

*Report of a Survey*

*on*

*Teacher Education Partnerships*

*1998/99*

St Mary's University College  
A College of The Queen's University, Belfast

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 During 1998/99, the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) undertook the final year of a three-year survey of the effectiveness of partnership arrangements between the higher education institutions (HEIs), providing teacher education courses, and a sample of schools which host students on school experience.
- 1.2 The survey related directly to the introduction of changes to initial teacher training (ITT) which came into effect at the start of the 1996/97 academic year. A key feature of the new arrangements is the stronger emphasis placed on classroom experience, and the acquisition of key teaching competences. Formal responsibility for the courses remains with the HEIs, but it was recognised that the active interest, involvement and co-operation of schools would continue to be vital in enhancing and enriching the entire training process for each student teacher, particularly, but not exclusively, during periods of school placement.
- 1.3 This report contains the findings of the third and final year of the survey of the partnership arrangements managed by St Mary's College. To indicate the progress that has been made by the college over the three years of the survey, the report also includes references to earlier findings of the survey for 1996/97 and 1997/98. The Irish-Medium Education (IME) Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) was included in the survey in 1998/99 only. Prior to the final year of the survey, St Mary's was granted University College status, and is now a constituent college of the Queen's University of Belfast.
- 1.4 This report is based on 68 visits to schools, undertaken by 14 inspectors during the three years of the survey. Discussions were held with students and teachers, and regular meetings took place with St Mary's tutors, heads of departments and members of the college management team. The findings on the second year of the survey were also reported to the members of St Mary's University College Academic Board.
- 1.5 In contrast with 1996/97, when each HEI produced its own partnership handbook for schools, a common partnership handbook - "Initial Teacher Education: Partnerships between Schools and the Higher Education Institutions" - was used by all HEIs in Northern Ireland during 1997/98 and 1998/99. Each HEI supplemented this common handbook with further material which was specific to the respective institution. The handbook was based on a model of partnership agreed by the Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee (NITEC), and developed following discussions involving HEIs, serving teachers and professional organisations.

## **2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

- 2.1 The majority of schools are aware of their role in the partnership arrangements, and good working relationships, leading to a steady improvement in the quality of partnerships, are developing with St Mary's University College.
- 2.2 Following the introduction of a programme of seminars for school principals and teacher-tutors in 1998, St Mary's conducted a further eleven seminars in 1999. This initiative has been

welcomed by staff in schools, and has contributed significantly to the schools' understanding of their role as partners in the training process.

- 2.3 The student teachers have benefited from the developing partnership relationships between the schools and college, with more of them reporting good quality training on school experience. The incidence of students being placed with teachers who are poor role models fell significantly in 1998/99.
- 2.4 For the majority of students, school experience is a satisfactory and enriching experience. The schools are very welcoming, and work closely with St Mary's in supporting students experiencing difficulties. In a small minority of cases, students with problems fail to get support from the college to improve their performance and enhance their confidence.
- 2.5 St Mary's has encouraged schools to give students experience of whole school issues while on school experience. Where schools provide this, students welcome the opportunities to take part in a wider variety of school-based activities, but a significant number of schools still do not seem able or willing to provide students with such experiences.
- 2.6 The quality of feedback from the HEI tutors to the schools has improved over the three years of the survey. The majority of schools reported substantial improvements in the nature and quality of the discussion between tutors and teachers on students' performance when on the school experience.
- 2.7 There is now a consistent college view of the partnership arrangements. St Mary's tutors are committed to improving and developing the partnership, and are taking more account of the views of classroom teachers in arriving at a final assessment of the students' teaching competences.
- 2.8 The Irish-medium PGCE partnership has many strengths. Priorities should now include the more extensive promotion and use of the partnership handbook, and of the development of teaching competences while students are on school experience.
- 2.9 The partnership arrangements between the schools and the college have improved steadily over the three years of the survey. The awareness-raising seminars have played a major role and set a positive tone, as has the quality of documentation disseminated to schools.

### **3. INFORMING SCHOOLS**

- 3.1 During 1998/99, partnership schools were provided with copies of the handbook "Initial Teacher Education: Partnership between Schools and the Higher Education Institutions". The use of the handbook has enhanced the confidence of teachers in schools most notably on what is expected of all concerned when students are involved in school experience, and on the teachers' role in initial teacher education. It has also clarified the expectations of the HEIs with regard to the periods of school experience. Many of the teachers commented favourably on the helpful summary of the competences produced by St Mary's which accompany the handbook.

- 3.2 Schools generally report satisfaction with the quality of communication from the college, and particularly welcome the increased level of contact with college tutors during visits to the student teachers on school experience.
- 3.3 While the quality of contact with schools has improved gradually over the three years of the survey, there remain a small number of instances where more specific information on ineffective student performance and competence is still not available to the schools' teacher-tutors. In these cases, the schools concerned are unsure how to support the students or what areas of teaching competence should be the main focus for further support and development.
- 3.4 St Mary's encourages schools to give students access to wider aspects of school life by indicating additional activities which the student might undertake while on school experience. This guidance has proved helpful in some instances, but the survey findings for 1998/99 show a continued lack of awareness in some schools of the need to introduce students to a broader range of school experiences. This remains an important issue which needs to be addressed both by the college and some of its partner schools.

#### **4. CO-ORDINATION AND LIAISON**

- 4.1 In addition to sending the partnership handbook to schools, the college hosted eleven information seminars, the majority in St Mary's itself and two in both Londonderry and Omagh. These seminars enabled the college to disseminate information about the partnership arrangements, and to provide further information to schools about the structure and content of the competence-based BEd degree. The seminars were well attended, with the numbers attending increasing steadily each year, and there is clear evidence of the success of the seminars in raising awareness in schools about the purpose of students' school experience, and in enhancing further the status of schools as partners in initial teacher education.
- 4.2 As a result of the improved co-ordination and liaison arrangements on the part of the college, it is clear from discussions with staff in schools at all levels that there is a much better understanding of the partnership arrangements than was apparent earlier in the survey. Many of the principals and class teachers remarked favourably on the dissemination process, and commented on how it had improved their perceptions of students' school-based experiences, and how they could contribute to further improvement.
- 4.3 Earlier findings from the survey commented on the need for information on the structure and content of the college courses to be disseminated more effectively to schools. In response, St Mary's produced documents, giving information of the student's previous school experience, and guidance on the structure of the four-year BEd course. A number of schools commented favourably on the usefulness of the information provided in assisting the school to provide a more meaningful range of experiences during school experience.
- 4.4 The arrangements for the placement of students in schools are carried out effectively. In most instances, clear lines of communication exist between the schools and the college, and many of the principals and teacher-tutors commented favourably on how this relationship has developed

steadily since 1996. There still remain, however, isolated cases where students experiencing difficulties during school experience fail to get the support from college tutors which they require to improve their performance. Where this occurs, some schools still feel unsure how to cope with the problems presented, and are uncertain how to make use of the partnership arrangements.

## **5. STAFF IN SCHOOLS**

- 5.1 Over the course of the survey, the understanding of the partnership arrangements, and consequently the effectiveness of school staff in supporting students while on school experience, has remained variable. In the best examples of school participation, the teachers are aware of, and understand their role in helping to develop the students' teaching competences. In these instances, good use is made of the information sheet from St Mary's outlining which competences are to be developed for the year group. As a result, teachers are aware of the particular objectives which the HEI has set for each student on school experience. These schools also make good use of the students' individual profiles to familiarise themselves with their previous experience, and to tailor a programme matched to students' needs. This results in the provision of a good range of beneficial teaching experiences, and also work on classroom display, experience of assessment, special educational needs, and some monitored playground supervision. In almost all cases, the schools make good use of the college tutors' comments in students' files to discuss the strengths and weaknesses identified.
- 5.2 In a small minority of cases, class teachers felt that they had not been prepared sufficiently by both the school and the college for hosting a student on school experience. In these instances, the students receive a narrow range of experiences, with little provided in respect of whole-school activities.
- 5.3 The quality of feedback from the HEI tutors to the school has improved steadily, with a number of principals and teacher-tutors describing the exchanges as being more professional, structured and meaningful than in the past. The college invested significant time and resources during the final year of the survey to improving the professional liaison between its tutors and school staff. The result of this has been to create an environment where the majority of schools reported substantial improvements in the nature and quality of time allocated for discussion between tutors and teachers about students' performance on school experience. Many of the teachers commented on the importance St Mary's tutors now give to their opinions about students, and so are more confident and willing to share their views on student teaching competence.

## **6. STUDENTS**

- 6.1 In the main, the students were positive about the quality of the experiences encountered on school experience. There was evidence of a good understanding of the contents of the partnership handbook, and a number of students commented on the extent to which the vocabulary of the handbook was now used during both the college and school-based components of the course.

- 6.2 The evidence from the survey indicates that, for the majority of students, school experience is a satisfactory and rewarding experience. Most feel welcome in the schools, and comment favourably about the support they receive from teacher-tutors. However, some raised a number of issues with regard to the HEI's expectation of experiencing a broader and richer whole-school perspective during their time in schools. Many feel that the number of lessons they are required to prepare for and teach each week inhibits access to valuable whole-school experiences. The number of lessons required could usefully be reviewed with a view to adjusting the balance between class-based work and whole-school experiences.
- 6.3 Good use is made of the HEI's pro-forma which identifies the competences targeted for each year group, and many of the students refer to the competencies in their lesson evaluation notes, indicating a growing familiarity with, and practical use of the competences model of teacher education.

## **7. MANAGING THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCES**

- 7.1 On average, the students have five visits from St Mary's tutors during school experience. The quality of the tutors' discussions with school staff has improved and, in most instances, is now structured and purposeful; the tutors comment in detail on the students' planning, teaching and the quality of their school experience file. Reports on student performance are usually completed after discussions among the tutor, school staff and the student so that judgement on competence can be thoroughly informed by all the training partners.
- 7.2 In general, school staff recognise that the college now takes careful account of the views of the host school. The tutors establish regular contact with school principals and teacher-tutors during their visits to schools, and seek their opinions about student performance. Many schools commented on how these discussions had developed from limited, initial contacts a few years ago into the professional dialogue which they have now become.
- 7.3 In a minority of instances, the schools are given insufficient information about the weaknesses noted in the level of competence of students while on previous school experience. In these cases, students are less likely to share their difficulties with the teacher-tutors, and there is limited opportunity for schools to assist students in addressing the particular areas of weakness identified previously.
- 7.4 In the first two years of the survey, there was evidence that students were becoming more familiar with the concept of competence development, and the increasing dialogue between the school staff and the college tutors has led to continued improvement in all of the partners' understanding of the issues involved. This increased awareness of the use of individual competences to define particular areas of teaching skills has led to enhanced confidence on the part of schools in providing relevant experiences to improve the individual performance of students.

## **8. IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION (PGCE)**

- 8.1 There is much evidence of good relationships between the college and each of the schools visited in the survey of the Irish-medium PGCE partnership arrangements. The organisation of student placements is efficient, and the quality of contacts between teaching staff and college tutors during students' school experience, in the vast majority of instances, is sound. A partnership committee, established during the year, marked a significant step in continuing efforts to develop challenging, Irish-medium partner relations.
- 8.2 The staff in each school display a commitment to supporting the students during school experience. However, their efforts could be enhanced by a more purposeful use of individual student profiles in highlighting developing professional experiences, needs and interests. The students have valuable opportunities to work closely with schools in many aspects of their development as teachers, including experiences of extra-curricular activities and individual specialist interests. One of the students was provided with a particularly wide range of professional development opportunities throughout both key stages and, in addition, gained experience in special educational needs (SEN) provision; there is a need to extend such whole-school opportunities more consistently for the benefit of all of the Irish-medium students.
- 8.3 Each of the Irish-medium schools visited had been provided with Irish language handbooks incorporating the teaching competences and, more recently, with a copy of the partnership handbook. The use of the partnership handbook in schools is beginning; while students and college staff have begun, appropriately, to make on-going assessments based on its contents, there is a need to support and facilitate principals and class teachers in their willingness to gain greater familiarity with and working experience of the teaching competences.

## **8. TEASTAS IARCHÉIME OIDEACHAIS SA GHAELSCOLAÍOCHT (TIOG)**

- 8.1 Tá mórán fianaise ann gur maith an caidreamh idir an coláiste agus gach scoil ar ar tugadh cuairt faoin suirbhé a rinneadh ar shocruithe na páirtíochta do theastas iarchéime na Gaelscolaíochta. Tá eagrú lonnú na mac léinn sna scoileanna éifeachtach agus, i bhformhór mór na gcásanna, is fiúntach an teagmháil a bhíonn idir oidí scoile agus teagascóirí an choláiste le linn thréimhse taithí scoile na mac léinn. Bunaíodh coiste páirtíochta i mbliana, ar chéim thábhachtach í san obair a bhfuiltear ag tabhairt fúithi chun caidreamh dúshlánach a fhorbairt idir lucht páirtíochta na Gaelscolaíochta.
- 8.2 Léiríonn foireann gach scoile go bhfuil siad i bhfách le tacaíocht a thabhairt do na mic léinn le linn a dtréimhse taithí scoile. D'fhéadfaí cur lena n-iarrachtaí, áfach, trí leas ba chríochnúla a bhaint as próifíilí aonair na mac léinn le haird a dhíriú ar eispéiris, ar riachtanais agus ar chúrsaí sainspéise gairme de réir mar a bhíonn siad á bhforbairt. Is iomaí deis luachmhar a bhíonn ag mic léinn bheith ag obair i gcomhar le scoileanna i gcuid mhór gnéithe dá bhforbairt mar oidí, ag cur taithí ar imeachtaí seach-churaclaim agus sainspéise san áireamh. Bhí teacht ag duine de na hiníonacha léinn ar leathanréimse ar leith de dheiseanna forbartha gairme sa dá eochairchéim agus, lena chois sin, fuair sí taithí ar sholáthar riachtanais speisialta oideachais

(RSO); is gá deiseanna uileghné scoile mar sin a chur chun cinn ar bhonn ba sheasta ar mhaithe leis na mic léinn Ghaelscolaíochta uile go léir.

- 8.3 Cuireadh ar fáil lámhleabhair Ghaeilge, ina leagtar amach na cumais teagaisc, agus, le gairid, cóip de lámhleabhar na páirtíochta do gach Gaelscoil. Táthar ag tosú ar leas a bhaint as lámhleabhar na páirtíochta sna Gaelscoileanna; cé go bhfuil na mic léinn agus foireann an choláiste i ndiaidh tosú, mar is cuí, ar mheasúnú leanúnach a dhéanamh de réir a moltar sa lámhleabhar, tá feidhm le tacaíocht a thabhairt agus éascaíocht a dhéanamh do phríomhoidí agus d'oidí ina bhfuil le gur fairsinge a chuirfidh siad eolas agus a gheobhaidh siad taithí ar na cumais teagaisc ina gcuid oibre.

## 9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The partnership arrangements between the schools and St Mary's University College have improved steadily over the three years of the survey. The strengths of the arrangements include the commitment on the part of schools and the college to develop partnership further, the awareness-raising seminars which set a positive tone for developing good relationships at all levels, the quality of documentation disseminated to schools, a shared perception of the partnership arrangements by all concerned, and the contribution, increasingly, of all the partners in assessing students' teaching competence.
- 9.2 Issues which still require attention include the need for improved supervision for students experiencing difficulties, encouraging schools to provide students with more opportunities to participate in a broader range of whole-school experience, and improved levels of training and support for class teachers hosting students.
- 9.3 In 1998/99, the student teachers included in the survey were largely in the third year of their teacher education course. By this stage, the students generally already display a good level of teaching competence. The development of their competence has been greatly enhanced by the effective partnership arrangements which St Mary's has developed with its partner schools. This has required a determined effort on the part of the College principal, the staff and the active participation of the schools. It promises well for maintaining and developing further the college's partnership arrangements that the benefits of partnership are now accepted by all concerned.

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