



Preparing First-Year Student Teachers for their First School Placement: What Factors do Teacher Educators Need to Consider?

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This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/BJESBS/2016/21989

Editor(s):

(1) Leonidas Kyriakides, Department of Education, University of Cyprus, Cyprus.

Reviewers:

(1) Dare Ojo Omonijo, Covenant University, Nigeria.

(2) Marta Kowalczyk-Wałędziak, University of Białystok, Poland.

(3) Muhammad Nubli Abdul Wahab, University Malaysia Pahang, Malaysia.

Complete Peer review History: <http://sciencedomain.org/review-history/12661>

Original Research Article

Received 14th September 2015
Accepted 11th November 2015
Published 15th December 2015

ABSTRACT

Aims: Student teachers embark on their first school placement with various preconceptions regarding their role as a teacher and their ability to manage a range of challenges in the school environment. The purpose of this research was to investigate how students' perceptions regarding their career choice and their concerns changed over the period of the placement.

Study Design: Qualitative research.

Place and Duration of Study: The research took place at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Methodology: The sample included 46 women and 15 men all of whom were first year students enrolled in primary teacher education. All participants completed pre and post school placement questionnaires. All participants were questioned regarding their decision to become a teacher and concerns around their first school placement.

Results: Data analysis of the pre and post school placement questionnaires found a number of factors mediated the nature and efficacy of the placement for this sample of students: concerns about the placement, student gender, certainty of career choice, and the associate teacher.

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Conclusion: The findings of this study give credence to the role that school placements play in cementing students' decisions to become teachers. It could be useful investigating opportunities for students to spend some extended periods of time in various classrooms throughout the year to alleviate pre placement concerns.

Keywords: Student teachers; education; pre-placement; student concerns; gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

For many student teachers, anticipation of their first school placement is imbued with mixed emotions. While typically excited by the prospect of finally experiencing for themselves the role of teacher, they also face anxiety. The latter includes various misgivings, such as relating to their associate teacher (the classroom teacher in whose class a student is placed for the duration of his or her time in the school), designing appropriate lessons, teaching well, managing a class of unknown children, being on "the other side of the fence" in the staffroom, and balancing the overall teacher education course demands with family and part-time employment.

For teacher educators responsible for observing the students in school classrooms and providing feedback on their progress, the first placement is also a time of significance. The final decision as to the students' readiness to proceed to the next stage of the teacher education programme generally rests with the observing lecturer, and this decision is rarely taken lightly. In addition, the overall performance of students and the issues that arise for them on school placement can highlight gaps in students' preparation and the necessity to change or modify teacher programmes. For the associate teacher, the time spent with a student teacher in the classroom has the potential to be an enriching and rewarding experience, an exhausting and frustrating experience, or somewhere in between.

Clearly, the better student teachers are prepared for their placement, the greater the likelihood that they, the observing lecturer and the associate teacher will find it a positive experience. At the University of Canterbury's College of Education, situated in Christchurch, New Zealand, students embark on their first school placement in the second semester of their first year of the teacher education programme. Programme staff consider the early positioning (in relation to some countries) of the school placement in the teacher education programme important in bridging the theory-practice gap for student teachers. By the

time students enter schools for their four-week placement, they have participated in professional studies, social and cultural studies, child development and a number of curriculum specialisms.

The overall objective of the study reported in this paper was to investigate how students' perceptions of teaching as a career change over the period of their first school placement. Specific objectives related to students' concerns about their upcoming placement and concerns about becoming a teacher after completing their placement. This included exploring how their surety about becoming a teacher had changed over the four weeks of placement and whether they felt their pre-placement concerns were justified. It was hoped that the results of the study would help determine if, indeed, teacher educators at the College of Education needed to refine course content and experiences before student teachers' first placements to ensure the greatest likelihood of positive outcomes and, if so, what that refinement might involve.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Literature Review

The academic course component of teacher education programmes provides student teachers with the knowledge base required for their profession, whereas school placements give students opportunity to participate in the practice of their profession [1,2]. Anderson [3] claims that time spent on school placements is the "keystone event" in a teacher's education, whether pre-service or in-service. Caires [4] describes this time as a simultaneous experience of survival and discovery and a time of vulnerability for students as they switch from the role of student to the role of teacher.

According to Vahasantanen et al. [2] when student teachers are confronted with the school culture during their first experience in the role of teacher, their professional identities tend to be challenged by various realities. These include teaching dilemmas, conflicting expectations,

feelings of inadequacy, and levels of tension between their pre-placement expectations and what they can, in reality, achieve once in the classroom. Vahasantanen and colleagues [2], along with Flores [5], found that during the course of the students' first school placement, common beliefs and prior assumptions regarding a teacher's role are sometimes affirmed and frequently challenged. Anderson [3] found 96% of the 98 students she surveyed changed their beliefs and behaviours during this time. Johnston [6] also claims that many student teachers have "deleterious experiences" during their placements time in schools.

Lamote and Engels [1] questioned first year student teachers on two occasions six months apart and preceding their first school placement. They believe that the challenges to students' beliefs attributed by other researchers to the first school placement actually begin before this time. They noted significant differences in certain indicators of student teachers' professional identities five months into the teacher education programme and before students embarked on their first school placement. Lamote and Engels' [1] finding implies that the academic programme student teachers engage in does more than provide students with a knowledge base [2]. It also prompts students to begin re-evaluating previously held beliefs and assumptions about teaching. Given the abundance of research identifying changes during the school placement [1,4,7,8] it is probable that the seeds of re-evaluation sown during teacher-education coursework flourish once the students are on placement.

Caires et al. [7] argue that for student teachers the switch from the role of student to teacher and the discovery of discrepancies between theory and practice often culminate in a "reality shock". Sinclair, Dowson, and McNerney [9] suggest that the extent of dissonance between the expectation and the reality of the placement can be sufficient to result in student withdrawal from the teacher education programme. Caires [4] found the women in her study reported higher levels than men of difficulty in terms of the socio-emotional impact of the school placement, but this was not reflected in greater attrition rates for women. Cushman [10] and Thornton and Bricheno [11] however, found that men student teachers reporting problems with their first placement were considerably more likely than women reporting difficulties to leave the teacher education programme.

Although a small number of students fail to complete their placement and even withdraw from the teacher education programme as a result of their placement experiences, Sinclair [8] found nearly two-thirds of the students in her study were more committed to a career in teaching after their school placement. This is in contrast to Anderson's [3] finding that only 16% of the students became more positive about their choice of teaching as a career and 28% became more negative. Regardless of whether they find the experience to be positive or negative, it is apparent that the realities of time spent in the classroom lead students to evaluate and re-evaluate their motivation to become a teacher [7,9]. Brannon [12] surveyed 140 American teacher education students before their first placement to find out what concerned them most about their upcoming placement. The data she collected indicated that the greatest concern for students was classroom management, a not uncommon challenge for experienced practitioners and therefore not a surprising concern for students who lack experience in dealing with the variety of behaviours manifested by children. Sadler [13] also found classroom management to be the primary issue for student teachers and therefore deserving of a greater degree of attention in teacher-education programmes. Sadler acknowledges, however, that although students can learn theory relating to classroom management in their university classes, they still need to negotiate management strategies for themselves in actual classroom contexts. A second concern for the student teachers in Sadler's study prior to their school placements emanated from the complexities of teaching, a concern that Sadler also considers requires the classroom context.

Students naturally rely on their associate teachers for help and support throughout placements [14,15]. Ussher [16] found that student teachers have high expectations of their associates and expect to learn through the opportunities for teaching and learning that their associate creates and provides. For Clarke [17], the engagement between the associate teacher and the student teacher "is the essence of teacher education". Ussher [16] emphasizes the importance of associate teachers who have the time, knowledge and experience to enable students to make the most of every learning opportunity. The students in Anderson's [3] study supported Ussher's stance, with many commenting they were positively influenced by their associate teachers. However, the fact that

not all students in this study were commendatory about the support they received from their associate aligns with Johnston's [6] observation that the nature and quality of the support that associates provide is not consistent across students. For any one student, Johnston continues, the type of support experienced while on placement can markedly affect his or her capacity for professional growth.

Certainly, the Scottish Executive [18] and Sadler [13] found that the characteristics and actions of associate teachers have a major impact—for better or worse—on the experiences of student teachers. While the majority of students in Sadler's study said their associates had had a positive influence, the remaining students reported struggling with teachers who appeared unengaged or unable to provide them with feedback. Johnston [6] cites reports on teacher education in Scotland, such as one by the Scottish Executive [18], that implicitly question the assumption that school placements are inherently positive. Sadler [13], searching for means of remedying poor experiences during placement, recommends that teacher education programmes support not only students before, during and after placements but also associate teachers, by giving them guidance on how to effectively give students the types of experiences and feedback that maximise their professional development.

Lamote and Engels [1] conclude from their exploration of student teachers' formation of professional identity that students require opportunities to explore and articulate their emerging professional identities from the beginning of their teacher education programmes. Although claiming that student teachers' "ideas and principles are not firmly rooted in authentic experiences" (p. 16) until they spend time in a classroom, Lamote and Engels [1] argue that students need opportunities during their academic course work to explore and articulate their perceptions of classroom teaching.

2.2 Teaching Practice at the University of Canterbury

Students enrolled in the primary school teaching programme, the three-year Bachelor of Teaching and Learning, experience school placements during each year of the teacher education programme. Students' first school placements occur during the second semester of the first year of the programme. During both the second

and third years of the programme, students spend five weeks in the first semester and five in the second semester in schools. By the end of their three-year degree, current students will have spent time in the classrooms of six different teachers in six different schools.

The personnel responsible for placing students endeavour to place students at different year levels in a variety of schools over the three years. Students are assigned to an associate teacher in whose classroom they will spend the duration of their placement. University lecturers observe students on one or two occasions for about two hours per visit, during which they watch the student teaching, provide feedback, and discuss the student's progress with the student and with the associate teacher.

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

All first-year (on campus) primary-school student teachers (20 men and 73 women) were invited to complete two questionnaires—one before their first school placement and the other during the first week following that placement.

Fifty-two women students filled out the questionnaire before the four-week school placement and 46 after. The students ranged in age from 18 to 42 years of age, with a median age of 23. Of the six women students who did not complete the questionnaire after placement, four had successfully completed their placements, one had withdrawn for medical reasons, and one withdrew from both placement and programme. The four who completed their placements did not respond to attempts to contact them.

Eighteen men filled out the questionnaire before placement and 15 after it. These students ranged in age from 18 to 53 years of age, with a median age of 24. Of the three men who did not complete the questionnaire after placement, two had left the course and the other failed to respond to repeated attempts to contact him. It was not possible to track down the two who had left the university. Two other men, who did not participate in the research project also left the course following their school placement. That two of the 18 men - and a total of 4 of the 20 men in the full cohort compared with one of the full cohort of 73 women - left the teacher education programme at the time of their first school

placement supports the findings of Foster and Newman [19] and Thornton and Bricheno [11], who observed worrying attrition rates for men at or just after placement.

It could be argued that the final sample size of 70 students is too small to comprise a representative sample of New Zealand first-year teacher education students. However, the sample size comprised 86% of the first-year students enrolled in the undergraduate teacher education programme at the time the research was conducted.

3.2 Procedure

Questions asked in the pre-placement survey and relevant to this paper are:

- How are you feeling about your decision to become a primary school teacher? “Very sure”, “fairly sure”, “slightly unsure”, “very unsure” (circle one option). Please explain.
- Do you have any concerns about your first placement? Please explain.

Questions asked in the post-placement survey and relevant to this paper are:

- How would you rate your overall placement? “Very positive”, “positive”, “negative”, “very negative” (circle one option). Please explain.
- How are you feeling now about your decision to become a primary school teacher? “Very sure”, “fairly sure”, “slightly unsure”, “very unsure” (circle one option). Please explain.
- Were your concerns about your first placement justified? Please explain.

Students who completed the first questionnaire but not the second were tracked down via their professional studies lecturers and asked to fill in the questionnaire. Follow-up emails were then sent to any students who still had not responded. Data collection took place over six weeks, with Week 1 being the week before the four-week school placement and Week 6 being the week immediately following it.

Simple preliminary analysis comprised grouping responses to all questionnaire items on the basis of similarity and relatedness for both their qualitative and quantitative components. The qualitative data were then scrutinized by the researchers for emergent themes, after which data was rechecked and codes developed for

further categorization. Codings were cross-checked by a colleague in an effort to promote reliability. SPSS Version 19 software was used to generate simple descriptive statistics from these codings.

3.3 Ethics

Approval for the study was gained from the University Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. All research methods complied with the University of Canterbury research ethics guidelines. Participation in the surveys was anonymous and voluntary. A detailed explanation of the research purpose and process was communicated both orally and in writing. Written consent was sought from all participants and confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data suggested that various factors mediated the nature and efficacy of the first school placement for this sample of student teachers. The factors that emerged from the data and that are discussed in this paper are:

- Concerns about the upcoming placement.
- Student gender.
- Certainty regarding career choice.
- The associate teacher.

4.1 Concerns about the Placement

All but six students, when responding to the question of whether they had any concerns about their first placement, listed one or two concerns. (Discussion pertaining to the six students who said they had no concerns is presented later in this section). Supporting the findings of Brannon [12] and Sadler [13], the concern that received the most mention from students related to classroom management (13 women and three men):

“I am concerned about handling any behavioural issues that arise. Am I equipped and confident enough to put the theory into practice well and effectively?” (36-year-old female)

The second greatest concern related to the student teachers’ ability to teach curriculum content and whether they could teach lessons in a way that would best meet the needs of students. Fourteen students made comments such as these ones:

"Having full and rich lessons for my students. I worry that what I teach won't be appropriate or that they won't learn." (20-year-old woman)

"Being able to meet the educational needs of all learners." (23-year-old man)

Because, in New Zealand, primary school teachers are expected to teach all curriculum areas and because the students in this study had, at the time of their first placement, been introduced to less than half of these, it is not surprising that issues relating to curriculum content and teaching performance were sources of trepidation. Interestingly, the only curriculum area to gain specific mention as a cause of concern was mathematics. Although students had already completed an introductory mathematics course, concerns about their own confidence in the subject translated to a lack of confidence in teaching it.

"A little apprehensive as I have got Year 7/8s and doubt my ability to teach math." (38-year-old male)

"Maths is not my strong point—I am not sure how I will manage teaching it." (23-year-old female).

The lack of curriculum coverage prior to placement might have been a contributing factor in four women and one man claiming they felt hindered by a lack of preparation.

Two women and one man expressed concern that once they took on the responsibilities of a teacher, they would not like the career choice they had made. One of them (a 26-year-old female) spoke for the two other students when she said, *"I hope I have made the right choice. If I have not made the right choice, I will feel like I have wasted a year."* This same concern appears to have been hinted at in the statements made by five others, who said they were very unsure as to what to expect in the school environment. General anxiety regarding their imminent placement permeated the answers not only of these students but also of eleven other male and thirty-four female students.

Other concerns expressed included their relationship with their associate teacher (five students), tiredness (two students), and various other reasons expressed by individual students such as the workload, balancing home and

school, relating to young children and looking too young. Reference to the wide range of concerns that students held pre-placement supports the notion that student teachers do consider some of the challenges they will face in the classroom and understand that no amount of academic preparation can compensate for the realities of the school environment.

Sadler's [13] claim that although students can be introduced during their academic course work to theoretical frameworks, they need to test this learning within classroom contexts has significance here. It is questionable whether any amount of academic preparation can provide students with the confidence to enter their first teaching experience concern free. This is borne out by the results of the post-placement questionnaire when students were asked whether their pre-placement concerns had been justified. All but seven students claimed their concerns were not realised during their classroom experiences.

"I was worried that I would have no control over the class and they would not respect me. My class loved me and were well-behaved. I had no need to be concerned!" (23-year-old female).

"No, as there was lots of support." (19-year-old man)

The second student's comment hints at the importance of the associate teacher. For many of the students, the support of the associate teacher appeared to be crucial in allaying pre-placement concerns and building confidence:

"I was very anxious about my first placement. I didn't think I would be good enough. The positive feedback from my associate teacher proved that I did not have any reason to be anxious." (24-year-old female)

Such comments reiterate the place and importance of the associate teacher in assisting and supporting student teachers [14,15,16,18].

For a small number (five) of students, pre-placement concerns related to classroom management did come to fruition in the classroom.

"Behavioural management was a concern, and yes it was justified as there were many students with behavioural problems and this

made managing them difficult." (18-year-old male)

Fortunately for this student, a supportive associate, whom he *"got on really well with"*, and a "very positive" self-rating of his placement saw his pre-placement "very sure" rating of his decision to enter teaching echoed post-placement, when he again said he was very sure he wanted to be a teacher. Yet again, this example brings the importance of the associate to the fore. In the absence of a supportive associate, the placement outcome with respect to this student's desire to be a teacher could have been different.

The six students who said they had no concerns comprised one woman and five men. Of interest is the fact that the woman withdrew from her placement and the teacher education course, as did one of the five men. Both of these students had, however, also indicated in the pre-placement questionnaire that they were "slightly unsure" about their decision to become a teacher. For these two students, their admission of lack of surety sits uncomfortably with their claim to have no concerns. However, the four other men who claimed to have no concerns successfully completed their placements, retaining their "very sure" status regarding their decision to be a teacher and labelling their placement experience as "very positive".

These students' comments add yet further support to the supposition that many students embark on their placement aware that they will experience challenges to their beliefs and attitudes about teaching. Their comments also confirm Lamote and Engels' [1] claim that this process of challenge begins before the first school placement.

4.2 Student Gender

Two of the 18 men and one of the 52 women surveyed before their first school placement subsequently withdrew from the teacher education course. For these three students, it is possible that the placement did provide the reality shock that Caires et al. [7] describe. The higher withdrawal rate for men also suggests that more needs to be done before placement experiences, particularly for males, in terms of helping students explore their developing professional identities, especially with respect to their beliefs about and expectations of the teaching role. For men, working in an environment in which they might be, for the first

time in their lives, in the minority (numerically), this suggests that issues relating to gender that they will confront as classroom teachers cannot be left to chance [20].

4.3 Certainty Regarding Career Choice

The results obtained from this small sample of students supports work by Anderson [3] that showed a shift in student teachers' pre-placement beliefs and attitudes during and immediately after placement. For a large number of the student teachers in this current study, the first placement served to affirm their decision to become a teacher. Before the placement, 27 women and 10 men claimed they were very sure about their decision to become a teacher. The number of women in this category increased to 39 after placement, but the number of men remained the same post placement as pre-placement. The results for the women at least present a more positive post-placement orientation than the Anderson [3] and Johnston [6] findings.

Before the placement, 21 women and four men claimed to be "fairly sure" and four women and three men claimed they were "slightly unsure" regarding their decision to become a teacher. After the placement, only one woman claimed to be fairly sure and three slightly unsure. Two in the latter category showed they were somewhat less confident in their decision to become a teacher, having moved from the fairly sure category. The other's position remained unchanged, as did the woman's in the fairly sure category. The results of these shifts again support research [2,3,20] that found common beliefs and prior assumptions regarding a teacher's role are sometimes affirmed and frequently challenged in the course of school experiences.

Prior to the placement, 10 men claimed they were very sure about their decision to become a teacher. However, one of these men, despite completing his placement, withdrew from the teacher education programme, as did another male student who had, prior to placement, claimed to be fairly sure of his decision. These results lend support to Lamote and Engels [1], who call on teacher education programmes to help students explore their emerging identities from the very start of those programmes, and to Sadler's [13] call for students to receive more support from their teacher educators and associates during their school placements.

4.4 The Associate Teacher

Reflecting the (numerical) gender balance of teachers in New Zealand [21] 3 of the students who completed their placements were in the classrooms of women associate teachers and eight were with men. Of the 46 women who completed their placements, 42 were placed with female associate teachers and four with men. Of the 42 women with female associate teachers, none appeared to ascribe the perceived value or outcome of their placement to the gender of their associate teacher. Thirty-seven of the women rated their placement as “very positive”, four as “positive” and one as “very negative”. The woman who experienced her placement as very negative attributed this result to illness interfering with her ability to fulfil university requirements. Of the four women who spent the duration of their placement time in the classroom of a male teacher, three rated their overall placement experience as very positive and one as positive. It would appear from these results that the associate teacher’s gender had little effect on the women’s self-rating of their experience.

For men, however, the outcomes appeared less clear cut. Ten of the 15 men were with female associate teachers and five with men. The proportionate placement of a greater number of male students (than female students) with male rather than female associate teachers reflects a stance by University of Canterbury placement personnel that male students should have at least one placement with a male associate teacher. All of the 10 men who were placed with female associate teachers, rated their placements as very positive. Of the five male students who spent their placements in the classrooms of male associate teachers, only one rated the placement as very positive and four as positive.

While numbers are too small to allow trends to be determined, it seems that, in general, the men in this sample had more positive experiences in the classrooms of female than male associate teachers. The following two comments are representative of what the male students said about working in the classrooms of female associates.

“I loved finally being in a classroom, I was able to concentrate hard on my goals and my associate helped me every time I stumbled.” (18-year-old male)

“I was placed with a really nice AT [associate teacher]. She was particularly helpful.” (53-year-old male)

Two of the male students with male associates had this to say:

“I felt I had to fight to get what I needed.” (18-year-old male).

“Associate teacher could have been more involved.” (22 year-old-male).

Again, while the small sample numbers warrant treating commentary in relation to the findings with caution, it is possible that the apparent overall discrepancy in the experiences between the male students placed with male associate teachers and those with females does not support the efforts of placement personnel to place male student teachers with male associate teachers. These results even suggest that male students receive more support and assistance when they are placed with female teachers. These findings are ones that warrant further exploration, not only to verify their validity but also to determine the reasons behind those findings if validity is confirmed.

Sadler’s [13] suggestion that teacher education programmes need to provide ongoing professional development opportunities for associate teachers on how to best support students gains credence from these results. A worrying development in New Zealand is the recent cut, for budgetary reasons, in the amount of time that lecturers can spend observing their students in schools. The results of this study point to the need for education lecturers to work more closely with both students and associate teachers, rather than to minimise the importance of these collaborations.

In related vein, Ussher’s [16] emphasis on the importance of associate teachers having the time to provide the support required is evident in the following comment from an 18-year-old woman student about her placement:

“Would have been better if she [the associate] wasn’t so busy.”

For this student, who nevertheless rated her placement as positive, the school placement and lack of time afforded to her by her associate teacher failed to change her pre-placement lack of certainty regarding her choice of career.

Johnston's [6] finding that the nature and quality of support student teachers receive from their associate teacher impacts on the students' rating of their placement aligns with the findings of this current study. Forty-eight of the students rated their placements as very positive. Comments such as the following ones demonstrate the importance of not only the relationship between student and associate but also the degree of teaching experience of the latter and his or her preparedness to provide support and feedback. It is these qualities in associate teachers that evidently contributed to the positive placement outcomes in this study.

"Learnt heaps from an amazing experience associate." (37-year-old female)

"I respected her style of teaching and behaviour management. Great feedback and feed forward." (26-year-old female)

"Lots of support from experienced associate." (22-year-old male)

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study give credence to the role that school placements play in cementing students' decisions to become teachers. For 46 of the 61 students in this study who completed their placements, a "very positive" rating of their placement experience aligned with a "very sure" response to their feelings about becoming a teacher.

The study did indicate some interesting trends. While the sample number is too small to suggest the trends have veracity, the findings nevertheless highlight areas worthy of further investigation. A general anxiety in the transition from student to teacher is to be expected and, not surprisingly, the student teachers in this study embarked on their first school placement with various concerns. For a small number of students, these concerns were borne out in the school classroom. However, for the majority, the concerns appear to have been unjustified or invalidated once the students immersed themselves in the classroom.

Because the study took place at a time when students had invested almost a year in the teacher-education programme, without any time in schools, it could be useful investigating opportunities for students to spend some extended periods of time in various classrooms throughout the year. This would help to alleviate

concerns regarding the nature of classrooms, introduce students to a range of teaching styles and management strategies and provide them with some experiences designed to build confidence. For students who enter teacher education programmes directly after leaving school, this practice would allow them to make the transition to the teaching role in a more gentle and graduated way. For older students, whose distance from the school environment likewise results in anxiety, a graduated immersion in a variety of settings would enable them to develop familiarity and confidence prior to embarking on a school placement, the outcome of which can determine or hinder a prospective teacher's progress throughout the teacher education programme.

While the small number of male teachers in the sample suggests it would be unwise to imply direct links, the results of the study do suggest that the university's favouring of pairing male students with male teachers should be questioned, especially if further research supports this current finding. In general, the men in this study appeared to experience more positive outcomes in classrooms with female associate teachers than with male associate teachers.

The greater likelihood of men than women leaving the teacher education programme during or following placement received some support in this study. In order to maximise male retention, it would seem imperative that first-year students in particular are placed with associate teachers who are best able to meet students' needs. Whether or not students thrive best in classes with associate teachers of the same gender or whether more care needs to be taken in selecting which student should be with which associate is questionable. In this case, female associate teachers appeared to provide more supportive environments for these male and female students experiencing their first placement.

The findings of this study furthermore suggest that a case can be made for closer links between University of Canterbury, College of Education lecturers afforded the responsibility of observing students and both the students and their associate teachers. Greater communication and strategic sharing of students' needs between these three parties might ensure that the first school placement provides students with a solid grounding in the practice of teaching and the confidence to flourish to the best of their abilities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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