and Andrew explained, where relationships were positive and reciprocal, they felt welcomed by the school and well-supported (see Hobson et al. 2009; Le Cornu 2009). In keeping with Hascher, Cocard and Poser (2004), during periods when student teachers are performing poorly in the classroom, they can experience periods of distress and frustration and this study has shown that positive relationships are even more important at these times. As Jane, Edward and David report, when relationships did not address their emotional and psychological needs, low levels of self-esteem and feelings of isolation and insecurity can follow that then impact negatively on their teacher identity and wellbeing (Sewell et al. 2009). However, personal resolve and determination can overcome this and lead to a successful outcome as shown by David and Edward.

The notion of teacher identity is important and when the student teachers had a sense of this, they used it as a measure of their progress towards becoming a teacher. Having the opportunity to stand up in front of the class and teach a lesson was deemed by Jane to be particularly important and it is this exposure to teaching practices that is an important precursor to the development of teacher identity (Flores and Day 2006; Dahlgren and Chiriac 2009). The perception that mentor feedback is unhelpful and fails to address student teachers' weaknesses

and needs risks not adequately preparing them for their future role as a teacher which then contributes to negative feelings about the training (Karen, Edward and David). The quality and extent of the interactions with mentors is influential in the student teacher experience and is viewed positively when the feedback is thought to be constructive but challenging (Andrew and Chloe). Without regular and honest feedback on their performance student teachers felt confused and sometimes angry (Karen and Jane) (c.f. Hyland and Lo 2006; Valencia et al. 2009). Jane's recount told of inappropriate or inadequate support mechanisms that then risked her continued motivation by diminishing her levels of self-efficacy and providing fewer opportunities for the development of coping strategies (e.g. Davis and Fantozzi 2016).

A perceived mismatch between student teachers' and mentors' goals through poor or inappropriate styles of mentoring and a reluctance to hand over responsibility for the classroom further impacted Edward and David's self-efficacy and teacher identity. Conflicting priorities brought on by what Jane perceived as her class teachers' own performance management targets highlighted the tensions that can exist between students as *teachers* and their needs as *learners* (see Skinner 2010; Hamman and Romano 2009; Hall and McGinty 2015). Furthermore, a lack of mentor experience, and lack of mentor training, can lead to further role confusion between the student teacher (e.g. Edward and David) and the mentors resulting in inconsistencies and ineffectiveness in the giving of feedback or support (e.g. Hobson 2010). Perceptions that workload is excessive further contributed to Jane's high levels of anxiety. Furthermore, Jane also indicated that when emotional and psychological support was not forthcoming, the additional burden of domestic and family life was isolating and overwhelming and she felt that the situation then became untenable (Tang, Cheng, and Cheng 2014). The ability to proactively seek help can have a positive impact on progress although poor relationships with school staff can lead to reluctance to approach them and discuss problems (David and Edward). However, whilst *in the moment*, student teachers find it difficult to see a way through the negativity and

hostility, remaining focussed on the goal of becoming a teacher can be an important contributor to continued motivation as both David and Edward reported (see Reichl et al. 2014).

Participant accounts in this study revealed that they were conscious of being *newcomers* in the schools. However, more in-depth analysis showed that they were very much aware that they were not going there as new *permanent* members of staff and this drew attention to the transient nature of their experiences. The short, temporary nature of their placements limited the sense of belonging that they felt and made them feel awkward and reluctant to adopt a *teacher* persona that might upset or offend the class teacher or mentor (Karen). This reinforces the difference in goals between those of teacher training and those of the established school community; the education of the children. Inadequate recognition of this can result in poor relationship formation and limited engagement in a community of practice that should benefit both student teachers and school staff (Ambrosetti and Dekkers 2010).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to detail and exemplify the lived experience of a group of PGCE (Primary) student teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their personal experiences during their teacher training programme. A descriptive phenomenological approach to the analysis led to the identification of three themes that represented their *collective voice* relating to their lived experience. The student teachers' accounts gave an insight into their teacher training and showed this to be a complex mix of both external and personal influences that contributed to the extent to which they felt they belonged and could make a contribution to the teaching community or feel like outsiders.

The three themes draw attention to the interrelationship between 'the ideal self and the actual self' (Lauriala and Kukkonen 2005, 213) in this context. The student teachers measured themselves against the expectations and demands of their mentors and their own personal

expectations and ideals of what they felt being a teacher means. Of importance here is that relationship formation came more easily and naturally to some student teachers than others and could also be dependent on context. This reconciliation of the demands of both professional and personal identities added to the notion that identity orientation can be a dynamic and tenuous process (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Hsieh 2015).

Having established the overall collective voice, the different individual experiences were considered and aligned against the Lave and Wenger (1991) community of practice theoretical framework. As Hughes (2007) suggests, it is important to consider the strength of the model *in practice* rather than taking it at face value and on some individual levels there were elements where the student teachers' experiences resonated with the original model. For example, the student teachers' perceptions of how their individual needs were recognised and addressed by the school communities contributed to the extent to which they felt they were *learning*. Strong relationships with their mentors and opportunities to experiment and adapt teaching practices helped the student teachers to overcome adversity and gain a sense of professional belonging. Where the challenges and expectations could not be resolved this led to a decrease in motivation and subsequent withdrawal from the programme. Mentors were shown to play a pivotal role in the student teachers' experiences, but it was where the mentoring approach was deemed to be open and supportive of the goals of the student teachers that the experience was viewed more positively.

A subsequent focus on individual accounts indicated elements of the experience that highlighted limitations of the Lave and Wenger (1991) model:

Willingness of the community to embrace change

Where the development of teacher identity appeared to be influenced by the willingness of school staff to embrace change, this was received positively by the student teachers. The

professional capacity of mentors to induct the student teachers into the school community but also learn from what they had to offer challenged the community of practice notion of organisational stability and newcomer learning as tending towards the community norm (Fuller et al. 2005). Where relationships were strong and the mentoring approach was that of a *co-learner*, this led to a positive response by the student teachers and their sense of belonging increased. In contrast, where the style of mentoring was indicative of a ‘mimetic approach’ (Valencia et al. 2009, 311) this was not felt to contribute to the student teachers’ learning even though this would support the idea that learning tends toward the community norm.

Legitimate peripheral participants

The *legitimacy* of the student teachers as *newcomers* in the school communities is also a consideration. As Cornford and Carrington (2006) suggest, there needs to be a willingness by the established members of the community to accept newcomers to enable the formation of relationships and shared goals. However, some student teacher accounts challenged this. Findings revealed that where the student teachers’ perception was that their mentors did not have the time to support them, adopted a hierarchical approach to mentoring or were ambivalent to student teacher needs this limited the extent to which the student teachers felt welcomed and accepted (Sandvik et al. 2019). Some participants’ perceptions of a lack of acknowledgement of them as individuals with pre-existing skills or specific needs further challenges the concept of them being regarded as legitimate participants in this context (Fuller et al. 2005; Cornford and Carrington 2006). Furthermore, the student teachers’ inexperience might also be perceived as a threat to mentors’ own professional performance and challenge the notion of legitimacy and the extent to which they are welcomed (Kerno 2008).

Dysfunctionality

Whilst challenges to the accepted community of practice theory might be considered from the perspective of dysfunctionality (Wenger 1999), this might go some way to explain Jane's decision to drop out of the programme because of her sense that learning had been impeded by her experiences. However, this does not explain Edward's and David's outcomes who were both successful in completing the programme. They both readily acknowledged that despite the hierarchical nature of their mentors' approach, they felt they had learned and become better teachers because of this. Therefore, findings from this study have suggested that dysfunctionality within a teaching community of practice does not necessarily inhibit learning and the development of a teacher identity although it might.

So, whilst establishing the collective voice of the student teachers' experiences through a descriptive phenomenological approach to analysis suggests a broad alignment of teaching training experiences within a primary school community of practice, a more granular focus on individual experiences (Fuller et al. 2005) might suggest otherwise. By testing the community of practice theory *in practice* rather adopting it as a prescriptive framework of expectations *for practice* this study has mirrored some of that reported in other education and training contexts (e.g. Fuller et al. 2005; Cornford and Carrington 2006). However, it has also illustrated that in a primary school setting, the complexity of relationships, identities and challenges experienced by some student teachers does not fully support the Lave and Wenger (1991) theoretical model, despite student teacher learning taking place. This contrasts the findings of other studies in primary school settings (e.g. Maynard 2001; Woodgate-Jones 2012; Solomon et al. 2017) that did not take this into account. The personal circumstances and dispositions of the student teachers also appears to be of importance in determining how well the communities of practice model applies to this context.

Limitations and implications for practice

This qualitative study was based on the accounts of eight primary-phase student teachers engaged in a one-year postgraduate teacher training programme and whilst analysis arrived at a collective voice for these participants, it is not generalisable beyond this. A consideration of the lived experience of the mentors and class teachers involved in teacher training would help to provide a more complete picture and further test the applicability of the community of practice theoretical framework to the primary school teacher training context.

However, this study has highlighted that student teachers' goals of becoming a teacher can be impacted by the quality of relationships, opportunities to teach and different priorities within the school settings. Support for emotional wellbeing may go some way towards helping student teachers to reconcile their own internal struggles and personal values and responsibilities. Through dedicated training opportunities, support for mentors to give greater focus on identifying and being sensitive to individual student teacher perceptions, their sense of teacher identity and their personal beliefs and values may help them to consider how shared, reciprocal learning goals can benefit both the student teachers and the school settings.

The data collection method adopted in this study highlighted that regular feedback opportunities throughout the teacher training experience can provide the space and opportunity for student teachers to report and reflect on their experiences. Careful monitoring of the quality of student teacher/mentor relationships might help to anticipate and address instances where there is a breakdown in relationships or a failure to develop good relationships in the first place. In this way, individual student teachers' needs can be addressed to help reinforce their developing teacher identity and to enter the teaching community with enthusiasm and optimism.

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