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Diverse placement experiences and professional identity development. Perceptions of trainee teachers based within the post-compulsory sector

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Abstract

This article explores the experiences of trainee teachers on placement which forms their professional identity. This article focusses on trainee teachers based in the Further Education (FE) and Skills sector, in England.

By conducting a qualitative study using one to one interviews and using the reflections of trainee teachers after placement it was possible to explore the diversity of experiences and evaluate the impact their placement had on their identity as a teacher. The latest Ofsted (2019) guidelines clearly outline the judgements made about the quality of the placement setting in terms of how well the trainee is prepared for employment in their chosen sector. There is a concern that all sectors are judged against the same criteria, despite significant differences between them.

This research set out to determine if one placement within the FE and Skills sector provides sufficient access to diversity of experience, or whether an additional placement should be made a compulsory part of the programme. The research findings exposed a number of similarities in the way that diversity had positively impacted on teacher identity development, despite the participants being placed within very different settings. The authors discovered a clear link between diversity within the placement experience and the development of teacher identity. This article presents the argument for rich diverse placement experiences as a way not only to satisfy Ofsted, but to enable trainee teachers to meet professional teaching standards (ETF, 2014) and be prepared for future employment in this varied sector.

Keywords

Professional development, Professional Identity, Initial Teacher Education, Further Education and Skills Sector, Trainee Teacher, Diverse Placement

Link to Article

<https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p=12896>

Introduction

The different education sectors in England are currently governed by separate bodies underpinned by their own professional standards specifically aimed to meet their particular needs (DfE, 2011; ETF, 2014; Advance HE, 2019). Initial Teacher Education programmes are aligned to these professional standards and trainee teachers are expected to successfully meet these by the end of their training.

It is widely believed that the context a trainee teacher is placed within for their teaching experience has a big impact on their development (Orr, 2012). The Department for Education (DfE) has an expectation that trainee teachers within the primary and secondary sector will be provided with a range of experiences during their placement.

“Trainee teachers... need to teach children and young people in their specified age range, from different backgrounds, as well as gaining experience of different approaches to teaching and to school organisation and management” (DfE, 2019).

The DfE believes that rich variety will enable trainee teachers to fully meet their professional standards (DfE, 2011). However, trainee teachers within the Further Education (FE) and Skills sector are only required to undertake one placement during the programme. The depth and breadth of experience offered by the placement may be limited due to the type of provider, particularly within community or offender learning. The DfE recognises this, particularly for some subject areas, but also defines flexibility in terms of subject area as a way to provide alternative solutions for this.

“Trainees that are training to teach a subject that is always or predominantly taught in only one age range (for example post 16) may need to demonstrate subject knowledge in a related subject if they don’t have the opportunity to teach their subject across the full age range of training” (DfE, 2019).

The argument for diversity in terms of numbers of placements that the DfE make, is based on the premise that by teaching only one subject area, at one provider, the trainee is limited in their experience and therefore unable to satisfy all elements of the professional standards for teachers. One solution is to require all trainee teachers working in the post-fourteen year old sector is to undertake an additional placement in a different context, similar to the primary and secondary training requirements where trainee teachers complete two and sometimes even three different placements (DfE, 2019). The purpose of this study is to examine whether this variety of opportunity enables trainee teachers to fully satisfy the Education and Training Foundation professional standards (ETF, 2014), or whether they already have diversity of experience from one placement, and a second placement is nothing more than a 'tick box' exercise.

Review of current literature

Since the introduction of simplified and re-worked professional standards by the ETF in 2014, post-compulsory teacher education programmes adopted a curriculum which provided opportunities for trainee teachers to meet these standards, within the diverse FE and Skills sector in England. Previous curriculum reform in 2007, was criticised for being over-prescriptive and using features of compulsory teacher education programme with little regard for the needs or challenges of the post-compulsory sector (Thompson and Robinson, 2008).

There is a growing concern in the FE and Skills sector that OfSTED applied the same strategies and criteria used to inspect the compulsory school sector without regard to the very different nature of the FE and Skills sector. OfSTED (2019) continued to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach when inspecting initial teacher education provision across the three sectors: primary, secondary, and post-fourteen (the FE and Skills sector). This fails to recognise or appreciate the complexities of the FE and Skills sector or the challenges inherent in curriculum design and delivery due to the very diverse nature that exists in the sector. For trainee teachers this is reflected in the different levels of prior experience needed to teach, their required subject knowledge, their teaching experience and the learning needs of the individual trainee teachers in the sector (Lucas et al., 2006; Burnell, 2017).

The development of trainee teachers is shaped by a number of factors but key to developing their identity is the placement that a trainee teacher is required to undertake. This can aid, or restrict their development (Clarke, 2007; Flores and Dale, 2006; Orr, 2013). Within the school sector, all trainees must undertake two placements

and teach across a range of ages (Gov.uk, 2019). However, trainee teachers within the post-fourteen sector are currently only required to undertake their placement with one provider, in order to meet the professional standards (ETF, 2014; Gov.uk, 2019). This single experience can provide a lack of the range of contextual experiences which is assured for compulsory sector trainee teachers.

The curriculum for trainee teachers, according to Osborne, et al., (2007) should provide a relevant grounding in knowledge, as well as an opportunity to test given knowledge in situ. Trainee teachers also often draw from their subject specialism and prior experiences to inspire and engage their own learners, which means that their teaching approach will be influenced at the beginning of their training due to the limitations of their previous experiences (Flores and Day, 2006; Osborne et al., 2007; Timoštšuk and Ugaste, 2010).

Professional identity is a form of social identity defined by Tajfel and Turner (1979), which states, that the individual adapts the behaviours and beliefs of the group they assign themselves and feel they belong to. Through experiencing different responsibilities and roles in the teaching profession the trainee teacher develops their teacher identity (Karousiou, Hajisoteriou, and Angelides, 2019).

Placements can be “very persuasive, very demanding, and in most cases, very restrictive” for trainee teachers (Beijaard, Mejer and Verloop, 2003, p110). Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) argue that the culture of the organisation and existing colleagues are critical, but they also recognise that the trainee’s own values inform their professional development, in response to a dynamic learning environment. As they interpret and make sense of interactions that happen between themselves, the learners and the rest of the teaching team they begin to develop their own personal teaching identity. Beijaard, Mejer and Verloop (2003) suggest:

“...being a teacher is not static, but responsive to the wider context and an interpretation of the social processes inside their classrooms. Thus, but not necessarily for all teachers, classroom interactions can play an important part in identity formation and re-formation (:971).

Schepens and Vlerick (2009) also argue that a dynamic sense of self develops through the interpretation and re-interpretation of situations. The trainee teacher needs to be active within this “tacitly acquired knowledge” (: 126). Ultimately, this leads to changes in behaviour, competencies and even beliefs, which was also acknowledged by Flores and Day (2006) and Clarke (2009), highlighting the metacognitive processes in relation to trainee teacher’s own practise. Moreover, many researchers postulate that most

trainee teachers begin to identify themselves as teachers during the teacher training period (Clarke, 2009; Flores and Day, 2006; Sallı et al., 2018; Wright, Loughlin and Hall, 2018)

An effective PGCE programme should provide opportunities for trainees to engage in personal discovery, something defined as individual agency, and have a degree of social interaction (Combs, 1972). According to Tickle (2000), this provides an opportunity for “the synthesis of holistic practice” (: 88) leading to the holistic development of professional identity. This occurs through interaction between the trainee teacher and their colleagues at the placement, which is seen as an important element (Lucas and Unwin, 2009).

Research by Lucas (2013) further strengthened the argument that communication with the wider team at the placement allowed trainee teachers to learn different work practices and receive guidance and support from other colleagues. However, they also reported trainee teachers often experienced minimal mentor involvement and restricted access to the wider team. Furthermore, research by Orr (2012) identified “isolation” across the FE sector due to the high job demands, which restricted the existing teachers’ sociability. As a result, communication with colleagues at the placement may be limited due to this lack of free time leading to narrower experiences of diversity in this respect.

Research undertaken by Eraut (1994) discovered that professional identity is shaped through personal experience where problems have been encountered and reflected on in order to have significance on current and future teaching performance. Therefore, he argued “...professional knowledge is constructed through experience and its nature depends on the cumulative acquisition, selection and interpretation of that experience” (: 20).

This correlates with research undertaken by Winch (2006) who identified that a critical element when making informed and rational judgements resides in the ability to predict possible consequences. Having sufficient information about the subject and a degree of autonomy, makes this possible.

Being autonomous requires knowledge and skill on the part of the autonomous individual. It also requires permission to make and implement reasonable or worthwhile choices. But it further requires appropriate social conditions (: 11).

Having access to conducive social conditions, such as equality of power compared to established teachers and access to resources can be restrictive for a trainee teacher

due to the nature of their stage of development. The trainee teacher must have the opportunity to develop autonomy through decision-making. However, according to Winch (2006), this process also involves the development of the self, both in terms of knowledge and awareness. They must also be able to construct their own meaning, knowledge and self-direct their learning (Gilar et. Al., 2007).

The FE and skills sector can be an unstable and unpredictable environment for trainee teachers and in order for trainee teachers to succeed in this sector in the future, it is important to provide the opportunity for them to develop autonomy during their PGCE (Orr and Simmons, 2011). Dixon et al. (2010) also argue "...a smooth, problem-free and incrementally introduced placement may be a false preparation for the erratic and hectic environment of FE" (: 391). They suggest that the PGCE should equip trainees with the skills, knowledge and ability to critique their individual experiences of placement. However, this level of reflection is a skilled activity and develops through the programme as the trainee develops their ability to 'notice', a concept explored by Seidel and Sturmer (2014). They define professional vision as "...the ability to notice and interpret relevant features of classroom situations" (Seidel and Sturmer, 2014: 741). They argue that pre-service teachers do not have the ability to effectively direct attention to the relevant areas of pedagogical practice, within the learning environment, in order to make informed decisions about their practice. This is particularly challenging for new teachers, as the learning environment is a complex, dynamic learning environment. They argue that pre-service teachers "...lack the elaborated and integrated knowledge structures that would allow them to link observed situations with knowledge about teaching and learning" (: 746).

This paper presents the argument that the current experience of trainee teachers within the post-compulsory sector, can be sufficiently diverse within one placement. One placement can provide access to a rich variety of opportunities, including subject knowledge enhancement across levels; experience of diverse learner needs; and opportunity for research-informed practice. It aims to explore the impact that the current placement experiences have on the professional identity development of trainee teachers. This will be achieved by focusing on the views of trainee teachers working in the FE and Skills context, thus presenting a personal perspective.

Methodology

The primary data was collected from a small group of trainee teachers, undertaking their teacher training in different subject pathways at the same university. They were based for their main placement experience in a variety of settings, within the FE and

Skills sector. There was an expectation that the participating group of trainee teachers had undertaken a second placement, of their choice, within a contrasting context. Initially, six trainees participated in a focus group where they shared their experiences through the use of semi-structured questions. The initial individual interview plan is shown in Appendix One: One to One Interviews, and the initial focus group plan is shown in Appendix Two: Focus Group Questions, with the researchers developing further questions from the responses. These were transcribed and used in the data analysis described below.

After focus group participation, the participants were invited to be interviewed on a one to one basis. The findings from the focus group informed the individual interview questions. As the participants self-selected, a smaller sample size of only three participants was used, which is recognised by the researchers as a limitation of the study. However, the evidence from the interviews was analysed, providing rich qualitative data. According to Brinkmann (2013) and Saldaña (2011) the depth and richness of the data obtained through interviews determine the quality of the data.

The importance of reflection is strongly emphasised as a critical part of the PGCE programme (Baxter Magolda, 2003), as it encourages trainees to examine their classroom practice and pedagogic development. Once the data was collected, thematic coding identified recurring and dominant themes in the trainee teachers' responses. This coding happened as part of the qualitative data collection and after as part of the analysis of the emerging themes (Saldaña, 2013).

Qualitative data is defined by William and Brown (2009) as a process which aims to measure the value of something. The trainee teachers were encouraged to access a range of diverse opportunities, both within the placement organisation and as an alternative provision. It was anticipated that they would develop their own practice and their professional identity in light of this experience. This study explored the way in which their development occurred and the impact that the diverse placement experiences had in influencing this.

Ethical considerations

This research followed the ethical procedure endorsed by the researchers' university, where the researchers work, as well as the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research provided by the British Educational Research Association (2018) was followed fully. An information sheet was provided to all participants, which gave detailed information about the research being undertaken. All participants were clear

about the aims of the research, that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any point.

In order for the research to provide validity and rigour, the intention was to collect data from a range of participants to reflect diversity in terms of race, age, gender and context. It was anticipated that this would provide rich data from which comparisons could be drawn. However, the participants self-selected so this was somewhat out of the researchers' control. To protect the participants' anonymity and ensure confidentiality fictional names as James, Natalie and Mike, were attributed to the participants for the purpose of this study.

Analysis of teachers' responses

The focus group were asked to discuss the variety and diversity of different experiences within the teaching environment of their placement and reflect on the development of their professional identity as a teacher through these experiences. Additionally, the trainee teachers were asked whether completing one or two placements was more beneficial in terms of diversity of experiences and meeting the professional standards. A standard thematic approach to analysis was used which searched for keywords. The emerging themes were: teacher identity, diversity, culture of the organisation and subject specialism. The findings of the focus group informed the individual interview questions.

The one to one interviews

Context

The three participants undertook their teaching placements in different contexts. This resulted in a variety of different experiences which differed in terms of the context, their subject specialism and prior experience (Table 1).

Participant	Context and subject specialism	Prior teaching experience	Diversity experienced
James	Sports specialism. Placed within the HE sector where he was employed as an associate lecturer.	Previous experience in the primary and secondary sector. Also had experience of	Taught across a range of levels HE3-HE7. Taught a range of subjects including sports coaching, business and marketing.

		working at a Camp America.	Taught at a community project on occasion on a voluntary basis.
Natalie	Fine art specialism. Placed in a community placement working at a mental health and wellbeing charity organisation.	None	Student-led curriculum Differentiated teaching approach. Diverse student needs with a range of mental health, disabilities and socio-economic status.
Mike	Photography specialism. Placed in a secondary school – Academy with year 9-13.	None	Wide range of experiences and responsibilities such as lunch monitor, parents evenings, phone calls to parents. Also taught in an HE context twice.

Table 1: Context of the participants

Findings

The theme of diversity in placement was explored in the individual interviews and a range of different experiences the participants had experienced, emerged.

Both Mike and James experienced a wide range of diversity within their placements through collaborating with the wider team (Lucas and Unwin, 2009; Lucas, 2013). They attended various meetings, including regular continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities and undertook additional responsibilities in relation to administrative tasks and students. Communicating and interacting with the wider team at the university provided James with the opportunity to teach on different programmes and across different academic levels, from Foundation to Master’s level. He also supervised dissertations.

Mike experienced a wide range of teaching opportunities across levels and year groups which enabled him to take a responsive approach to his placement, adapting to meet the needs of the individual learners and the learning environment. What Mike valued and viewed as the most important aspect of the role and his success in the placement was the relationship he built with the students.

“You kind of go in and think everyone is going to understand what you are teaching them, but you realise that everyone’s abilities are varied, er...

everyone's behaviour is varied and behaviour was a big part of the placement for me because there was a lot of challenging situations" (Mike).

Through this variety, Mike learnt about how to adapt his own approach in response to the needs of the learners, across different age groups and outside of the classroom (Winch, 2006; Gilar et al., 2007). He also participated fully in a range of both department and school wide activities, such as corridor duties, assessment moderation, parents' evenings and Continuous Professional Development (CPD). This resulted in him developing a sound understanding about the way the school operated and this translated positively into his practice within the classroom (Lucas and Unwin, 2009; Lucas, 2013).

"When you know your students and understand the whole teaching experience, it's a lot more fluent and you sort of understand the demands of the course and the demands of the organisation, whereas when you are new, you'd be just told to just read that off the board, or, you know, do the register, or help support this student, and I think you do have to have prior knowledge as well of the course and the subject you are teaching" (Mike).

This demonstrates how Mike's identity transitioned from a new, inexperienced teacher exploring the role, to a more proficient one, as he became more experienced. As he became more aware of the role, his confidence developed and he became more equipped and able to meet the expectations of the placement and all it entailed. "I remember making my first phone call [to a parent] and I was so nervous." Collaborative positive relationships with the wider team at the placement and a range of different experiences at the placement, such as providing pastoral care to the students, engaging in CPD activities, team meetings and other responsibilities, shape the understanding of trainee teachers' expectations of their roles and responsibilities as a teacher, and as a result promote the transition from a student teacher to perceiving oneself as a teacher (Flores and Day, 2006). Moreover, the variety and quality of these experiences directly affect the development of the teacher identity and transition from being a trainee teacher to perceiving oneself as a teacher (Salli and Osam, 2017).

Natalie had a different type of experience because the main contact at the placement was her mentor and she did not get involved with the wider team. However, Natalie felt that she had experienced diversity because the learners she taught were from "all walks of life" (Natalie). Although she did not work within a wider team, she felt that she had quality time with her mentor. Natalie also had the opportunity to help set up a project for the learners towards the end of her placement which gave her "experience

on student exhibitions and how to teach people to work as a team” (Natalie). Thus, although Natalie had a limited access to the wider team, she still had the opportunity to experience a variety of different responsibilities at her placement, allowing her to fulfil the professional standards (ETF, 2014) and establish herself as a teacher (Salli and Osam, 2017).

The theme of professional identity emerged clearly from the participants’ responses. The individual interviews reported the development of the professional identity of trainee teachers as a process (Flores and Day, 2006; Schepens, Aelterman, and Vlerick, 2009). There were discrepancies observed between the initial trainee teachers’ expectations of themselves as teachers (the type of teachers they set out to be) and the teacher personas they developed (Schepens and Vlerick, 2009).

Mike noted the difference between the teacher he had originally set out to be and the actual experience.

“I think that that always changes because you sort of go into the placement and you sort of think: Yeah, I’m gonna be this like really liked teacher. Everyone’s gonna, you know, obey my rules and it’s nothing like that” (Mike).

James was inspired to become a PE teacher based on his own experiences as a learner and his own teachers, which was mentioned by Flores and Day (2006) reporting previous positive experiences of education as a motivation to become a teacher.

“I still go and speak to those PE teachers now, just because the respect that I’ve got how they dealt with me. That’s the teacher that I wanted to be. I wanted to be that with my own personality and my own person. And deliver in ways that I think will work for me, for my students” (James).

However, even though James had experience of teaching in the primary sector, he initially had particular perceptions about what a university lecturer needs to be like and this shaped his own teaching style, without taking into account his own personal traits, or previous experiences of teaching. “I walked in thinking- this is how a lecturer needs to be. Instead of- this is what I want to be, or this is what will work best” (James). James recognised that this approach had presented obstacles and challenges and this disjuncture, forced him to reflect on his development.

“In the first couple of months or so I struggled in ... knowing names and being who I wanted to be. And being who I wanted to be was the teacher

that I was in primary school and secondary school, just at a different level” (James).

Realising the dissonance between the desired teaching persona that James tried to adhere to originally and the one he realised would be better for the placement and would be more intact with his own personality prompted James to adjust, as teacher identity formation is a dynamic process (Chong, 2011).

Similarly, Natalie had a clear idea of the type of teacher she had become by the end of the placement. “I want to be the chilled, but strict teacher” (Natalie). This was different from her beginning identity where she described herself as “a little mouse,” whereas she had become confident through the placement experience. “When I walk through that building I’m the teacher” (Natalie). This was driven by the needs of the learners attending the placement, as Natalie was aware of the need to adopt a certain persona, but at the same time she wanted to remain true to her own identity.

“When I walked into my placement, I was like really scared. I was like Oh My God, I’m gonna be teaching actual adults who erm... like my grandparents age or my mum’s age and like, what if they don’t respect me? So, I thought, ok, I’m gonna have to be strict. But then I had to think: these are poorly people, so I have to be really nice and calm-like approach to them. So, that’s how I was. I still think that I am calm and approachable now, but, yeah, that’s definitely me” (Natalie).

In comparison to James, Natalie acknowledged that her natural temperament would complement her placement at the beginning of the course. Therefore, she used her own character traits to her advantage from the beginning of her placement. Schepens, Aelterman and Vlerick (2009) described teacher’s professional development as a process, which involves an interaction between the experiences and personal values and beliefs.

All three participants experienced a level of flexibility and autonomy in relation to the delivery of the curricula.

“as soon as somebody said, ‘erm, you know a bit about this subject?’ I was like, ‘yep, I do, get me in’. So, in whatever spare hour I had I was delivering on other people’s courses, which is how I managed to start delivering on a masters” (James).

They also recognised teacher identity acquisition as a process throughout their placement. Moreover, they identified the Christmas break, which was halfway through their training, as the time they started to identify themselves as teachers.

“In first semester I hid behind knowledge. By the second semester related more and engaged more with learners. I sort of took the shackles off myself and just went in” (James).

Wright, Loughlin and Hall (2018) also noted that trainee teachers begin to identify themselves as professionals, teachers rather than trainees, during their teacher training program. However, they established that development of the perceived teacher persona grows at different stages of the program for trainees (Wright, Loughlin and Hall, 2018) in contrast to the specific time point mentioned by the participants of this study.

Similarly, Natalie gained confidence through developing self-efficacy in her teaching practice. She worked independently and did not seek out support very often which enabled her to develop an autonomous approach.

“I’m a kind of person, who likes to do things by myself. I think I work better like that. I mean, I’m not saying input from someone else, is bad, it... I would have probably benefited from it, but I can do things by myself... I’d feel like I’d have a watchful eye on me constantly. So, I feel like I was ok on my own” (Natalie).

Mike agreed about developing a stronger professional teacher identity in the second semester, but he was conflicted about the amount of autonomy he had. “For me, I wanted to do my own thing and teach my own style” (Mike). However, Mike felt that the placement needed to strike a “balance between being supportive and letting you do your own thing.” He admitted that at times he felt restricted by other teachers and a sense of obligation to emulate their teaching style. He felt that “you do have to be thrown in at the deep end” in order to learn how to teach through that immersive experience.

James admitted to placing self-imposed restrictions on himself at the beginning of the placement. This correlates with the findings of the research by Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2003).

“I had the autonomy, I just, I think that I didn’t choose to take at the start... I don’t think it was the environment that was constricting me, I think it was me what was doing it” (James).

James recognised the benefit of being autonomous, but also believed that this that this can only occur once you have a more developed identity, and are confident with your own developed identity, as he felt that this got the best results in the role and with the learners.

Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) acknowledged the importance of own values and beliefs in relation to teacher identity. All three participants expressed high expectations of themselves as teachers and their feelings of accountability for the academic achievements of their students.

“I was giving my students a hundred percent; so from me doing that I feel like I was being a better teacher because I was teaching them properly on how to do things” (Natalie).

“I got more people through, which was more important to me” (James).

“When you would have, like, the staff briefings, there’d be a lot of pressure on erm... meeting those targets, getting erm... the students beyond the line... and I think that’s the biggest sort of responsibility for a student. You do feel accountable for each one of those students” (Mike).

As postulated by Eraut (1994), experiences contribute towards the development of professional identity, but it is important to use reflection in order to overcome encountered obstacles. All three had to overcome an obstacle which then led to development through a boost of confidence and they recognised the important role that reflection played in their professional development.

“I’ve made plenty of mistakes. But I’ve learnt from most of them. People need to be able to make mistakes” (James).

“I was constantly writing down... reflections... and that helped me... throughout” (Mike).

When Natalie first started teaching she felt very overwhelmed, so she reflected on this and made changes to her practice, getting prepared fully to try and reduce this feeling. She also learnt through observing her mentor in placement.

All three participants reported enhanced subject knowledge through the variety of subjects that they were required to teach through their placements. As the community centre promoted a student-led teaching style, Natalie was required to adopt a flexible approach to the curriculum. This required her to enhance her subject knowledge to be able to successfully accommodate the students’ academic demands.

“I did my degree in fine art, I don’t obviously know everything around the subject... Throughout the course I’ve taught myself a lot of stuff as well. Subject knowledge. So I was giving my students a hundred percent. So from me doing that I feel like I was being a better teacher because I was teaching them properly on how to do things” (Natalie).

James also needed to research into the subject as he was teaching at a high level and felt a certain degree of pressure to get the information factually right.

“Every single week was like a mini assignment when I was doing my own lectures. So, there was a lot of studying a lot of going away, reading books, like, a lot of going on the internet and stuff like that. Which I didn’t mind, because I could confidently go into that room and then and say: ‘Right, I know this little and then allow them to sprout from that” (James).

Mike also needed to develop his knowledge of the technical aspect of photography in order to feel prepared enough to teach it to his own students.

“I would sort of go home, brush up on my knowledge of theory and then you can look up what sort of projects the students are doing and then you can tailor that that experience that subject knowledge that they’ve got...and you can go off and do your own research as well. And that really helps you develop your own subject knowledge” (Mike).

Natalie did not attend a second placement due to time restrictions and additional responsibilities that she had which were external to the programme. She did not feel that this had limited her experience because she had learnt such a lot from her placement, about how to deal with people who have mental health issues and about how to make the learning environment conducive to learning, taking into account this particular type of learner need. Natalie felt confident that the placement had prepared her for a teaching position in any context.

I jump straight into things. I’ve taught a lot of things now in my placement. I think I’m ready and prepared not to teach. I feel ready, definitely (Natalie).

Natalie disclosed some perceived limitations due to a lack of access to technology at the placement. However, this had prompted her to take a creative approach, offering alternative resources, such as games and handouts instead of relying on technology. Natalie valued the theory element of the programme as this supported her preparation for the teaching role and future employment. Although Natalie did not experience everything in the placement in order to meet all of the professional standards, such as

technology, she felt this was something that she would continue to do once employed as a teacher. She did not feel that this had disadvantaged her. “I’m ready now to jump into a job” (Natalie).

Mike also recognised the benefit of a varied placement. “There are 101 issues you’ll have as a teacher” (Mike). He believed that all the different aspects of the placement had prepared him for when he would be teaching independently as a qualified teacher. Mike felt informed through the programme content, sharing of experiences with peers as well as the mentor input. He felt confident by the end of the programme to create his own sessions based on his own approach and in response to the needs of the learners.

You’re kind of implementing own ideas, but you’re teaching something that’s already been taught in the past, so it’s sort of creating it differently and I’d say more updated as well (Mike).

Mike felt that the placement had given him the range of opportunities which equipped him with a wide range of knowledge and he believed he would not have experienced this in a different context. “The placement itself met the needs and demands of the course perfectly” (Mike). Even in spite of this and feeling he had met the professional standards, Mike also organised and attended a day at a university, which provided a diverse experience, as a second placement. He valued this experience as it added more to his CV and helped him to stand out to prospective employers. “In terms of the diverse experience, it is really important to have another placement because then they can see you’ve taught in both FE and HE” (Mike).

Mike also disclosed that he would have appreciated a third placement in a more traditional college environment and additionally would have liked to have gained experience working with learners with special educational needs (SEN).

James had a lot of prior experience of teaching in different sector before starting the programme, but he still valued the opportunity to experience variety within the placement and other placement settings. He felt that this provided an opportunity to experience diversity in terms of the culture of different organisations (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009). However, he did recognise that limited time could present a barrier to this happening. He firmly believed that trainee teachers should experience different contexts, so they are more able to make an informed decision about the context they want to gain future employment in. He also believed that the theory element of the programme gave him the ability to reason and his tacit knowledge became explicit.

Conclusion

The latest OfSTED report outlines that during inspections, Ofsted will:

“...gather evidence on how well trainees teach and how well trainees and groups of trainees are prepared to meet the minimum level of practice expected of teachers as defined in the Teachers’ Standards, the Teachers’ Standards (Early Years), or the 2014 professional standards for FE teachers and trainers, by the end of their training” (Ofsted, 2019: 15).

What OfSTED aims to explore and uncover is the nature of partnerships between the PGCE provider, the teaching placement and the trainee teacher to determine and establish how well prepared the trainees are:

“...to teach children/pupils/learners in schools/colleges or other settings in different circumstances, and for the age range, and/or subject(s)/specialisms for which they are being trained” (Ofsted, 2019: 28).

A key judgement made against this is based on “the quality and range of placements” (: 29). This piece of research has identified that although all three trainee teachers were placed within different contexts, within the post-fourteen sector, which resulted in differences of experience, they all placed value on variety as a way to enable them to build and cement their teacher identity. They recognised how this enhanced experience enabled them to meet the professional standards (ETF, 2014) and equipped them with the skills and knowledge for future employment in the sector. A critical aspect of this was their opportunity to work independently, as this enabled them to face challenges and develop confidence. They all felt the need to develop on their existing subject knowledge in order to fully meet the needs of the curriculum they were delivering and meet the needs of the learners they were teaching. Where they experienced high levels of autonomy, their confidence grew quickly through feedback from the mentor. Having access to a wider team and being involved in whole organisation processes, was also seen as adding enormous value to their experience.

According to the participants of the study, they felt that their teacher identity was developed as a result of the teacher training program, as they engaged in different experiences at their placements and reflected upon them. As a result of detailed reflection trainees underwent a process of their teacher identity formation. As they adjusted to the role of being a teacher, they realised the importance of their own personality, which allowed them to mould their personal traits and use them to benefit their teaching styles and the needs of the placements they attended.

During phase two of the inspection, Ofsted look specifically at the trained teachers, who have just completed their training, in order to determine "...how well prepared they are for employment as a result of their training" (Ofsted, 2019: 20).

Two participants actively sought additional experiences in settings different to their main placement, which they believed put them in a better position when applying for future job opportunities. They also saw this as a way to make informed judgements about which types of context, or sector they wanted to secure a future job within. Although Natalie did not experience the same diversity in terms of placement, she felt ready to work within the sector by the end of the programme. She recognised that her learning did not finish at this point, but took a more long term view of her teacher development, which was also supported by research conducted by Wright, Loughlin and Hall (2017).

All three placed an enormous amount of value on the theory element of the programme, linking this to their knowledge and practice, preparing them for the role.

This research has uncovered that the experiences trainee teachers have whilst on placement, are as diverse as the sector itself. Diversity of experience can take place within the same setting, or through different contexts. The authors make the argument that it is not enough to adopt a simplistic view of diversity in terms of different placement settings, but that a more tailored approach will result in the individual needs of the trainee, being fulfilled in this respect. For future cohorts, it is more important to stress the value that diversity in placement can have on future employability and in the development of professional teacher identity. This should include aspects of autonomy, access to wider curricular activities, strengthening of subject knowledge and successful achievement of a range of challenges, in order to develop confidence. A belief was held by the trainees that additional diversity of experience across the sector would lead to better employment opportunities, but this is an area which is currently under-researched and would benefit from further investigation.

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Appendix One: One to One Interview Questions

Can you describe the placement experience you have had (has this been based in one or more than one organisation?).

What types of diversity have you experienced in the placement (this can be around the level you have taught, the types of learners, the overall experience)?

What do you think has made the placement experience successful (or not)?

Has your experience changed the type of teacher you want to be?

How has your teacher identity developed through this experience?

What types of things do you get involved in that is outside of the classroom?

Have you experienced the culture of the organisation?

Do you think you have managed to meet the professional standards through your experience?

How well do you feel prepared to apply for jobs in different sectors or different contexts?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix Two: Focus Group Questions

1. Do you think you have experienced diversity in the placement; such as the level of students you've perhaps taught, or the subject, the range?
2. What types of issues have you had (if any)?
3. Outside of your experience in the classroom, how do you think you've experienced the culture of the organisation? Has that happened? Do you just go in and teach a lesson or do you get involved what the wider aspect of that organisation? And how has that happened?
4. Do you get involved in interviews or the wider role as well?
5. How well do you feel prepared to apply for jobs in different sectors or different contexts? If you've been doing your placement, let's say, at a university, would you now feel equipped to apply for jobs, perhaps in a school, or at a college? How do you feel about that? How well prepared do you think you are?
6. Has your experience altered your view on where you want to go and get a job?
7. Do you think there's anything different that could have been done to give you more breadth and depth of experience? Or, do you think that you've had enough (such as 2 placements)?
8. Have you enjoyed having two different placements?
9. If you've only had one placement, would you have preferred to have had two? Do you think that you've missed out because you haven't been into a second place for your placement?
10. If you hadn't got two placements we asked you to go and have a diverse placement day experience somewhere different. Do you think that's been enough?
11. You are talking a lot about learners. What about the actual culture of the organisation? Is that something you feel that is different in different organisations? Do you need more experience of this?