

Report of a Survey

on

Teacher Education Partnerships

1998/99

Stranmillis 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 higher education institutions (HEIs) providing teacher education courses, and a sample of schools which host student teachers 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 Stranmillis 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. Prior to the final year of the survey, Stranmillis was granted University College status, and is now a constituent college of the Queen's University of Belfast.
- 1.4 The report is based on visits to Stranmillis, schools and further and higher education colleges by a team of twelve inspectors; sixty-two visits to schools were made from 1996-1999. The visits to schools included discussions with student teachers on placement, teacher-tutors, heads of department, class or subject teachers and principals. In 1998/99, visits concentrated on a sample of students who were in the third year of their Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree course.
- 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 Northern Ireland (NI) HEIs 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.
- 1.6 The development of the partnership model has been a difficult and complex process for all concerned and, while there are still some issues to be addressed, this report recognises the significant progress which has been made in the three years since the partnership arrangements were introduced. As the earlier findings indicated, Stranmillis University College has established good relationships with schools over many years, and student teachers generally received much encouragement and support from principals and teachers when on school placement. Since greater emphasis was placed on partnerships in initial teacher education in 1996, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the contribution of all of the

partners. The college has made determined efforts to build on the good working relationships which it has with the schools, recognising that the development of effective partnership is dependent on the full support of all of the participants.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- 2.1 Staff in Stranmillis and in schools are much better informed about, and have a greater willingness to implement, the partnership arrangements than was evident at earlier stages in the survey.
- 2.2 In 1998/99, the information which the schools received about the partnership arrangements was considered to be good or excellent in two-thirds of the schools visited.
- 2.3 The majority of the student teachers have a good understanding of the partnership handbook, and are beginning to apply the competence statements in their planning and teaching. They are increasingly more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and are beginning to identify appropriate action to develop further their skills and competence.
- 2.4 School principals are generally content with the level of communication from Stranmillis, and emphasise the nature of the good relationships with the tutors which they have enjoyed for many years. They welcome the visits by the link tutors, and the documentation and training which have been provided by the college. Class teachers are generally committed to providing a well-planned programme for the students. They regularly give the students constructive and supportive feed-back.
- 2.5 The members of senior management and staff of the college have worked hard to develop and disseminate helpful documentation to the schools, and to provide training for those most directly involved in managing the experiences of students in schools. They have identified the need to continue to improve communication with the schools about the partnership arrangements.
- 2.6 There is wide variation in the timing and usefulness of tutor visits to schools. Students report that much of the feedback from tutors is constructive and clearly focused on their developing competences. In some instances, however, the feedback is not sufficiently detailed to enable the students to improve their performance.
- 2.7 Many class teachers find it difficult to have meaningful discussion with the visiting tutors because of lack of time, and the demands of other school duties. In the absence of such discussion, it is not possible for the teachers, tutors and students to reach a shared understanding of the students' developing skills and competence.
- 2.8 The schools would be in a better position to help the students if clearer expectations and objectives, tailored to the progress, strengths and shortcomings of individual students, were identified by Stranmillis.

- 2.9 Some of the students are concerned about their lack of skill in the use of information and communications technology (ICT), particularly in relation to their work in schools.
- 2.10 While the development of teaching competences is now more widely discussed among the partners than at earlier stages in the survey, more still needs to be done to clarify the role of the schools in developing the competences of the students on placement.
- 2.11 The students have begun to use the competences in self-evaluation, and are just beginning to relate these to their action plans to address weaknesses.

3. INFORMING SCHOOLS

- 3.1 Over the three years of the survey, there have been significant developments in the way in which schools are informed about the partnership model of training. Since the introduction of the model in 1996, Stranmillis has done much to improve the quality of communication with its partner schools. The documentation now provided for schools by the college confirms its commitment to partnership, and encourages schools to become more actively involved in supporting students in training. The documents offer useful guidance to schools regarding the management of the student's placement, student support arrangements, and the evaluation of student performance. Stranmillis provides each partnership school with details of the course being followed, the student's previous experience, and of other duties, integral to teaching, which the student should experience during the placement. Link tutors from the college visit the schools prior to the start of the placement, and seminars have been arranged to provide more information for teachers and principals about the partnership arrangements.
- 3.2 The teachers appreciate the efforts which Stranmillis has made to keep them informed of the partnership arrangements. Some difficulties have arisen in schools where class teachers have been absent, and the replacement staff have not been as well informed about the arrangements as they might have been. The majority of the students and teachers are well informed about the contents of the Partnership Handbook for Initial Teacher Education although some class teachers would value more clarification on how the requirements relate to the development of competences. Overall, the level of communication, in both directions, between the college and the schools has been improving steadily over the three years of the survey. In 1998/99, the information which the schools received about the partnership arrangements was considered to be good or excellent in two-thirds of the schools visited.
- 3.3 Some schools have responded to the demands of the partnership model better than others; most have shown enthusiasm and a willingness to participate fully, but a poor response was noted in a small minority of the schools included in the survey. This poor response inevitably had an adverse effect on the quality of school experience for the students placed in these schools.
- 3.4 The findings from the 1998/99 session indicate that Stranmillis tutors are more confident in discussing their role in developing partnerships with the schools. Staff development initiatives within the college, and a greater emphasis on the development of partnership with schools by the members of senior management, have created a climate whereby there is a greater

acceptance and understanding of the role of the tutors in informing schools about the partnership arrangements. The majority of Stranmillis tutors linked to the schools are positive in their attitude to developing meaningful partnerships with the schools, and are taking the necessary steps to establish productive working relationships with class teachers and with principals. This shows a marked improvement since the first year of the survey when not all of the college staff fully realised the implications of the partnership arrangements, and many were not as well informed about the procedures as was necessary. However, on occasions, some tutors still have insufficient time during their school visits to become involved in meaningful discussion with the teachers to help develop the partnership arrangements, and to discuss the progress of the students.

4. CO-ORDINATION AND LIAISON

4.1 Since the beginning of the survey, schools have reported a noticeable improvement in the level of co-ordination and liaison with Stranmillis, and this has had a beneficial impact on the quality of the partnership. In just over half of the schools visited in 1998/99, the quality of co-ordination was good, and the students benefited from the improved links between the schools and the college. Over the three years, Stranmillis staff have worked hard to bring about improvements in the way in which they work with teachers and with the students in schools. The time and understanding which many of the tutors devote to their work in schools is now a marked feature of the partnership arrangements.

4.2 There remains, however, some variation in practice in the way in which tutors work with the schools, and some weaknesses were noted in just over one-third of the schools surveyed in 1998/99. These weaknesses were usually related to the timing of tutor visits or in the quality of the interaction of the tutors with students and teachers. The members of senior management in the college have begun to monitor more closely the effectiveness of the tutors' work in schools in order to effect a greater measure of consistency in approach.

4.3 Principals value the good relationships which have been established with many of the link tutors, and are willing to consult the tutors if they have any difficulty or concerns about a student's progress. Staff in schools are, in the main, contributing well to the teacher education partnership, and are very supportive of the students. Some class teachers would value more specific advice from Stranmillis on how best to maximise the time the student spends in the school, and on how to meet more effectively the identified professional needs of the students. Most of the students are making a determined effort to become involved in the wider aspects of the life of the school, and the vast majority of the schools are providing a broad and rounded experience for the students.

5. STAFF IN SCHOOLS

5.1 During the first year of the survey, there was a poor level of understanding of the nature of the partnership arrangements within the schools and, in 1997/98, it was found that the concept of partnership was clearly evident in only half of the schools. In 1998/99, the findings indicate an improvement in the quality of partnerships; in the majority of the schools, there was a

satisfactory response from the teachers, and in half of those surveyed the response was good or excellent.

- 5.2 Many of the teachers welcome the opportunity that the partnership arrangements offer for establishing a more prominent role for schools in the training of student teachers, and increasingly it has helped the staff in schools to reflect on their own practice. The teachers recognise that school experience needs to be carefully planned if the teaching competence of the students is to be developed progressively and consistently. In many schools, such an approach is in place, and the students are benefiting from good quality training and support. There are, however, inconsistencies both within and across schools. Some class teachers indicate that it is necessary for them to have further training in supporting students if they are to fulfil their role in the partnership arrangements. A small minority of the class teachers who were providing support for students had not received the relevant documentation supplied to the school by Stranmillis, and some indicated that it would have been helpful if they had had more information regarding the students' level of competence achieved during previous school placements.
- 5.3 While there have been significant improvements over the three years, a wide variation remains in the understanding of the role of class teachers in developing student competences. A few teachers indicate that the contact which they had with Stranmillis tutors was too brief to inform them sufficiently about the student's progress or achievement.
- 5.4 Some examples of very good liaison between the college tutors and the staff in schools were noted during the last year of the survey. In one instance, the tutor briefed the class teacher before observing the lesson, and at the end made the teacher aware of the findings; a copy of the tutor's written report was left in the school. Some class teachers have carried out structured observations of the student teachers, and have used this evaluation to help the students to improve on particular aspects of their practice.
- 5.5 In the second year of the survey, the teachers were largely unaware of the detail of the competence model which now underpins the education and training of student teachers. In the course of 1998/99, Stranmillis staff undertook to raise the profile of the competences approach to training in their work with the students and teachers, and some improvement was noted. There continues to be a need for further training to enable teachers to comment broadly and critically on the developing competences of the students, and for them to engage more fully in debate with the college tutors about the quality of the students' work.

6. STUDENTS

- 6.1 The great majority of the students included in the survey are confident and articulate; most communicate easily about their experiences in schools, and they are familiar with the requirements of the partnership model. In this, the third year of their course, they have had more opportunity to consider the development of competences, and most have a better understanding of the way in which the various elements of the course combine to help them acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. The students recognise that the improvements in

the partnerships between Stranmillis and the schools have been helpful to them in their development as teachers. Many of the students speak highly of the way in which they are accepted into the partner schools, and the quality of the support they receive from the teachers. In a few instances where students were having particular difficulties in schools, these were dealt with sensitively by the college staff. Teachers commented favourable on the response from Stranmillis when weaknesses in a student's performance were identified by the school.

6.2 The students reported that the five single day visits to the placement schools, prior to their period of teaching experience, had been useful in helping them to get to know the schools, although some would have liked more information about the school prior to their first visit. The students were given specific tasks to carry out during these visits, and they had the opportunity to consult with the class teacher about planning; the tasks gave their visits a purpose and a clear focus.

6.3 The students noted that inconsistencies exist in the way in which visits by Stranmillis tutors are planned; some tutors inform the schools in advance when they plan to visit the student and others arrive without prior notice. In addition, they noted that, while much of the feedback from tutors is constructive and clearly focused on their developing competences, some is less helpful. Some students would like class teachers to play a greater part in assessing their teaching since the teachers see them on a more regular basis, and in a wider range of circumstances, than their tutors. The majority of students have some involvement in the wider aspects of school life, and some help with extra-curricular activities and with educational visits. The travel arrangements for some students limit the time when they are available at the end of the school day for additional duties or for discussion with the class teachers. All of the students have access to a good range of suitable resources within the schools. A concern was expressed by some of the students that they were lacking in experience in the use of ICT, and a number indicated that they would have liked more opportunities to use ICT in their school experience.

7. MANAGING THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCES

7.1 During the second year of the survey, the findings showed that students had concerns about the uneven spread of tutor visits to schools, and about the variation in feedback which they received from tutors. These issues remain, and in almost half of the schools in the final year of the survey, the students still register the same concerns. The findings of the survey indicate that there are wide variations in the number and timing of tutor visits to students during school experience. In one instance, for example, the first tutor visit was made two days into the placement and the next two visits on two consecutive days in the third week. In this case, the spacing of the visits was such that the opportunity for the student to put advice into practice was limited.

7.2 Reports from the tutors on observed lessons are generally supportive and helpful to the students, although the students would welcome more advice on specific targets for improvement. The students are more aware of the ways in which their strengths and shortcomings are assessed by the college, and they have compiled personal action plans related to the development of their teaching competences. They know the importance of the

continuous assessment of their progress and of their formative profile; more needs to be done to strengthen the link between their own action plan for improvement and their school experience. Some particularly good practice was noted in a college of further and higher education where the quality of the feedback from the Stranmillis tutors was very helpful, and was consistent with the views of the staff who had contact with the student; in addition, there was good dialogue and sharing of ideas between the staff in the two institutions.

- 7.3 Since the beginning of the survey, the area of shared responsibility for developing teaching competence has been a complex issue for all of the partners, and in the first two years little progress was noted which related to improved quality of partnership. In 1998/99, the area of competence development was more evident in discussions with students and with tutors. Many of the class teachers are also now using the lesson observation forms provided by Stranmillis, and their confidence in sharing these with the students has seen some development. There is, however, a need for the college staff to provide clearer formative assessment of the students to guide the schools in the work they undertake with students during the placements.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Stranmillis University College has established good relationships with the schools, and has a firm foundation on which to continue to build meaningful partnership arrangements. This report acknowledges the vigorous efforts which the college has made, particularly in the past year, to improve communication with schools. The principal and members of senior management of the college have established clear priorities for partnership, and have earnestly endeavoured to create a climate of openness in which all of the partners can work together in the best interests of the student teachers.
- 8.2 Over the three years of the survey, the students have become better informed about the partnership model, and they have begun to make use of the competences in their planning and teaching. There remains some variation in the effectiveness of the dissemination arrangements within schools, and the understanding which teachers have of their role in supporting students during school experience. While the majority of Stranmillis tutors are now more aware of their role in developing and supporting partnership, the findings of the survey indicate that there is still undue variation in practice in the way in which tutors work in schools, and in the quality of the feedback which is given to students. There is considerable pressure on the time available to teachers and college tutors during school visits, and this lack of time often inhibits the discussion on the students' progress. As the partnership model continues to develop, it will be important for all the contributors to build on the very many aspects of good practice already in evidence, and to ensure, where possible, a consistently high level of provision for all students during school experience.
- 8.3 In 1998/99, the student teachers included in the survey were largely in the third year of their teacher education course. The great majority already displayed a good level of teaching competence, and the steady development of their competence is due, to a considerable extent, to the improved quality of the partnership arrangements Stranmillis is developing with its partner schools. Improving the training partnerships clearly has the full support of the college

principal, senior management, students, and increasingly the support of the college staff and teachers in most partner schools. This promises well for developing further the college's partnership arrangements, the benefits of which are now generally recognised by all the training partners.

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