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The Early Professional Development of Beginning Teachers in the UK. What can Students tell them?

Abstract:

This paper will consider the implications for, and the potential benefits of, the involvement of students located in state secondary schools in the early professional development of beginning teachers England and Wales. Teacher training in the UK has, during the past twenty years, been strictly controlled by government legislation and has produced (in the view of many academics) an instrumental model of professional development which denies the autonomy of beginning professionals to explore their developing practice and evaluate their progress in a reflective manner. This is particularly so for teachers completing their initial training in universities before becoming newly qualified teachers in state secondary schools. The paper offers a case study of student involvement in the early professional development of teachers and claims that this attempt at collaborative professional development promotes elements of school improvement, student attainment, teacher professional development and social justice. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the potential benefits of student – teacher collaboration in the early stages of the professional development of teachers.

Key words:

Initial Teacher Education, Student Voice, Citizenship Education, Collaborative Learning and Teaching.

Biographical statement:

John Edwards has worked in education in the UK for thirty-eight years. For sixteen years he taught English Language and Literature in State maintained Secondary Schools, and Adult Education Centres. From 1988 until 2008 he worked as Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Continuing Studies at Portsmouth University, where he taught a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and was Course Leader for the Postgraduate

Certification in Education, a programme which prepares students to teach English in Secondary Schools in England and Wales. His main research has been in the areas of English education and curriculum development and Student Voice in schools. He has worked in recent years with schools in London and the South of England developing Student Voice initiatives. He is currently working for the National Health Service in England as a Consultant Education Advisor.

Introduction:

The aim of this paper is to explore the potential for students in state maintained secondary schools in England to collaborate and participate in providing verbal and written evaluative feedback to trainee teachers as they begin to develop their pedagogic and professional practice in the classroom. The training programme, which will constitute the main focus of the discussion, is the one year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which the majority of graduates wishing to teach in the secondary sector, undertake as the professional route towards gaining Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The involvement of students in the professional training of teachers is intended to provide an element of 'value added' to the trainees in terms of an additional source of evaluative feedback of their evolving classroom practice and to students as a means of assisting them to understand the complex nature of learning and teaching and of taking some degree of ownership of their individual learning requirements.

The context of the study is located within the successive policy initiatives implemented by government in the UK during the past thirty years, which have influenced what occurs in state maintained schools and in the training of teachers to work in those institutions. Government has also concerned itself with broader issues relating to the rights and welfare of children reflected, for instance, in the Children Act (1989), Every Child Matters (2004) and The Children's Plan (2006).

A second initiative, which took place over the same period of time, was the emergence of the Student Voice movement in England and Wales. This development was broadly linked to the concepts of children's rights, as outlined in the United Nations Convention (1992) and had been given impetus within the school system by the research and publications of a range of academics working on issues related to school improvement, student attainment and social justice (Fielding, 1997, 1999, 2001; Rudduck, 1996, 2004). The model of social justice within schools which they promoted acknowledged children's rights to participate in discussions and decisions related to their learning needs and personal welfare, the ways in which they engage and interact with the adults who teach them and the nature of the learning and teaching community and environment. It is possible to argue that the levels of student misbehaviour, truancy and short-term exclusions from school might be partly attributable to students' dissatisfaction with the educational provision they receive and might be ameliorated by a shift in attitude which would afford them some practical and purposeful voice in their education.

The project, which is outlined below, attempted to engage students in meaningful ways with the experiences of trainee teachers who worked with them on a daily basis. It offered students the opportunity to undertake structured observations of trainees working in the classroom to develop their skills of planning, teaching and assessment and to provide principled feedback to trainees on their evolving practice. It sought to provide trainee teachers with the opportunity to receive an enhanced range of feedback on their practice (in addition to that which they regularly gained from school mentors and university tutors) and to engage in reflective analysis with those whom they taught. The key aims and objectives are stated below:

- To explore the potential for involving students in the evaluation of trainee teachers' progress towards meeting the requirements for Qualified Teacher Status

- To develop a framework of systematic observation, recording and reporting (both verbal and written) between students and trainee teachers
- To develop a model of practice which would promote the above aims in an ethical and practical manner and which would provide an element of 'value added' to both students and trainees

The project ran between 2002 and 2007 and took the form of an 'unfolding study' (Punch, 2000). It involved the establishment of a pilot case study based on three schools within the Portsmouth Initial Teacher Training Partnership. The findings from the study would inform the further development of the project. The pilot study forms the basis of the paper.

Initial Teacher Training in England and Wales: - changing patterns of power and control

The literature on Initial Teacher Training in England and Wales has been dominated over the past three decades by issues of ownership and control of the training process (Wilkin, 1996; Furlong et al, 2000). This focus has been largely determined by the increasing centralisation of control over teacher training by successive governments since 1976. Such control is evidenced in the Department for Education Circulars (9/92) and (9/93a), which required Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to establish training partnerships with schools and the Department for Education and Employment Circular (4/98) which set mandatory standards for trainee teachers to achieve. This sequence of government interventions in teacher training effectively moved control from HEIs to a form of partnership with schools who were required to share in the formative and summative judgements on the quality of trainee teachers working in their classrooms. Initial responses from HEIs in the literature from 1990 onwards reflected a growing concern over loss of autonomy in the training process. It was clear, nevertheless, that government believed a greater degree of accountability and consistency in training

provision was required and that a substantial school based element of the training programme would provide the necessary craft skills and practices alongside subject knowledge and pedagogic theory.

The academic literature continued to contest the nature of such control over teacher training (Graham, 1998; Hoyle and John, 1998) but paid little attention to the needs and status of the client group (students) for whom such training is undertaken. By the turn of the millennium relatively few studies of students' perceptions of trainee teachers' work in the classroom and its impact on their learning had been published with the notable exceptions of Lang (1993), Meighan (1997), Everton, Hopper and Thwaites (1999) and Bedfordshire County Council (2001).

In any case such studies concentrated mainly on the nature of student – trainee personal interactions rather than focussing upon students' perceptions of how effective trainee teachers were in classroom management and pedagogy. This is not surprising given the levels of entitlement afforded students in the world of schooling, yet studies on student attitudes and levels of disaffection (Barber, 1996; Rudduck et al, 1996) suggested that students not only resented such isolation from issues of control but were potentially both able and willing to exercise their judgement in a principled way in matters relating to their educational experiences. As Verhellen (2000) suggested:

'For children themselves it means that they are seen as not-yets: children are defined as not yet knowing, not yet competent, and not yet being. By defining childhood as a preparation or transition period, children are placed in a state of limbo. They are obliged to wait and are required to prepare themselves as future performers.' (p.33)

Zion (2009) concurs:

'Students are affected daily by educational decisions made by adults inside and outside of school, but their voices often go unheard in the raging debates about schooling and school reform...students can provide insight into the effectiveness and sustainability of reform efforts, what helps them learn or

gets in the way of their learning, and what the school personnel might do to increase their opportunities for learning.’ (p.134)

As indicated above, schools have been centrally involved in the training of beginning teachers for more than two decades yet rarely have students’ opinions been sought on the impact the presence of trainees in their classrooms might have on their educational progress and wellbeing, let alone whether they, as learners, might have helpful contributions to offer on the developing practice of the trainees. Teachers have traditionally preserved their authority status either through habit or suspicion and trainee teachers are, possibly, most nervous of all in protecting their image. As Rudduck and Flutter (2004) commented:

‘Engaging in (student consultation) presents, for teachers, some potentially uncomfortable prospects: in particular concerns about being on the receiving end of personal criticism and concerns about what happens if the familiar hierarchical structure of the classroom is challenged by the principle of partnership.’ (p.147)

Yet partnership in training was what the government had sought to achieve. Might it yet grow another, more radical strand?

Student Voice and Initial Teacher Training:

Student Voice (sometimes termed pupil voice) has developed, both within the literature and daily practice, as a portmanteau term over the past twenty years. In its broadest application it refers to elements of a school’s activities, which involve students in some degree of interaction and decision-making in respect of policy and practice.

The two titles illustrate something of the problematic nature of the concept: ‘pupil’ connoting someone who is under the direct authority of a teacher or tutor, in essence a subordinate status; ‘student’ connoting someone who has, potentially, a greater share of autonomy in the organisation of their educational experience.

At its most basic, Student Voice implies an element of agency on the part of the individual learner, a capacity to select from, reflect upon, and critique what is on offer in schools. Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue that at the heart of Student Voice practice are four core values:

- ‘1. A conception of communication as dialogue.
2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity.
3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.
4. The possibility for change and transformation’ (p.8)

This is both an admirable and aspirational set of values yet Rudduck and others remind us that schools are conservative by nature and are often reluctant to acknowledge the changes and developments in young peoples’ attitudes and capacity to respond to their learning environment.

The emergence of an interface of trust, transparency and mutual respect in schools will require careful cultivation and the process towards collaborative engagement between students and adults may well be slow and painful.

Rudduck and Flutter (2002) suggest:

‘...it takes time and very careful preparation to build a climate in which both teachers and pupils feel comfortable working together on a constructive view of aspects of teaching, learning, and schooling.’ (p. 53)

It is clear that achieving such a consensual forum for productive dialogue will affect the traditional structures and relationships, which have prevailed in schools for more than a century. Fielding (2001) commented:

‘For many teachers Student Voice is seen as either peripheral, irrelevant or corrosive of the already diminishing legitimacy of teacher professionalism.’ (p.105)

Rudduck and Flutter (2004) argue for a transformatory approach as advocated by Robinson and Taylor above:

'In most schools transformation will be about re-casting teachers and pupils in a more participatory and collaborative relationship, reviewing perceptions of pupils' capacities to contribute actively to a range of school activities and allowing them to move outside their assigned cells as learners of the statutory curriculum into learning associated with a wider range of roles and purposes.'

(p.139-40)

It was this approach which sought to inform the project outlined below. Yet throughout the project's planning and implementation there was an awareness of the unequal and problematic power relations instanced above. As Fielding (2001) suggested, the subject of any Student Voice initiative is underpinned by the imperatives of:

'Who is allowed to speak?

To whom are they allowed to speak?

What are they allowed to speak about?

What language is encouraged/allowed?'

(p.100)

In other words, schools will police the process of Student Voice interactions with extreme care, alert to the possibilities of dissonant voices disrupting the apparent democratic surface of school life. The potential for transformation may become diluted by a process of assimilation; risk taking converted into risk avoidance.

Such concerns were apparent from the outset when the project was in its planning stage and issues of equity, transparency and ethical risk taking were present throughout the discussions, which preceded the project in its pilot phase.

Students' evaluations of Trainee Teachers: pilot project

The pilot project was undertaken as a collaborative programme between three ITT partnership schools in the city of Portsmouth and the researcher based in the School of Education and Continuing Studies of Portsmouth University. The schools were selected on the basis that they were among the first to have been involved in the ITT partnership programme, hosted large numbers of trainee teachers on a regular basis who were well supported by experienced school-based mentors and provided regular access to the researcher throughout the pilot project.

It was important at the outset to establish that there would be a sufficient number of trainee teachers willing to participate in the project so, at the same time as schools were contacted, the current cohort of PGCE English trainees was approached to ascertain their willingness to be involved. The choice of curriculum subject was made on the basis that the researcher had both academic and pastoral responsibility for this particular group and would be able to monitor, advise and intervene as the pilot evolved. Twelve trainees (40% of the cohort) expressed an interest in participating.

It was crucial that a number of key ethical concerns would need to be addressed before the project was launched and that these would require close monitoring throughout the life of the project. If any of the ethical issues became critical the researcher and school-based co-ordinators resolved to terminate the project in order to minimise risks occurring to the participants. It was agreed that if any participant, either student or trainee teacher, became uneasy with their on-going involvement they would be free to withdraw from the project with immediate effect.

For students participating it was crucial that no aspect of their involvement, however interesting it might be for them personally, should impede their anticipated academic progress. Particular care was taken to ensure that full

and informed consent was obtained from individual students, their parents or carers and senior management of the schools.

For the trainee teachers participating, it was equally crucial that no aspect of their involvement should impede their progress towards meeting the requirements for Qualified Teacher Status and the opportunity to gain subsequent employment. It was particularly vital that their developing confidence as beginning teachers and their day-to-day working relationships with students should not be adversely affected by their participation in the project.

A working party was formed to co-ordinate the development and schedule of activities for the pilot: this comprised the project co-ordinators from the three schools and the researcher. The initial proposals for action included:

- Establishing a focus group of the trainees who were to participate in the project.
- Identification of students who were to participate in the project, arrangement of school-based briefings for students and the setting up of university-based training on observation and feedback techniques.
- The establishment of protocols for school-based observations by students on trainee teachers; deciding on the frequency and number of observations and consideration of practical procedures to facilitate effective observations and discussions of the sensitivity of such episodes – particularly issues of confidentiality and the establishing of mutual trust and a shared understanding of the purpose of the observation.

The working party met at regular intervals throughout the pilot to monitor and review progress.

Trainee Teachers' Focus Group:

The focus group meeting was intended to provide an opportunity to explore attitudes and perceptions related to participation in the project. It took the form of a free-flowing SWOT analysis, a consideration of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with being observed and evaluated by students. The discussion was intense and a number of initial comments produced the following consensual views:

- Objective data on an individual trainee's classroom performance might not always be possible to produce.
- Constructive comments from students should be encouraged and responded to and adverse judgements should not be viewed as personal attacks.
- Students who participated in the project would be known to have been thoroughly briefed and trained and were assumed to be honest and positive in their motivation and judgements.
- The advantage to trainee teachers would be that they gain a clearer insight into students' expectations and what teaching strategies worked effectively in the classroom.

Some initial concerns raised by the trainees included:

- The possibility that student – trainee relationships might be adversely affected by the change in role and balance of power in the classroom.
- Students might be unrealistic in their expectation of trainee teachers' abilities – possibly expecting them to exhibit the same levels of confidence and competence as their regular, more experienced teachers.

- Students might not fully understand and apply the criteria which they were using to evaluate trainees' classroom practice.

These initial thoughts from members of the focus group were supported by some rich reflective comments:

'I think a child is going to see it...as they have a say in their education more than the relationship with the teacher being badly affected.'

'I don't see it as a child having an advantage over you - if anything I think they will see it as an advantage to themselves, to gain an insight and input into how they're being educated.'

'Their feedback to us is vital...we'll know what students expect in a teacher, which is like a golden nugget of information...to find out what kids actually want and what will motivate them to work is ideal.'

The focus group discussion produced a pragmatic and reflective set of responses. It should be noted that many beginning teachers view the prospect of being observed in the process of learning their craft with some trepidation, however experienced the observer may be. The potential for destabilising the personal and professional dynamic of the classroom as a consequence of involving students in such observations could not be underestimated. Much depended on the maturity and principled approach of the students selected to ensure that such a situation was not provoked.

Students' training for observation and evaluation of Trainee Teachers' classroom practice:

Six students from Year 8 (aged 12) in each of the three schools were invited to participate in the pilot project. Year 8 students were selected on the basis that they would have settled into their secondary education and have become familiar with established patterns of good practice in the classroom. The selection of the students by their class teachers, trainee teachers' subject mentors and project co-ordinators was made against the following criteria:

- Students selected would be interested in working positively with trainee teachers.
- Students would understand the criteria for making formative evaluation on trainee teachers' classroom practice.
- Students would sustain a level of interest and involvement for the duration of the pilot project.
- Students would feel confident in providing trainee teachers with verbal and written feedback on their classroom practice.

The six students selected from each of the three schools attended two training sessions at Portsmouth University's School of Education and Continuing Studies. On each occasion they were accompanied by their class teacher or the school's project co-ordinator. After a buffet lunch and an introduction to the nature and focus of the project they were engaged in collaborative workshops designed to raise their awareness of the work of trainee teachers in the classroom and develop skills of observation and evaluation.

Session 1:

The six students from each school were asked to identify key features which they believed contributed to making a good teacher. A short verbal 'brainstorming' session led to an extended period of discussion and debate on the personal and professional indicators involved in identifying a good teacher. The students elected to use flip chart paper and marker pens to illustrate and label such features. They worked in discrete school groups, though the visual and written presentations which resulted from forty five minutes of intense discussion and note making revealed striking similarities. Their views on what constituted a good teacher combined both personal and professional attributes.

Personal features included:

- Being friendly but formal in manner
- Being smartly but casually dressed
- Being consistent in manner and approachable
- Being able to deal with difficult situations
- Being patient and willing to listen
- Being able to identify (and possibly solve) problems
- Being fair and firm.

Professional features included:

- Being able to explain instructions clearly
- Being able to support individual learning needs
- Being able to control the whole class
- Being able to structure lesson activities clearly
- Being able to explain tasks in a variety of ways
- Being able to offer praise and sanctions in a calm and positive manner
- Being able to mark and comment on work in a reasonable time
- Being able to respond to the mood of the class.

To an experienced professional these might seem obvious criteria for becoming a successful classroom teacher but it is noteworthy that the Year 8 students who would have experienced several dozen teachers to date in their educational careers were able to distil these features so consistently. They

were equally keen to record the characteristics of less successful teachers which provided the obverse of the above lists.

The attributes or characteristics listed are general and it soon became obvious that the students were less secure in being able to identify the attributes of a good English or Maths or Science teacher. This is not surprising as their level of specific subject knowledge would not be sufficient to provide such clear cut judgements.

The first session ended with a whole group discussion of the extent to which a trainee teacher would be expected to exhibit these qualities in their first year of teaching. The students were sensitive to the fact that trainee teachers were still learning their craft and would be demonstrating a variety of levels of success in relation to the characteristics listed above.

Session 2:

On their second visit to the University the three groups of students were shown a training video produced by the Teacher Training Agency (now the Training and Development Agency for Schools) which is often used to assist subject mentors in schools in their development of formative judgements related to trainee teachers' classroom practice. The extract chosen showed a trainee teacher of English in the final stage of her second phase of training. The students were asked to provide written comments or notes on her setting of learning outcomes for the lesson; her monitoring of students' progress and her ability to motivate students.

The students worked in pairs and observed a ten minute sequence of the training video. As with their comments on what makes a good teacher, there were consistent observations and recommendations on the performance of the trainee teacher on the video clip. This suggested firstly that they could transfer their theoretical assumptions of a good teacher onto an example of actual classroom practice, and secondly, they could sustain their attention

over a reasonable length of time. The video clip was a mere ten minutes; an average classroom lesson would extend to forty five minutes and beyond.

The two training sessions provided evidence that the students from each of the three schools were both intellectually curious about what makes a good teacher and were capable of forming principled and balanced judgements in observed practice. At no time in these sessions were they formally introduced to the Standards which trainee teachers have to meet, though their comments revealed a tacit understanding of the classroom performance criteria which are implicit in the Standards. The training sessions also demonstrated their capacity for patient and good-hearted tolerance of trainee teachers' lapses or mistakes which suggested that the trainee teachers they would observe in their own classrooms would not be placed at risk.

Students' evaluations of Trainee Teachers in Partnership Schools

The third and final phase of the training programme provided an opportunity for each of the volunteer trainee teachers to be observed on two occasions (approximately two weeks apart) by a pair of student observers. In each case the lesson plan was provided to the student observers who were required to participate in the lessons as well as observe and record – a high level of activity. It was agreed that if the students' ability to participate actively in the lesson was compromised, then further observations and evaluation activities would cease. Each of the student observed lessons was also observed by the relevant subject mentor and the visiting University tutor. In each case students, though essentially working in pairs, sat apart in the classroom and only discussed their findings after the lesson had concluded.

The students used the standard observation form employed by university tutors and subject mentors. This is a template which provides a running record of the lesson, together with opportunities to record summative comments and set targets for further practice. The students were encouraged to record their observations in whatever way they felt most comfortable in so doing. What emerged over the sixteen observations undertaken was a

consistent approach to the process of observation, evaluation and recording. The following is an outline of the process of recording which the students undertook:

- **Beginning of lesson:**
 - Voice/presentation
 - Capturing the attention of the class
 - Stating aims of lesson
 - Revision of previous work

- **Teaching technique:**
 - Questioning
 - Practical work
 - Organisation of lesson
 - Explanations and clarifications
 - Use of board and resources
 - Timing of activities
 - Class management/trouble shooting
 - Motivating students
 - Seeking out, helping and showing concern for students
 - Encountering difficulties

- **Assessment and monitoring:**
 - Revision of previous work
 - Checking that lesson aims were met by the students
 - Checking that lesson aims were met by the teachers
 - Target setting
 - Use of praise and sanctions

This is a formidable taxonomy of classroom skills which trainee teachers by the last phase of their PGCE programme are just beginning to implement in full. They are difficult to record, particularly as they often occur simultaneously in a lesson and in a dynamic of real-time flux.

Students' reflections on the process of observing Trainee Teachers

The three groups of student observers met to consider their involvement in the process of observing trainee teachers. Each was invited to write an account of what the experience had given them and how, if at all, it might have proved of help to the trainees they had worked with.

Lucy commented: 'This...is a great help to trainee teachers, as it allows them to not only hear feedback from official observers, but to hear the opinions of the ones who benefit most from their methods...the students. They get advice from those who have had previous experiences of being taught. Yes, teachers have been taught, but most of the time they probably don't remember what school was like in their adolescence! I think the views of students who are actually experiencing different methods of teaching everyday are vital, because after all, we students are the ones who benefit from this, not only the trainee teachers.'

Her concern that trainees receive direct and specific advice from those engaged in learning was evident, as was her belief that students had current and in-depth understanding of personal learning experiences which would prove helpful to the trainee.

Matt was keen to indicate his awareness of the pressures trainees experienced in their early classroom encounters: 'From participation in this project I have learned that being a trainee teacher is a lot harder than I thought. They have to plan a lesson, control a class they don't know, work in a school with teachers they have to get to know quickly and all the time being watched and assessed by students younger than them...I learned that confidence plays a big part in teaching.'

This capacity to empathise with the challenge faced by the trainees was apparent from the outset and appeared to be at least one factor which motivated the students to participate in the project. It appeared that their own sense of being vulnerable and under pressure at times in their learning life could be translated into the experiences of beginning teachers.

Danielle also exhibited this empathetic stance when she commented on her participation in the project: 'From this experience I now know how the student teachers feel when teaching a class. I understand that if students are behaving badly the student teacher may feel under pressure and nervous. I know how hard it is for the trainees to manage the class.'

The student observers also reflected upon their own experiences in a role which was unfamiliar to them and which, at first, seemed to destabilise the normal dynamic of the classroom as they had experienced it previously.

Claire admitted: 'At first when I was asked to observe the student teachers I was nervous about sitting at the back of the classroom and making notes. But once I started I found it was easy. I was also unsure about giving them feedback because I thought they might take things the wrong way. However, I found that if I told them something they needed to improve on after I told them something they did well, it made it easier for them to understand.'

Sarah-Jayne believed that both parties had gained from the experience. In respect of the trainees she suggested: 'They have benefited from us observing them, because they now know what students think of the way they teach and ways to improve. In order to help them improve we gave them feedback on the lesson, their performance and tips on ways to handle students differently. From us observing them they can see what their teaching is like from a student's point of view, making it easier for them to understand what students like and how they like to learn.'

Adam also saw a reciprocal benefit in being involved: 'We benefited from this project as we learnt a lot about how teachers do their job. Also I think that the student teachers have to learn a lot in a short time and appreciated what we said so they could improve their teaching.'

It is possible to construe these comments (and similar others) as idealistic and somewhat naïve. Yet it was apparent that each of the student observers had taken their role seriously, had wanted to do what best they could to inform and support the trainees and had gained some initial purchase on the complex interplay between learning and teaching. They were articulate, enquiring and high achievers in their own right and so rose to the challenge with enthusiasm. A greater risk factor would have been involved if less confident, less motivated pupils had been offered a similar opportunity. Schools at the outset of the project were not prepared to take undue risks which might jeopardise the internal dynamic of the school or the early professional development of trainee teachers. Yet if the ethos of Student Voice is to be implemented fully and a sense of democratic participation to be realised it will be essential to offer similar opportunities to those students who are at the margins of such initiatives.

Trainees' reflections on being observed by Students:

Notwithstanding some of their earlier concerns and uncertainties, the majority of the trainees who volunteered to participate found the experience to have yielded positive outcomes. Only one of the group, a mature woman who had entered teacher training as a career change, had elected to withdraw. She freely admitted that, for her, the challenge of her notion of a changing hierarchical relationship within the classroom and her previous experience of being with children prevented her from feeling comfortable with the process and might have led her to leave the PGCE programme.

In the main the group, particularly the younger members, had felt they had gained in their professional development from feedback by students.

Lisa commented: 'The benefit was being able to see the perception of me as a teacher from a student's point of view as opposed to another teacher...I felt their comments were very rational and supportive'.

Simon described overcoming his initial concerns: 'It is a bit daunting in that it puts you in a defensive position if anything should go wrong...it's justifying yourself to the people that you teach...what I was worried about was that the classroom relationships would deteriorate...some respect might be lost...the students were a lot more forgiving than I had anticipated.'

Sara saw gains, potentially, for the students as well as the trainees: 'I think that actually considering the process of being taught helps them to value a little more of what goes on in a school...The students see teachers as human beings who can improve in what they do and be praised...I think it's the integration of students into adult life that helps to bring them on a little bit.'

Opinion was divided on the issue of whether it was preferable to be observed by students whom the trainees taught on a regular basis or whether neutral observers were better suited to the task. It was felt generally that a blend of the two options would provide a useful spectrum of feedback, though it was acknowledged that setting up such a pattern would be difficult to achieve. The trainees were agreed that if the feedback was to be used as a developmental tool to assist their progress then it would need to be undertaken at regular intervals and woven in with the feedback received from subject mentors, though they were aware that establishing a pattern of observations which linked a sequence of student and mentor episodes in a coherent and developmental way would be a logistical challenge for a school both in timetabling and development of human resources. They were alert to the fact that some schools viewed teacher training as part of their core business, whilst others placed it in a more peripheral context.

Overall, the benefits to their professional development of student observation and feedback was seen as an additional and informative contribution and outweighed the potential risks of undermining effective classroom relationships and management.

Ways Forward

The pilot project and its subsequent reiterations in the original group of schools, together with further innovations in schools in Hampshire, Southampton and the London Boroughs of Hackney, Kingston, Newham and Tower Hamlets suggest that it is feasible to involve students in the evaluation of trainee teachers' classroom practice. The research to date suggests that students are capable of the practical operation of such evaluations and are capable of forming balanced and principled judgements which can be recorded and reported in both verbal and written form. Trainee teachers, on their part, appear willing to receive such commentaries and evaluations as contributing to their formative development of good classroom practice.

Yet as Fielding (2001) notes with caution:

‘Are we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new, exciting and emancipatory that builds on rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation? ...Or are we presiding over the further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control?’ (p.100)

The warning is salutary and should serve to alert all those with a concern to ensure that schools become sites of genuine interaction between students and teachers that the process is gradual, the outcomes potentially problematic, yet with benefits in terms of understanding the complex nature of learning and teaching that accrue to all.