

Enhancing Teacher Education

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Teacher education and professional development are among the areas that are under scrutiny in the current spate of education reform initiatives taking place in this country. Teacher preparation is a complex and expensive endeavour. At the primary level, it is pursued through both in-college courses and field experiences (referred to as “teaching practice”). While this issue is of national concern, there has been a dearth of locally based research focussed on how teachers can best be prepared to become effective classroom practitioners. The recently conducted MUSTER (Multi-site Teacher Education Research) Project was an attempt to address some of the shortcomings in this area.

The MUSTER Project was an international project, organised and coordinated by the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex, United Kingdom. The project, which was funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID), focussed on primary teacher education and involved research from five countries, including Trinidad and Tobago. The local component, which was coordinated by the School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine, was divided into several sub-projects: *Teacher Identity*, *On-the-the-Job (OJT) Training*, *The Teachers’ College Curriculum*, *The Teaching Practice Experience*, and *Newly Qualified Teachers*. Participants comprised trainee teachers and lecturers from the two government teaching colleges, teachers and principals of cooperating schools (the schools to which trainees are attached for teaching practice), and principals and senior teachers from some receiving schools to which the newly qualified teachers were assigned. Data were collected over the two-year period during which the trainees were pursuing the Teachers’ Diploma of the Ministry of Education, and for some months afterward to follow up some of the graduates (newly qualified) as they adjusted to their new schools. The focus of this article is on the findings from *The Teaching Practice Experience* and the *Newly Qualified Teachers* sub-projects.

The overall intention of the Teaching Practice (TP) component was to gain some insights into the process of learning to teach. The TP involves the attachment of trainee teachers to cooperating schools for specified periods, under the supervision of college lecturers and cooperating teachers (teachers to whom trainees are attached). The participating trainees and college lecturers considered the TP to be the most important and useful part of the college experience. Trainees felt that the experience better prepared them for teaching and dealing with the demands of the classroom. They also demonstrated more confidence in knowledge of subject matter content, ability to use a range of strategies to enhance pupil learning, and an increasingly more pupil-centred approach.

The research identified three major areas of concern. The first was the lack of coordination among critical components of the programme. For example, there was inadequate communication between the colleges and the schools, and there were few shared understandings about roles and responsibilities among the main partners in the school attachment—namely the college administrators, the supervising lecturers, and the principals and staff of cooperating schools. The second was the differences among the cooperating schools. These included school culture, level of support by cooperating

teachers, physical layout and facilities, the ability and willingness to support trainees' innovative ideas, the professional experience and expertise of cooperating teachers, and, the attitude of staff to trainees. The third was the variations in the expectations and practices of college supervisors. Trainees perceived a wide variation in grading practices as well as in the level of support from supervisors. From actual observation of supervisors, it was noted that support spanned the full range from sharing and nurturing relationships that encouraged autonomy and growth, to autocratic ones that gave trainees very little flexibility in the classroom. In addition, since trainees were being assessed from their initial TP, many were unwilling to take risks by trying out new strategies in the presence of supervisors who were there to grade them. All of these factors impacted on the quality of the TP experienced by the various trainees.

The Newly Qualified Teachers' (NQTs) sub-study investigated the impact on, and the interaction with, the education system of the newly qualified teachers. Principals and senior teachers from receiving schools, who were interviewed, found that generally, NQTs came from the colleges with important knowledge and skills. They were also enthusiastic about teaching and wanted to make a difference. The NQTs themselves felt that they acquired useful knowledge of educational theory, instructional strategies, and classroom management techniques. Schools assigned senior teachers to make the new teachers feel welcome and to help them understand their roles and responsibilities—help that was welcomed.

There were some areas of concern. One was the perceived inadequacy of the college preparation in subject matter content and pedagogy. NQTs were described as weak in knowledge of critical content areas, were found to have insufficient training in instructional approaches, and lost their enthusiasm over time. Another concern was the relevance of the preparation for the realities of teaching and learning. The NQTs perceived that what they learnt in college was not very useful to them when faced with the realities of the actual classroom situation. Perhaps the most significant concern was the lack of well-structured induction and mentoring programmes to support NQTs. They expressed the need for sustained support and help in accessing material resources.

The evidence suggests that while trainees do make some gains as they move through the two-year programme, and receive some initial support as enter their new schools, there is much room for improvement. The critical issues that should be addressed may be summed up as follows: How can shared understandings of the roles and responsibilities of the various participants in the TP be promoted? What programme structure would ensure that trainees experience a greater measure of coherence and support in TP? What kind of TP experience will best prepare teachers to function adequately in today's schools? How might the approach to assessment be reshaped so that it is perceived to be fair by all stakeholders? How can the college programme be strengthened to help trainees develop stronger knowledge bases and competencies in a range of pedagogical approaches? What structures should be set up in receiving schools to guide and support NQTs as they assume their new roles and responsibilities?

It is hoped that these findings would inform the direction of primary teacher education in Trinidad and Tobago. They reveal, however, that teacher preparation at the colleges does not, and perhaps more importantly, cannot produce teachers who can function effectively without some measure of support and guidance when they return to school. This is not unique to our local context, as the literature on teacher education shows that new teachers become more competent when they undergo a period of “internship” after training. The recent announcement by the Minister of Education about the establishment of a professional development school is welcome and timely. Professional development schools have been shown to be supportive sites, not only for the clinical preparation of new teachers, but also for the continuing development of teachers and teacher educators, the support of children’s learning, and the support of research directed at the improvement of teaching and learning.

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