



# **Assessment in Teacher Education: North & South**

## **[ATENS]**

**A SCOTENS-funded research project**

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## **Executive Summary**

Central to any successful learning and teaching is assessment in its many forms. Therefore, this cross-border research project investigates the assessment of school-based placements as experienced by a sample of both primary and post-primary students. Those studying at either degree or post-graduate level in seven Initial Teacher Education institutions (four Northern/3 Southern) were sampled. Specifically, the project explores various teaching practice assessment techniques and the extent to which these are found to be satisfactory in the opinions of a selection of tutors and students. The resultant connections between such professional practices and subsequent planning, teaching and learning are also examined.

The findings are situated and critically discussed with particular reference to current thinking on formative modes of assessment. In an attempt to help inform the enhancement of practice, Rogoff's (1995) socio-cultural writings have been chosen as a suitable theoretical framework on which to hang this project. It is particularly relevant to the experience of pre-service teachers, in that it explores the balance between personal, interpersonal and cultural factors in learning as the student teacher journeys toward newly-qualified status. Due to the 'lived' nature of this research project, an interpretative approach is taken in the form of descriptive, thematic analysis in order to interrogate the data.

The findings of the project illuminate the reduced time and space students have in order to explore their teaching, integrate theory and pedagogy, reflect on practice and have professional, collegial conversations. These appear at times to be superseded by what students see as extraneous and repetitive college paperwork. Some student teachers claim that such pressures cause them to feel excluded from the community of practice within their schools, while others stated that they were simply not regarded as full-paid up members of the profession as yet. Current assessment methods are seen as being subjective and somewhat non-representative of teaching practice placement especially in terms of relationships forged and learning completed. The research found that, in the main, student teachers pre-empt how they are being assessed and work towards what they perceive as their respective tutor's personality. Although assessment for

learning is a journey that both tutors and students largely endorse, those students taking degrees and post-graduate certificates/diplomas that award grades tend to create a formula in order to gain as high a grade as possible, sometimes to the detriment of the feedback given. In other words, they attempt to formulize a formative process and so assessment is negating the process it is supposed to be measuring. In the research, students discuss a disconnect between the reality of practice that occurs within individual, engrained school cultures and systems of operating and college provision. Consequently, students sometimes feel conflicted between what is encouraged at college and what they are able to put into practice in the school setting. Perhaps more disturbingly, there were few if any linkages made by the students between their own experiences of being assessed and their subsequent planning, teaching and assessment of their pupils.

## Rationale

The concept of assessment has received much attention in educational literature (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b & 1999; Gardner, 2006) because it is now seen as an equally important element in the teaching and learning cycle. Huba and Freed (2000) broadly define it as the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep and vivid picture of students' knowledge and understanding. Such a process then allows for the provision of feedback to learners so that they are aware of how to help progress their own learning. Thus, both Assessment *of* Learning (summative) and Assessment *for* Learning (formative) have been explored and critiqued for use in classrooms across all age ranges (e.g., Assessment Reform Group, 2002; Gardner et al., 2010). Indeed, the assessment landscape has been further defined in recent years with the inclusion of Assessment *as* Learning (Bloxham, 2008). Subsequently, the ensuing educational debates and resultant curricular innovations in Northern Ireland (Council for Curriculum & Assessment [CCEA], 2007) and the Republic of Ireland (National Council for Curriculum & Assessment [NCCA], 2007) have served to secure the important place and role of assessment in the business of teaching in general.

This renewed emphasis on the need for professional reflection as embodied in formative assessment practices in particular is supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2005a:95) entitled 'Teachers Matter' wherein it stressed that,

*“...initial teacher education must not only provide sound basic training in subject matter knowledge, pedagogy related to subjects and general pedagogical knowledge, it also needs to develop the skills for reflective practice and research on the job.”*

Akin to this, is the Teaching Council's Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (2011) which queries the limited time and space given over to the meaningful cultivation of beginning teachers as reflective, enquiry-orientated, life-long learners. It emphasises the necessity of developing student teachers as continuous self-evaluators and collaborators in order to ensure that they can adapt throughout their careers and in addition keep the profession fresh. Indeed,

this philosophy underpins the current changes being implemented in teacher education courses in the Republic of Ireland as well as the existence of the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland's (GTCNI, 2007) competency-based reflective practitioner model.

Set against the above context, this study is timely since those going out to teach will be expected to assess their pupils with competence and confidence. Therefore, it is imperative that they have a deep understanding and experience of having been meaningfully assessed themselves. In that way it is more likely that they will be better equipped to provide the same quality service for others. This is all the more important since teachers will be educating pupils to take their place in the wider world of work which places increasing demands on employees to engage with various modes of communication, technology and self-development programmes. Therefore, being able to know oneself as a learner and having a bank of resources to draw on in order to further develop one's own knowledge base and skill set is essential. However, in the professional experience of both authors, it was often noted that students tended to return to the default position of awaiting assessment to 'be done onto them' by their tutors whilst on teaching practice rather than expecting to be an integral part of the decision-making process. This prompted us to consider how such a retrograde step in students' thinking might impinge on their ability to assess their own pupils might be affected.

### *Research Aims*

As a consequence of this educational policy backdrop, the following aims have been set for this research study:

- to explore the nature and conduct of school-based work assessments within concurrent (e.g., B. Ed) and/or consecutive (e.g., PG level) primary, post-primary and post-graduate degree pathways offered by a sample of Initial Teacher Education institutions in both jurisdictions.
- to investigate the extent to which the students and their college tutors find the various techniques employed to assess teaching placements as being useful in informing the next steps in the students' planning, teaching, learning and assessment of their own practice and their pupils' needs.
- to examine the grain of current assessment practices in the light of socio-cultural theory.

### *Research Questions*

Since a socio-cultural framework has been chosen as a lens through which to view this study, the following research questions have emanated from the above research aims:

- What is being assessed in the School-Based Work element in Initial Teacher Education and how is this being done?
- How are assessments of School-Based Work being used to inform students' subsequent planning, teaching, learning and assessment of their own and their pupils' needs?
- To what extent is the student involved in self- and/or peer-assessment of their teaching placement?
- How reflective of 'Communities of Practice' are current assessment methods of teaching placement?

A thorough examination of the literature is now a necessary segway into the findings and subsequent discussions of this research project.



## **Literature Review**

### *Introduction*

There is an old proverb that says ‘One man’s meat is another man’s poison’. This refers to the subjective nature between individuals’ tastes and opinions on any given matter. Such a philosophy holds true across a multitude of subjects and situations, including what constitutes best practice in education. This being the case, the thorny issue of how we measure or judge ‘good’ teaching and learning experiences presents itself. In attempting to solve such a conundrum, the Teaching Council of Ireland (2012) lists nine characteristics of effective school placement, namely:

1. a strong focus on learning,
2. relationships built on the core values of respect, trust and inclusion,
3. partnership,
4. professional engagement and ownership,
5. a whole school approach,
6. innovation,
7. integration,
8. improvement,
9. relationships and communication.

These tenets also closely mirror the reflective practitioner model (GTCNI, 2007) that underpins initial teacher education preparation courses in the north of Ireland. These philosophies are dominated by characteristics relating to the formation of knowledgeable, thinking, creative, collaborative practitioners who actively participate in the betterment of their own and others’ holistic life experiences.

Embedded within these philosophies is the concept of assessment. In recent years it has acquired a new-found status in the conduct of educational practice. An increasing research focus has been placed on the notion of assessment along with its many manifestations in the classroom.

Generally, debates lie around the summative versus formative polemic, often resulting in the jaundiced insinuation that they are mutually exclusive. Although this study touches on this dilemma, its focus centres mostly on the contradictory impacts current assessment procedures have on the dynamics of becoming and/or helping shape the formation of pre-service teachers. By blending socio-cultural and assessment theories, this study seeks to help cultivate an educational – cultural mindset around meaningful encounters of partnership between learner and educator. To this end, the Analysis and Review of Innovations in Assessment’s ‘Principles of Assessment Practice’ (Figure 1) were chosen as a guideline to determine our exploration of trainee teachers’ experiences of assessment in their teaching placements.

*Principles of Assessment Practice*

1. Assessment of any kind should ultimately improve learning.
2. Assessment methods should enable progress in all important learning goals to be facilitated and reported.
3. Assessment procedures should include explicit processes to ensure that information is valid and is as reliable as necessary for its purpose.
4. Assessment should promote public understanding of learning goals relevant to students’ current and future lives.
5. Assessment of learning outcomes should be treated as approximations and subject to errors.
6. Assessment should be a part of a process of teaching that enables students to understand the aims of their learning and how the quality of their achievement will be judged.
7. Assessment methods should promote the active engagement of students in their learning and its assessment.
8. Assessment should enable and motivate students to show what they can do.
9. Assessment should combine information of different kinds, including students’ self-assessments, to inform decisions about students’ learning and achievements.
10. Assessment methods should meet standards that reflect a broad consensus on quality at all levels from classroom practice to national policy.

**Figure 1:** Gardner et al., (2010:106-107)

In essence, these 10 principles advocate that assessment should be a relevant, transparent, multi-faceted and organic process that ultimately improves learning.

### *Summative v Formative Assessment*

*“When the cook tastes the soup, that’s formative: when the guests taste the soup, that’s summative.” (Stake, 2004:2)*

Gardner et al. (2010) make the crucial point that assessment activity itself is not inherently formative or summative but rather that it is the use to which it is put that defines it as such. If testing is used to improve pupil learning, it is formative (assessment **for** learning) but if the same testing is used to provide a result that will feature in a report, it is summative, (assessment **of** learning).

In 1998(b) Black and Wiliam’s seminal article ‘Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment’, identified the potentially sizable benefits to be made in learning when formative assessment is used as evidence to adapt teaching to meet students’ needs. Such sentiments were corroborated in the OECD’s 2005(b) report that describes formative assessment as ‘*perhaps one of the most important interventions for promoting high performance ever studied (p22)*’. Unsurprisingly therefore, much contemporary research has been attempting to connect college and school experience as a result (Grossman et al., 2009: Zeichner, 2009). Consequently, practices such as observation, reflection, mentoring and peer learning are woven into teacher education courses to varying degrees and in various forms. Despite this, understanding and implementation of formative assessment in teacher education programmes nationally and internationally has proven to be a complex and challenging endeavour.

The misunderstanding and misuse of formative assessment is due in part to what Black and Wiliam (1998b) term as a poverty of practice in schools alongside an empty commitment from policy-makers and institutions. In their follow-up article ‘Assessment for Learning: Beyond the

Black Box' (1999), they outline five deceptively simple factors that help improve assessment and in turn learning. These are:

1. the provision of effective feedback,
2. the active involvement of pupils in their own learning,
3. adjusting teaching to take into account the results of assessment,
4. a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils and
5. the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

These factors echo Gardner et al's (2010) understanding of assessment, namely that it occurs most effectively in a rich, mutually respectful and participatory atmosphere. In other words, it is a socially-dependent and by extension culturally-defined endeavour.

### *Rogoff's Socio-Cultural Theory*

Barbara Rogoff's (1995) socio-cultural theory is deemed particularly relevant to the experience of student teachers since it deepens our understanding of much of the research on formative assessment. Her work readdresses the balance between personal, interpersonal and cultural factors in learning. She claims that individuals and their environment and actions are inextricably linked, thus all such elements of an encounter or endeavour bring context and intelligibility to a situation. Therefore, she moves assessment from the sole responsibility of the educator to the shared responsibility of the educator and learner, taking into account the supporting landscape of experience, language, histories etc. She conceives of participation in communities as occurring across three interlinked and interdependent planes, namely '*apprenticeship*', '*guided participation*' and '*participatory appropriation*'. She defines these cultural, social and personal practices as the multi-layered and non-hierarchical sites where learning occurs simultaneously since all three planes are '*mutually constituting*' (Rogoff, 1995:139). It is perhaps helpful to think of these planes as spheres of experience rather than

concrete places such as college, school etc. Members often hold varying status in participation, depending on whichever community of practice they find themselves in.

Rogoff's (1995:142) metaphor of '*apprenticeship*' refers to participation relating to community, culture and family around shared funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Members of such communities of practice increase their expansive skills and understanding through active participation with others in '*culturally organised*' activities, a well-established theory in the field of social science (Bruner, 1983; Dewey, 1916; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). It acknowledges that the specific goals of the community are shaped by the '*institutional structure and cultural technologies of intellectual activity*' (Rogoff, 1995:143-146). In other words, cultural constraints, values, resources and tools define and influence that particular community and its activities. Therefore, student teachers cannot be a homogeneous group since they enter teaching practice shaped by their own unique histories, relationships, learning and assessment experiences which in turn shape their practice and identity formation. Accepting the premise that teacher education and particularly teaching placement is not a neutral and equivalent activity, surely the assessment of teaching practice must involve partnership in a bid for equity.

Rogoff's (1995:146-150) second plane, '*guided participation*', refers to the social or interpersonal experiences concerned when in the novice phase of learning. It alludes to such activities as conversations, communications, interactions and collaboration which occur between individuals as they negotiate and co-ordinate their participation in '*socio-culturally structured collective activity*'. It includes both deliberate attempts to instruct and casual conversations that occur between expert and learner or among learners. For student teachers, this plane identifies their need to be allowed and indeed facilitated to learn from interactions with and relationships between each other, colleagues, supervisors and mentors.

Rogoff (1995: 150-160) states that the basic idea of the final plane, '*participatory appropriation*' is that through social participation, individuals transform their understandings of and engagement in similar future activities. This personal plane of learning includes many aspects such as

cognition, emotion, behaviour, values and beliefs. Consequently, this study examines the extent to which student teachers are given the freedom to reconcile the college demands of teaching practice and the schools' expectations as they journey toward their own understanding and practice of what it means to be an educator. In other words, from the point of view of agency, how do trainee teachers perceive their role[s] as they move within and between these interlinking communities of practice?

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

Thirteen courses drawn from seven colleges across the island of Ireland were our selected sample. They included both primary and post-primary pathways within under-graduate and post-graduate courses, including Irish-Medium courses where possible. Considering the small-scale nature of this work and the fact that it would be easy to identify the Northern cohort in particular, none of the colleges are named and our findings and discussion are dealt with thematically rather than by institution. Not to approach the study in this manner would have contravened the laws of anonymity and confidentiality, thus leading to an unethical design. Focus group interviews were held with 6-8 students from each of the courses chosen. In the case of B Ed courses, final year students were earmarked while in the one year courses (PG certificates) interviews were held after students' final placements, where feasible. It was expected that having been through the maximum number of placements they would have the most to contribute to the project in terms of experience. In addition, individual interviews were carried out with School Placement Coordinators and teaching practice tutors in each institution. Both sets of interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded and transcribed for the final analysis. To support our understanding of the specifics of teaching practice and therefore the design of our data-collection instruments, we completed a document comparison of student handbooks, course guides and related School-Based Work paperwork ahead of meeting the sample.

In order to best capture the lived experiences of the student teachers our study necessitated a qualitative approach represented by the use of narrative and rich, shared discussion. From these conversations it was possible to then identify emerging themes. These are then analysed in the light of Rogoff's (1995) socio-cultural planes of participation theory and formative assessment literature. As a result, practical recommendations are offered as an invitation to teacher educators who read this report to consider other possible approaches to assessing teaching placement that might enhance their current practice.

## Findings

This section presents the main findings of our research study. Due to the method of analysis chosen, it is divided into four main sections.

### 🌀 **Section One: *Comparing Paperwork***

We begin with a brief examination of the types of assessment approaches taken across the sample institutions. This includes the format and purpose of the paperwork and practice involved in preparing, teaching and assessing as experienced by staff and students.

### 🌀 **Section Two: *'Apprenticeship Phase'***

The next section begins the analysis by discussing those aspects of the job that involve '*culturally organised*' activities (Rogoff, 1995:142). Many of these lay in the preparation phase for teaching practice, namely planning/paperwork, reflection and observation.

### 🌀 **Section Three: *'Guided Participation'***

We then focus largely on the experiences gained when liaising with mentors (mentor teachers), supervisors (college tutors), students and peers.

### 🌀 **Section Four: *'Participatory Appropriation'***

Finally, we consider the core learning students have gained as they prepare to enter the world of newly-qualified status. This is examined under the heading of 'Communities of Practice' since it is hoped that they will feel very much a part of such rather than apart from.

By looking through the lens of teaching practice assessment, it is possible to determine to what extent various methods help formulate students' professional identity and therefore capability to address their own teaching, learning and assessment needs as well as those of their pupils. Throughout this section, reference is made frequently to the use of final grades or passes and fails and how this coalesces with current formative assessment theory or not.



## **Section One: Comparing Paperwork**

One of the constants across all of the teacher education institutions involved in this study is the importance of planning and preparation as signified by the students' teaching practice files. Consequently, planning and preparation is outlined in all student handbooks as an area of assessment. The initial development of the teaching practice file is supported by tutors before students go on placement in all cases. Subsequently, tutors examine the teaching practice files on each teaching practice supervision. However, the provision of ongoing support at college level in the development of paperwork varies between institutions.

All institutions share a similar format for this file, namely the inclusion of schemes of work, lesson plans and reflections. Grading varies from pass/fail (mostly in post-graduate courses) to a calibrated A→E grade (mostly in B Ed courses) with an overall 1<sup>st</sup> class Honours → fail grade. In the main, the college tutors decide on the final, agreed grade awarded to students. In some institutions this is impacted to some degree by the host teachers'/schools' report; however, the tutors' assessment of the students' performance takes precedence. Only in the case of a wide discrepancy between tutors' opinions, especially if a compromise was difficult to strike would the host teachers'/schools' written report gain greater weight.

## **Section Two: 'Apprenticeship Phase'**

### *Planning/Paperwork, Reflections & Observations*

*"the easiest way to describe it is it is like being hit by a train .... I find it very hard to see beyond the next few days"*  
(student)

The guidance students receive in relation to creating and maintaining their files varies widely between and within institutions. Some have the opportunity to ask tutors to look at their plans before they go out on practice but the majority do not. In the main, students are dissatisfied with what they regard as too much unnecessarily repetitive paperwork, adding to the burden of already very demanding courses. Some go so far as to state that this preoccupation with

superfluous paperwork not only absorbs the time and space necessary for them to explore their teaching, integrate and reflect on theory and practice and have professional conversations but it also excludes them from classroom life.

*“....you can get a bit out of the loop with the teachers...they tend not to come near you either because they do realise the amount [of paperwork] you have to do.” (student)*

This situation can become further conflicted if institutional expectations and school practice in relation to planning differs.

Students also expressed general confusion in terms of what is being assessed. While files are collected by tutors, on their return to their owners they generally receive a sheet with boxes ticked to indicate that all required paperwork is present. There is a small space for general feedback but students feel that this is not enough. They would like standardisation of what is to be assessed in a bid for fairness to all. They questioned whether their paperwork was being marked on the quality of genuine student experience or was it more heavily reliant upon individual tutor's styles and preferences? As a consequence, students are primarily concerned with what a particular supervisor might be looking for in a file, rather than using it as a tool for further professional development.

*“If you look at everyone's file they are similar...It seems like they have a lot of scope to do what they want...where it should be more like a maths problem.” (student)*

Similarly, tutors also acknowledge the ambiguity around the assessment of these files. In the latter teaching placements, they are more willing to allow for creativity and flexibility in producing the teaching practice file in general and lesson planning in particular. Students alluded to the empowering nature of this relaxed move, so much so that it had the effect of encouraging them to use the contents as a resource to aid their practice rather than just another task to be completed. In other words, the teaching practice file begins to represent a closer depiction of their real, lived teaching placement experiences. A student in one of the focus groups called for a rebalance between paperwork and practice by saying,

*“I could be a terrible teacher all year and produce a great TP file and I can still get great marks. I can be interacting badly with my students or treating my peers or the secretary badly but once I have my file in tip-top shape I can get the marks.”*

### *Reflections*

The majority of students readily agree that reflection is important however they regard its presence within teaching practice as relatively meaningless. For example, it was referred to in various derogatory terms as ‘going through the motions’, ‘paying lip service’ or even ‘pulling teeth’. One student summarised the attitude in the main to reflection by stating,

*“It forced me to go through different methodologies but I think it can be somewhat contrived because we have to do it. If something happens in a class that motivates you to think about it, that is fine ...if...nothing happens and you still have to go away and write it up I don’t find that helpful.”*

Some students believe that the reflections built into teaching practice are asking them to reflect on what they already know. Others state that they are too forced and generic, thus not taking into account that every school is different. They appreciated that reflections were a legitimate way of assessing professional values and providing an understanding of the journey from student to teacher, but only where the reflection was meaningful and real for the student. Many tutors also concurred that when reflections evolve naturally as a consequence of teaching, they carry greater meaning for students. A number of tutors believed that in this case, reflections could play a larger role in determining students’ final grades.

### *Observation*

The following two quotes reflect the range of opinions expressed in relation to observations.

*“...those two weeks every year are a waste of time.” (student)*

*“Through observation students learn things that can only be learnt in class.” (School Placement Coordinator)*

Although generally expected, there was a lack of clarity around the aspect of observations which were either the sole responsibility of the student or jointly organised between the student and the university. As a result, a small percentage thought that perhaps briefings on what and how to observe might be beneficial. Some institutions encouraged initial observational periods as general good practice and in the majority of cases, these occurred in the students' designated class/phase. By contrast, a few tutors expected continuous observations throughout students' placements. In some cases, students are permitted to observe teachers other than their host teacher but this would have to come from the students' own initiative and agreement from the school. Consequently, they spoke very positively about the benefits of seeing such different approaches. There was a general expectation that students try to gain new experiences where possible such as working in a Special Educational Needs unit etc. Many found that being given opportunities to observe various age groups in terms of their differentiated needs was invaluable.

With regard to observational templates, there was great variance here too. Institutions offering post-graduate courses tended to provide detailed instructions as to what students should observe and in some cases when to observe such facets of school/classroom life, especially in their first block placement or two. These tended to progress from the gathering of logistical information to noting down their host teachers' pedagogical methods. Specifically, one or two subject departments in post-primary outlined very particular tasks for their students to carry out during their observational period, for example, focused observations, small group teaching and tracking a single pupil for a day etc. Those teaching B. Ed. courses, however expected final year students to have gained enough professional experience to know what to look for at this point in their career since they were now on the cusp of 'assuming the mantle' of NQT status. A minority felt that having a focus for observation took away from the learning potential of being asked to observe.

Due to the pressures in time and workload, some students saw the observations as pragmatic and practical rather than rich and experiential. In other words, it was more about focusing on the classroom routines and the pupils' needs and such issues rather than observing and learning from the teachers' practice. Others felt that the observational period was very important for getting to

know the children and especially the host teacher's personality. As a consequence of the very busy nature of the classroom, students ended up getting heavily involved in the activities and relationships with the pupils.

Most notably, observations were infrequently followed up in any of the institutions in a formal way. This was something that students lamented about since there was potential to share valuable insights and queries with staff and peers. Some tutors also felt that students missed out by only going out to schools in blocks and at certain times, thus never experiencing a school year through from start to finish. Some called for the formalization of the mentors' role, with students regularly visiting and observing their mentor across a school year as a means of providing observations that fulfill a more formative and practical role in teacher education.

### **Guided Participation**

#### *Mentoring*

*"We all have very different experiences. We don't all interact in the same way. Some are of a more limited capacity and some are more hands-on where you get mentoring for every class and session." (student)*

Generally it was found that host teachers were interested in their students' progress but their input in terms of mentoring (viewing paperwork and critiquing practice) was extremely variable, depending on the individual teacher and school. This was acknowledged overall by college tutors. Some students thought it feasible to expect a greater role for their mentor teacher when deciding grades since as one student noted, *'my mentor sees me 98% of the time and my supervisor sees me 2% of the time...there is no balance.'* One Schools' Placement Coordinator stated strongly that although shared responsibility around grading is a commendable idea, the colleges legally *'carry the can'* for awarding grades. Therefore, tutors must be clear as to what and how to assess fairly. It is encouraging if the school informs and affirms the grades given. She noted that difficulties arise when a principal, for instance says one thing in a telephone message to the college but writes something different on the final report. Some students feel that basing the teaching practice grade primarily on a small series of short and sometimes non-

representative supervisions is unfair, especially since there appears to be no absolute benchmark for comparisons.

*“...you can tell instantly if someone has a good rapport and values in their class but I don’t know to what extent that is measurable with a grade. Actual supervisions are so limited in comparison to your school life. You need to get perspectives – teachers, students etc. (student)*

Overwhelmingly, mentors preferred to give oral rather than written (tangible) feedback since they did not wish to write disparaging comments. Additionally, they were reluctant to encroach on students’ space too much or indeed create neediness in their charges. Such varying degrees of involvement warranted a mixed reaction from students. Some appreciated having relative professional independence and autonomy and they liked being trusted whilst others wanted greater affirmation of their work and stronger collaborative working relations. Negotiating this difficult position can be quite demanding for students since certain social skills are needed to succeed in this environment. Overall, host teacher involvement was viewed positively by students, although the inconsistency between mentoring experiences and styles was also highlighted as being significantly problematic.

*“You hear stories of big conflicts with older host teachers not happy with the (revised) curriculum so when a young teacher comes in and is very comfortable with a different style that can cause conflicts....this can also be very important to the learning process for us because we will be going into schools and working with lots of different types of teachers. That’s the social nature of teaching and you just have to get on with it.” (student)*

When it comes to final grades, students feel that like is not often compared with like in terms of mentorship. Their peers are commended for teaching in a particular way while they are prohibited from doing so. As one disgruntled student put it, *‘I could not teach the way I wanted because I had to go her way.’* This said, despite possible tensions, students see the mentor role as key to their motivation and experience of teaching practice since *‘you have someone else pushing you to be the best’* thus exceeding your own expectations.

Tutors also value the mentor role. They suggest that a tightening of the school and mentor roles could help strengthen and deepen those valuable, shared experiences during the delicate and often fraught guided participation stage. Perhaps the mentor could play a more central and inclusive part in students' teaching experience and maybe have greater input into their assessment. However, as one Schools' Placement Coordinator cautioned, that despite student feedback being very positive on the aspect of mentorship, its value is questionable,

*"...how in-depth and critical it is, is another thing – whether it is survival tips or deep pedagogy – we don't go there. They get supportive and well-meaning feedback but how valuable it is, is questionable."*

Although a post-primary tutor expressed a desire for all parties involved with the students to have input, they voiced a greater concern about the process of grading,

*"It is our tendency to create templates for things but when that happens it can become a box-ticking exercise and lose its soul – how can you assess something without killing it?"*

Interestingly, all interviewees acknowledged the complex problems inherent in the mentorship of teaching practice and tutors were especially mindful that students are always guests in the host school and therefore no formal demands can be made. One Schools' Placement Coordinator spoke at length about the need for deep and meaningful consultation with mentor teachers around mentorship since they were being asked *'to move beyond their normal role'*. Further professional development and support structures might bring a greater sense of *'shared ownership'* and *'respect [for] all parties'*.

### *Tutors*

The supervisory role of the tutor is rife with controversy as many students claim that the tutor they are assigned often greatly impacts their teaching practice and consequently, formation as a teacher.

*"My inspector is lovely and even brought me sweets because I was sick but other nameless supervisors are aggressive. Others have*

*continuous bad experiences with their supervisors and also different students all have problems with the same supervisor. The supervisor grades you so it is very important – that is the bottom line.” (student)*

This being the case, it is not uncommon for students to pre-empt their tutor’s preferences and priorities in terms of what is deemed valuable for assessment, thus endeavouring to appease the tutor’s perceived personality traits.

*“You will tip off the kids to let them think they are being inspected. You don’t really introduce anything new... because it could go wrong.” (student)*

This said, some students treat supervision as business as usual,

*“I just want them to come to a normal class, I don’t do crazy bells and whistles lesson plans. I want them to see how I always teach I think that is a better attitude to have.” (student)*

Although assessment for learning is a journey and students largely endorse this, they tend to create a formula in order to gain a high grade. There is perceived variance in what different tutors see as important influences on grading (file versus teaching versus reflections versus debriefing) and in how teachers grade their students (generously or not) thus making teaching practice an uneven playing field. In this regard students do not know what is being assessed or how it is being assessed and openly wonder if tutors themselves are any the wiser. As one frustrated student commented,

*“It is like good cop/bad cop and it is very hard. You could be pulled one way by one examiner and another by the other because there is nothing set.”*

Another added discouragingly,

*“I really liked my supervisor and her approach but the end result is still not going to be between the two of us. So you are wondering am I doing enough, am I there or not?”*



This point was picked up again when a number of students felt that if schools had a greater say in grading them, this would especially help prevent situations where tutors might have preconceptions about students before they visit. Similarly, it could help off-set the somewhat rigid college marking guidelines that do not really take different schools' practices and cultures into account.

Among some of the post-graduate course participants there is a general feeling of satisfaction with a straightforward pass/fail as reflected in one student's comment,

*“The year is meant to be a progression...giving it a grade would devalue the whole experience of learning and progress...for morale it would be bad too and it would become more competitive.”*

Other students voiced their support by saying that being issued grades was an insufficient measure of their practice since they were narrowly based on brief snapshots across quite a lengthy time period. By being given a straightforward pass/fail notification, post-graduate students argued that they were able to focus on the accompanying feedback which was of paramount importance, whereas a final grade allocation negated the possibility of improvement which stood in contradiction to what good assessment should be about. This was bolstered for some by the necessity to complete a formative profile form after each teaching practice block. The content of these documents were influenced by tutors' and host teachers' reports. This does not bear through to courses where grades are given. However, some called for more opportunities for dialogue so as to give them a better sense of their ability levels,

*“It all seems a bit mysterious and the only concrete bit of advice seems to be if you are doing really badly you would know about it ....there could be more room for a consultation process along the way....because it is high stakes for us and five visits is not very many so to know where you are would be excellent.” (student)*

On a related note, students commented on the quality of tutor feedback given since some found it to be descriptive as opposed to critical and informative which would help facilitate their progress more explicitly. Specifically, there was some dissatisfaction where narrative grade descriptors

were used. They found it difficult to decipher clearly between, for example, grades A and B since they are very similar. As a result, some students don't try to work out the detail and instead such paperwork is stored in their teaching file where it is largely ignored.

One Schools' Placement Coordinator flagged up what she saw as a dilemma in terms of the misconstrued messages awarding grades can give. She felt that there can be a kind of expectation that because you have been accepted into the college you are a teacher-in-waiting. In other words, it is merely about going through the procedures to gain qualified status. She added strongly that some students appear to think that they are entitled to receive their degree because they have paid for it. On a finer note around inherent misconceptions about assessing student competence, she commented that some students erroneously think that the grade was only for the lesson observed. This negates the taking of a more holistic view of what is going on more widely in their practice, thus the use of various sources of evidence i.e., host teachers' input, final school report etc. In order to remedy this problem, one institution that normally awards grades is reverting to a pass/fail in Year 1. Instead, students will be required to provide written or enduring evidence of what they have done on teaching practice. For these reasons, some students felt that they would be in a better position to grade themselves and are critical of the feedback given after supervisions. As one disenchanted student quipped '*it is not a conversation, it is someone reading out to you*' with no room to rebut points.

In the main students are frustrated with the very real difficulties they experience as they try and access and assess their learning on this social plane. Such uneasy sentiments were echoed by one Schools' Placement Coordinator who acknowledged the dilemma of subjectivity around assessment. She elaborated by claiming that there is reluctance in using the word average and certainly below average in assessments, attributing this to a continued trend in elevated grading due to "*having moved to mass higher education*" and by extension a "*redefined*" degree. She empathised with the students, commenting that in her institution there "*isn't really a fixed notion of assessment... [since] all the numbers etc. have moved up [therefore] assessment is a woolly area*". She questioned the value of giving a grade because it meant "*trying to be precise about something which is not precise and is being continually changed*". She acknowledged the

students' beliefs that often they experience inconsistency in being assessed on placement since grades were merely arbitrary and open to interpretation. She concluded that students had a valid point since often "*beauty is in the eye of the beholder*".

### *Peer Learning*

Although there was an array of opinions expressed, it would appear that many students experience isolation whilst on placement despite a mixture of opportunities existing for peer- as well as self-assessment. For instance, in one institution, the post-graduate students visit each other in their final placement to observe and team-teach if they wish. By contrast, they choose someone in an entirely different context. Though daunting, they find it to be an invaluable learning experience. Back in college, courses are delivered in very practical ways for demonstration purposes and also to facilitate students in peer-teaching and assessment. This approach is complemented by the use of micro-teaching video footage and collaborative on-line discussions and feedback around a specific weekly focus, for example, differentiation. Involvement in these types of activities contributes to the students' on-going formative profile, thus helping them develop their understanding and acumen around the GTCNI (2007) competences.

In another post-graduate institution, students spoke positively of what can potentially be gained in observing each other especially in terms of learning about classroom management and behaviour. However, they lamented the fact that often there aren't enough students to allow this to happen. Also, they feel that there's a greater emphasis on lesson evaluation rather than peer-assessment. One subject department within this institution takes advantage of peer-learning since their students need to be able to teach all specialisms within the subject area. Therefore they can draw on each other's strengths for those aspects they are least confident in teaching. These students also create lesson plans together which is found to be an advantageous way of working.

A third institution does not formally facilitate peer-assessment but rather reflections and evaluations which are types of self-assessments. They can engage in this way with others in the school but generally this does not happen due to pressing time and timetabling constraints. The primary students welcome the opportunity to peer-assess as being beneficial despite finding it nerve-wrecking. However, planning and collaboration tends to happen more by chance. Primary students felt that both on placement and back at college they had insufficient peer-learning. They felt this was due to large class sizes and whether or not their tutors and schools were prepared to facilitate such arrangements. One student shared her experiences from a special school and this was found to be extremely helpful. Another note-worthy exception was the completion of a collaborative task centred around teaching practice the previous year. This was found to bring interest and reflection to the process especially since it involved negotiation and compromise, much like in real world teaching staffs. Despite time being at a premium, thus rendering it difficult to meet up and plan, some students would like to see this type of interaction made compulsory. Post-primary students endorsed these sentiments, commenting that informal chats snatched during lunchtime do not compare with focused and fruitful peer-assessment opportunities. It was suggested that perhaps designated classes allowing for collaboration and dissemination in final year before and after placement would help reassure and anchor them as it had done in other years. Students wanted more peer-assessment and in contrast questioned the usefulness of all the self-assessment (reflection) on their courses. There seems to be a copy and paste attitude to reflections in comparison to the richness of peer-learning.

Interestingly, the Schools' Placement Coordinator of the final institution noted that despite seeming desirable, in practice peer-assessment just did not work well for their students.

*“In briefing sessions they talk about communities of practice and encourage peer-assessment but the very competitive nature of the job market does not facilitate collaboration.”*

She elaborated by saying that due to somewhat unintended negative effects as a result of peer-teaching with their first year students in the past, they have shelved this practice across the college. Rather than create a supportive framework for movement into second year, a sizeable number of students foundered in the class without their peer. She believes that schools' cultures

in this part of the world are *'not there yet in terms of [this] more relaxed but effective thinking'* unlike in Scandinavian countries despite the fact that the latter still score very well in international tests.

On a brighter note, Year 4 students in one institution are given a prime opportunity to self-assess by being asked to formally reflect and report to staff on their development as teachers over their four placements. This is to be accompanied by a supporting portfolio of evidence. Although a plausible idea to facilitate individuality, there is a tendency for such presentations to become *"carbon copies of each other"*. The students work out that there is a formula to getting good marks so they pursue that avenue rather than think about the benefits they have gained over the course of their placements. The tutor says that if they formalise it too much, it becomes routine and once it can be measured, often it ceases to measure what it originally intended to measure.

### ***Participatory Appropriation***

#### *Communities of Practice [CoP]*

As in so much of this study, experiences vary greatly from school to school when discussing students' views around being part of a *'community of practice'* (CoP). There was a feeling among some students that they did indeed feel part of a community of practice in their placement schools, without question. They mentioned the double benefit of having been afforded the opportunity to teach as well as learn on the job. A number of post-primary students felt appreciated as members of a CoP since often they got to attend departmental meetings and teachers would mention having learnt from them. They felt that this is particularly true in forward-thinking departments except when the constraints of exams begin to impinge on this dynamic. They liked when they were regarded and respected as a fresh pair of eyes in the classroom and on the team which was often the case. In one particular institution, the students talked at length about the many positive aspects they bring to schools such as modern methods, new ideas and active approaches. Their qualities include enthusiasm, clarity of vision, passion and cross-germination across schools, age groups and experiences. As a result, some students

are embraced openly by being party to all conversations and being permitted to use all facilities. They have enjoyed being in a group of professionals who share ideas and resources and advise each other. It is telling however that other students had quite different and sometimes almost hostile experiences as illustrated by the following vignettes,

*“There is a clear divide in the staffroom between the older teachers and the younger ones and the sub-teachers – it is very obvious who is who when you walk in.”*

*“The first day we sat at the wrong table unknowingly but we were asked to get up - that was the male corner and no-one else was allowed over there.”*

*“...some staff will not even look at you in the corridor....there are four computers in the staffroom and we were told if you see a teacher waiting for one get up immediately. We are not allowed to park in the main school car park because there are so many of us we have to park around the back.”*

Encouragingly, many students across the phases felt that by their final placement, the school staff and pupils overall regarded them as qualified teachers and so treated them accordingly. Whenever they felt welcome and part of a CoP, in other words, trust had been fully established, they did not mind when other teachers entered the class while they were teaching. Some students relished the opportunity to plan with their mentor teacher but then really appreciated being given professional autonomy to implement it in their own way. One student compared her teaching placements on both sides of the border. She felt that more full days' teaching in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year would facilitate feelings of being part of a CoP in a much wider sense (such as liaising with parents). As one student commented, it would also reinforce to the pupils that they are *'real teachers'* sooner.

In order to strengthen their commitment to the host school, most became involved in clubs, societies, sports, Christmas plays etc. Others appreciated the professional benefits derived from being involved in report-writing, planning, open days, exam invigilation and in the case of one student, sitting in on a parent-teacher meeting. A post-primary tutor recognized that those students who *'went the extra mile'* held a stronger identification with their departments' and/or

schools' CoP. It might be noted however, that such duties tended to fall outside the students' direct placement remit. As a consequence of trust being in place, students felt that they rose to the challenge because they felt important and so their observations were sharper. Being allowed to or having the initiative to help out and work together engendered a sense of CoP. Ironically, post-primary students, a primary tutor and a Schools' Placement Coordinator noted that it is possible to feel part of a subject department CoP but not the wider school. They did not particularly lament this fact since they claimed that often best practice can be shared in informal forums such as during break and lunchtimes.

Others had less positive experiences in this regard. Some felt that they were considered outsiders and therefore treated as such.

*"I think they can use us more. We are all very progressive and have been very forthcoming and would love to get involved...but it seems to be just not on the table or available to us. When someone is offering to do stuff and it is not being taken up I think that is odd." (student)*

Occasionally, a few long-standing teachers appeared a little territorial at times. This attitude was seen to surface mostly when college and school practices ground alongside each other, for example technology versus textbooks. The students commented on the need for diplomacy in these situations so as not to come across as being disrespectful of the host school. For these very reasons, the students mentioned how they try to be circumspect when choosing a school since each has its own dynamic. By 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year, they are really in a much stronger position to pick up on the values of a school.

Specifically, those students, training within the Irish Medium sector tended to feel very much part of a CoP because the Irish-speaking teaching community is a small and close-knit one. The teaching profile of this sector is quite young and many have come through the same initial teacher education institution. To complement such professional links and so make teaching practice a much more shared experience, they also form a class CoP through e-mailing and sharing ideas with each other.

## Analysis & Discussion

The '*culturally organised*' activities referred to by Rogoff (1995:142) in the '*apprenticeship*' phase demarcates the beginnings of what will eventually develop into mature participation as students journey toward newly-qualified status. There appears to be disparity between what tutors expect and are seen to value in regards to paperwork and what students understand the paperwork to entail, especially in terms of priority status. This is exacerbated by two things, namely the tutors' perceived preferences and personality traits. When their apprenticeship experience moves out into schools, clashes sometimes occur where additional and sometimes different cultural practices and priorities exist.

It is apparent that students perceive this phase as being one where paperwork tasks are ticked off their to-do list in a product-driven manner, largely because of the quantity of content to be covered. Conversely, tutor feedback on the teaching practice file tends to be predicated on a checklist-type of system and this seems to reinforce the tendency to lean toward summative rather than formative [or a mixture of] assessment practices and purposes. In addition, professional discussions, peer-review and debriefing from observations become diminished in essence. Where they do exist, they tend to serve pragmatic purposes rather than the deepening and development of pedagogical practice. Ironically, many of the students display very positive attitudes toward assessment and recognize the value and potential for professional growth inherent in formative methods if harnessed and focused in a particular way. Unfortunately, what appears to be a process to be engaged in deeply, conversed about with peers and elders over time is being turned into a subjective product to be graded and therefore, for the most part remains apart from students' vibrant, lived experiences.

Engaging learning on the plane of '*guided participation*' is extremely important for student teachers since it facilitates them moving from legitimate peripheral participation where they watch and learn from colleagues to becoming fully functioning members of the host school. Despite overall acknowledgement of the value and necessity of mentorship by the mentor teachers, it appears to be a loosely defined concept. As a result, it would seem that no particular



perimeters are negotiated and so great variance in experience occurs. There is a widespread feeling among students that much of their success [or failure] depends on the personal and professional relationship engendered between them and their host teachers. There is reluctance on the part of many of the mentor teachers to stipulate the nature and conduct of this relationship since they seem unsure of their precise role also. Tutors endorse the value of having the host teachers' input but again exactly how this manifests remains nebulous.

Similarly, confusion and ambiguity abound in terms of the role of the college tutor. Again, students admit to aiming to please perceived personality types in order to gain a high grade. More concerning is that they believe that their chances of being treated fairly are greatly reduced due to the subjective nature of assessment and the chasm that can sometimes exist between conflicting tutors' opinions. Ironically, many students found the grade descriptors to be ambiguous and difficult to align with written feedback issued by tutors, thus stifling their ability to put into practice advice given. Peer-teaching and learning varied substantially despite being generally hailed as beneficial across all sites. As one student put it, *'you can't tell someone everything but through peer-teaching they might see it.'* Most pointedly, students really craved the need to engage in dialogue with each other as well as with their superiors in order to process this very important phase of their developing practice. Although not as simplistic to implement as it might first appear, tutors did acknowledge the value of such collaborations and interactions. Self-assessment was less enthusiastically embraced and when it became a requirement to report on such reflections as part of summative assessment, students tended to treat their lived experiences as products to be graded.

*'Participatory appropriation'* is conceived, in a sense as that point at which trainee teachers are recognised as having reached a level of professional maturity whereby they are now ready to be initiated formally into the teaching fraternity. Some found that they were openly welcomed into their chosen communities of practice and were perceived as fresh, 'new blood' while others were viewed more as outsiders or perhaps threats. Unsurprisingly, when students felt respected and appreciated their willingness to assist both in and outside of school hours increased. They

relished fuller involvement in all aspects of school life and indeed felt that this enabled them to show their true capabilities.

It would appear from the conclusions drawn across all phases of participation, that the ideals of having a strong focus on learning (1) and the need for partnership (3) as outlined in the Teaching Council of Ireland's (2012) list of effective school placement indicators are largely absent. There is a sharp sense of mechanical immediacy as opposed to rich and knowledgeable understandings of how the complex nature of teaching, learning and assessment might be represented on paper. Likewise, professional engagement and ownership (4) is very much conspicuous by its absence in the somewhat unilateral exchanges unearthed in this study. Needless to say, the possibility of improvement (8) for the students is diminished as they aim to please perceived personality types and their respective agendas. Perhaps most worryingly is the fact that the relationships and communication (9) between colleges and schools as well as between the students, tutors and host teachers is relatively fractured. Apart from the fact that each individual and each group of interviewees possess varying viewpoints on the nature and conduct of teaching, learning and assessment, there appears to be a deferential approach to the colleges as being the arbiter of what constitutes success [or failure] in the field of student placement. Surely this does not echo the values of trust, respect, fairness and equality for all as outlined explicitly in the GTCNI's (2007) teacher competencies.

Moreover, these dynamics speak of the real conflicts of purpose around assessment that exist as outlined by Bloxham (2008), depending on the particular stakeholders' priorities. Although the theory around current assessment favours the betterment of student and life-long learning, the practice appears to lean toward the securing of certification, quality assurance, accountability and selection. These tensions and contradictions within assessment in higher education are even more starkly juxtaposed when compared to assessment in other craft apprenticeships where features such as goal transparency, modeling, authentic usage, collegial and end-user feedback and self-responsibility with a view to progression prevail (Kvale, 2007).

Specifically, many of the above findings contravene the Principles of Assessment Practice (Gardner et al., 2010), particularly in relation to the first tenet that states it '*should ultimately improve learning*'. In fact, there is little evidence that any of the principles are being met meaningfully since they advocate active, participatory, flexible and collaborative experiences. They speak of the presence of uncertainty within the judgments made with a view to negotiation and change never being far away. This view is corroborated by the complete lack of material in the final analysis relating to how students assess their own pupils and the impact (or lack thereof) that their own experiences have had on this. This was despite the fact that it pertains directly to our research questions and therefore featured explicitly in data-gathering discussions. Although it is not possible to discern how well students have been able to assess their own pupils, the fact that such a connection was repeatedly overlooked as warranting emphases by interviewees is surely somewhat alarming.

This resonates with Black and Wiliam's (1998b) initial claim that engaging in effective formative assessment is deceptively difficult because it looks easy on paper. This could lead us to conclude that on the courses surveyed; the connection between being assessed as students formatively or summatively and assessing pupils out in schools is weak and requires much more clarity and articulation. A similar call has been made by a team of researchers at Queen's University in Belfast who have just completed a follow-up study where they consulted pupils on assessment of their learning (Leitch et. al, 2008: Leitch et. al, 2013 forthcoming). Both studies show the complex nature of assessment and the considerable room for miscommunication that exists between educator and learner.

Again, this disconnect seems to be due in part to the cloudiness around whether student teachers are participating in a learning process or acquiring a product they will have to market later on. Understandably in this present economic climate, there is a strong sense among students that a high teaching practice grade will privilege them in gaining employment. Therefore, the product rather than the process is the Holy Grail. The rhetoric of current curriculum change and assessment theory is that of a socially and culturally-embedded journey while the reality of implementation is one of a relatively disembodied experience that leads to a definite, graded

destination. Perhaps few practitioners really know the language or have engaged in the necessary conversations around these concepts as they hone their own practices. If this is the case, then it is not surprising that student teachers are naturally unaware of these concepts or indeed do not know the language or how to become involved or be invited into such professional circles (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In-roads into changing this situation might begin with Bloxham and Boyd's (2007: 225) advice whereby they encourage '*a critical and scholarly interrogation of assessment practice*' hopefully leading to '*a balance between expansive and restrictive learning environments*'. Only in this way will there be any chance of increasing student teachers' and by extension their pupils' '*learning processes and products*' (Hargreaves, 2005:213).

## Recommendations

Throughout this paper, it is hoped that the complex and contradictory nature and conduct of teaching, learning and assessment has been demonstrated. Therefore, it is easy to stand on the sidelines and offer suggestions for change. However, in order to develop the field of education it is necessary to critique and endeavour to improve current practice. The following are far-reaching ideas that involve long-term commitment to the changing of cultural mindsets which are accompanied by short-term, concrete, operational ideas.

- ☉ *The explicit interrogation of what assessment means and what its goals are in each institution.*

This involves research and discussion around the multi-faceted nature of assessment as well as its relationship to the various perceptions of the stakeholders concerned. This aspect needs then to be addressed within the wider educational contexts [national policy, curriculum demands, school level, age phase etc.] so as to identify the tensions that exist between the respective components. Sharing these understandings across the different sites of learning is where the real need for effective communication lies. Explaining the procedures of assessment with students and schools does not tackle the deeper issues of what it means to be actively involved in dynamic and organic experiences such as teaching and assessment. Perhaps staff development programmes within and across schools and colleges would provide fruitful sites for these kinds of conversations to occur as necessary prerequisites of policy-making around procedures.

- ☉ *The facilitation of deeper, more genuine and creative partnerships between college staff, students and schools' personnel.*

The roles of all participants need to be redefined and clarified in concrete terms so that discrepancies become diminished. Most importantly, the role of the student requires greatest attention. Boud and Falchikov (2007) note that in order to promote students' informed judgments they must first see themselves as active learners. Exploration of what it means to be an active learner and in turn how this might manifest in preparation for, during and after school placement is essential. Boud and Falchikov (2007) caution the need for staged examination and

development of expertise on behalf of and with the learners. Perhaps further consultation with the student body on the issue of how they see their role in terms of being actively involved in their own learning and assessment would be a good starting point. They may have some 'insider' suggestions on the kinds of assessment techniques that lend themselves to allowing students to contribute to their professional development in such a way that it is taken into account when finalizing grades [if they are still found to be the preferred mode of judgment]. From the data collected, some suggested reflective journals that could carry a percentage weight. They are also in a stronger position to enlighten tutors and mentors as to the kinds of support they need most. All of this might be bolstered by the development of longer teaching placement time-frames thus allowing students to experience schools holistically or in the long-term.

In regard to the mentors and host schools, it might be feasible to begin negotiations around them having a greater and more influential role as formal co-assessors of their students. After all, they are steeped in the culture and practices of teaching, learning and assessment and so are vital resources in helping mentor student teachers. Indeed, a number of those students interviewed requested that host teachers 'officially' meet with them at least once a week to discuss their progress and provide explicit, shared feedback for improvement.

Transparency and consistency among tutors, in terms of what is being assessed and how it is being assessed is urgently required. Just like the philosophy that underpins formative assessment, tutors could benefit from having space and time to explore their individual and collective understandings of what it means to meaningfully assess the socially and culturally defined nature of teaching and learning and how this might best be done. There is a clear role also for tutors to assist in the translation of assessment speak for students. It would seem that some of the impact intended during debriefing sessions that following tutor visits is lost in translation. Maybe college staff and students could again consult on how best to clarify grade descriptors and the like so that students might be in a stronger position to achieve more highly and in accordance with feedback received.

Although these two recommendations appear easy, they do require considerable time and commitment if they are to help move all stakeholders toward a more synergetic relationship which will ultimately bear fruit for pupils. By shifting the cultural-educational mindset to one that is more representative of expansive learning, it is hoped that that most essential connection between the student teachers' own positive experiences of assessment will be used to the full in classrooms across the island of Ireland. Only then will the paperwork involved hold more meaning and power for everyone.

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