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# "Biting one's lip" and "distancing": Exploring pre-service teachers' strategies in dysfunctional professional relationships

Abstract: Pre-service teachers (PSTs) are often placed in a vulnerable position during their school placement. Recognising the presence of power dynamics between PSTs, university-based tutors, and cooperating teachers as well as exploring how PSTs navigate these power relations is the focus of this paper. Data from interviews with final-year PSTs were analysed using a directed content analysis exploring the issues of autonomy and agency evident within participants' descriptions of school placement. A finding of interest was the manner in which the PSTs cope with dysfunctional professional relationships. The over-riding approach appears to be compliance and silencing their professional voice. This was evident in the "biting one's lip" and "distancing" that occurred when PSTs experienced practices which were incongruent with the university expectations, or their own personal views, of teaching and learning. The implications for teacher education and tutors' facilitation of appropriate reflection are discussed.

**Key words:** School Placement; Pre-service teacher; Professional Relationships; Professional Voice.

## Introduction

School placement plays a key role in university-based PST education. As well as being a mandatory element of teacher education programmes it can also be allocated a significant amount of time on the pre-service programme and carry significant weighting in the overall assessment of the PST. For example, within the Irish context school placement is allocated a high percentage (40%) of teacher education programmes. These school placements are normally assessed by either school-based

mentors, university tutors, or a combination of both and the mechanism of assessment can significantly influence PST behaviour and the nature of their engagement in the process. Existing power-dynamics, and the need to display competence to school authorities and university assessors, means that PSTs must carefully navigate the demands of the placement while also catering for the sometimes differing expectations of university tutors and cooperating teachers.

Initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland offers a useful insight into this phenomenon as teaching continues to be considered with high status and so the demand for entry onto the initial teacher education programmes is also high. Accordingly, entrants to initial teacher education have a high grade profile (Darmody & Smyth, 2016) as entry onto a concurrent ITE programme, a 4-year bachelor's degree programme, is normally dependent on students' performance on the national examination following post-primary schooling, known as the Leaving Certificate, which acts as a matriculation exam for entry into third level education. The participants of the study were PSTs from a final year cohort of a four-year concurrent teacher education programme at a university in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and as mandated by the Teaching Council of Ireland (Teaching Council, 2011), PSTs engage in two block placements in schools. In this institution, the first placement takes place in their second year of ITE and is six weeks in duration. The second placement, in their fourth year, is ten weeks. PSTs are assigned two school placement tutors from the HEI who have developmental and assessment roles. Each university tutor visits the PST twice during the placement block to observe their teaching. Following discussion between these university tutors, a grade will be assigned to the PST. The cooperating teacher, who volunteers to accept PSTs within the placement school setting, will provide information to the HEI about their experiences with the PST but play no formal role in the assessment of the PSTs.

Recognising the presence of these power dynamics, between PSTs, university tutors, and cooperating teachers and exploring how PSTs navigate these power relations is the focus of this paper. Drawing on selected interviews from final-year students on a four-year PST education degree programme, this study specifically examined references to university tutors and cooperating teachers that emerged in their talk. In examining this talk we aimed to explore:

1. What were PSTs' perspectives of their professional interactions with their university tutors and Cooperating Teachers?

2. What positive and negative aspects of these relationships emerged from their talk?

**Preliminary literature review highlighting the key points of practicum and power relations**

Pre-service teachers (PSTs) are often placed in a vulnerable position during their practicum. Chief amongst the vulnerabilities they often experience is assessment by either a university tutor or mentor teacher. The assessment of PST's practicum is usually heavily weighted in their final award classification or viewed as significant for future job prospects which puts these assessors in an evident position of power. Indeed Moody's (2009) study comparing the assessment of PSTs in Australia and Ireland found that the lack of agreed expectations from supervisors, especially in a graded placement, often lead PSTs to approach their practicum with a conservative approach that would likely result in a better grade rather than risk jeopardising their performance. This focus on performativity often constrained rather than empowered teachers during placement (Moody, 2009). Although the negation of a grade can sometimes mitigate against this power dynamic there will often be a desire to appease one's tutor or mentor (Breatnach

2002, p.71).

This need for a preservice teacher to "put on a performance" for university tutors or mentor teachers, which might be contrary to a preservice teacher's inclination, is further reinforced by Rutherford, Conway, & Murphy's (2015) research into this performance as "dressage" as in the Foucauldian conception of disciplinary action. The tiers of dressage within placement often pertained to compliance, performance, and as discipline (Foucault, 1995), implying an enculturation of teachers through the expectations of their university tutor and mentor teachers.

> Dressage is much more complex than simply 'what to wear for work'. Dressage requires in the governed (PSTs) performance and productivity as well as docility, obedience and discipline. PSTs are being trained for labor in a specific workforce. They represent the object/subject of governance that is expected to maintain the status quo of teaching. (Rutherford et al., 2015, p.327)

This conception of dressage also serves to help conceive of how teacher identity may be distorted and diminish the PST's sense of agency pertaining to their practice as professional educators (Rutherford et al., 2015, p. 337).

In addition to the formal assessment of a practicum, another vulnerability for PSTs is also communicated implicitly through their relationships with those they are often most influenced by, especially their mentor teacher and peers. These relationships can be very supportive to the PST (Lawson, Çakmak, Gündüz, & Busher, 2015) but could also unintentionally prove to be mis-educative and disempowering (Ortlipp, 2003). As an additional support for the university tutors, the mentor teacher's role within the supervision process can often be a source of support to the formal role of the supervisor where anxieties might be openly expressed by the PST. However, this role can become mis-educative if the mentor teacher prioritises the strength of their relationships with the preservice teacher over the need to provide challenging feedback

(Flaxman, Ascher, & Harrington, 1988). This could also extend to the anxieties of a mentor teacher to critique teaching practices. Peers of preservice teachers can also provide a useful insight and feedback into a preservice teacher's development especially through the process of peer coaching (Lu, 2010). Similarly it could be argued that the need to prioritise a relationship over providing challenging feedback can often undermine the efficacy of this feedback (Ortlipp, 2003). From both the mentor teacher and peer, a hesitance to provide such feedback may further entrench a technicist approach to teaching.

Another vulnerability of PSTs, to be discussed, is a hesitancy to engage with teaching as a deeply complex and contextual activity. The tacit complexity of teaching that preservice teachers become exposed to during placement, and through feedback from their mentors, may contrast greatly with their expectations of the demands of the role and thereby cause a hesitance to engage with this complexity. Although there exists an expectation for teacher educators to help facilitate deeper understanding of this complexity for PSTs, this can be hindered if teacher educators prioritise their subject specialism over wider social and political issues as cited as a question by Hoban (2004, p.129): Do teacher educators acknowledge the complexity of teaching and practice what they preach or do they perceive themselves as specialist teachers of discipline knowledge?

**School placement within the Irish context**

These vulnerabilities for PSTs are equally true within an Irish context. The teaching culture in Ireland has often been characterised as being rooted in the hegemony of a traditional technical paradigm (Gleeson, 2010). In contrast to a focus of a reflective practitioner, teachers in Ireland predominantly shy away from theoretical debates on

education or teaching relying more on the 'techne' and their own "lay theories" of their educational practice (Sugrue, 1997). To highlight this primacy within the Irish teaching profession, research conducted for TALIS in 2008 studied the self-reported practices of teachers across comparable OECD countries ranging from the traditional transmission of facts by teachers to more constructivist pedagogies which were respectively classified as "structuring practises" to "enhanced activities". It found that although, in general:

> Teachers show a preference for structuring practices. This preference is particularly pronounced in Ireland, where teachers show a greater preference for structuring practice than in any of the comparison countries. Indeed, Irish teachers show the strongest preference for structuring practices across all TALIS countries (Gilleece, Shie, Perkins, & Proctor, 2008, p.78).

This prevalence within the teaching profession in Ireland can be charted back to an insightful report by the OECD in 1991 in the 'Reviews of National Policies for Education: Ireland'. It reported that, in Ireland, "since 1969 there has been a common basic salary scale for all teachers regardless of the educational level that is taught" which combined with "a short working year by international reckoning" lead to a teaching culture that is very removed from any professional accountability and in which the OECD concluded that "their autonomy in the classroom is legendary" (OECD, 1991, p.78).

This detachment from a more progressive discourse of education has also permeated how teachers in Ireland engage in their support of initial teacher education and school placement. Either by design or misfortune, co-operating teachers who work full-time in schools to mentor PSTs do not have any formal role in their assessment and cooperate only on a voluntary basis (Moody 2009, p.156). The formal assessment of PSTs is normally undertaken by university tutors who have been deemed sufficiently

briefed of their university's expectations to grade them. The need to involve cooperating teachers into the assessment of PSTs, and sufficiently up-skill their capacity to do so, has also been cited by the Advisory Group on Post-Primary Teacher Education (Byrne 2002). Although extolling the virtues of those teachers who diligently mentor PSTs, it advises against the danger of maintaining this situation as:

> Survival is uppermost on the minds of most pre-service teachers in their school placements. There is very little engagement with the theoretical principles necessary to understand such social and ethical issues in teaching … Interaction with experienced teachers, while potentially fruitful, tends to lead pre-service teachers to become conservative in their approach to the complex challenge of teaching. Instead of responsibility and reflection, acquiescence and conformity to school conventions and routines become the norm. (Byrne 2002, p.30)

More recently, the Teaching Council of Ireland (2013), following a comprehensive review of initial teacher education in Ireland (Sahlberg, 2012), recommend greater partnerships between the Higher Education Institutions and schools to address this concern. However, the capacity to effectively implement these partnerships has been critiqued as "managerial models of school–university partnerships have not worked to date and neither have models focused entirely on technical competence" (Young, O'Neill, & Mooney Simmie, 2015, p.37). A study of Irish cooperating teachers' perceptions of their roles as supervisors has found that they are not 'periphery' to the process of mentorship and "due to the lack of structured support for [Co-operating teachers] in an Irish context, their participation became central to the school placement process from the very beginning" (Young & MacPhail, 2015, p.14). Yet it was also reported that most cooperating teachers "were willing to engage in professional learning opportunities to enhance their role, with barriers such as time and location being seen as surmountable" (Young & MacPhail, 2015, p.14). Therefore,

given the dominance of the technical conception of teaching within Ireland, the milieu that PSTs often find themselves in during their school placement often depends on the capabilities of their respective cooperating teacher and university tutor as well as their respective demands. It is these interactions that this research hopes to investigate.

## Methodology

This research was conducted after the completion of participants' teacher education programme. All PSTs were invited to partake in a one-to-one semi-structured interview, with a researcher who was independent to the program, about their experiences of their ITE. There was understandable, and anticipated, low response to the invitation. 12 fourth-year PSTs responded to this invitation and subsequently were interviewed. The study was granted ethical approval by the authors' institution and procedures were carried out in accordance with institutional ethical practices. All participants were provided with an information sheet prior to engaging in the research study. Each participant signed a consent form and agreed to be audio recorded. The interviews were approximately 45-minutes in length. This was because the interviews were designed to gather data as part of a larger, ongoing research project on PSTs' experiences of ITE. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. A purposeful sample (Patton, 1990, p.169) of these interviews was selected for further analysis. The basis for selection was that the participant focused on a critical incident involving another professional, such as a cooperating teacher or university tutor. The authors noted that eight PSTs clearly identified issues pertaining to autonomy and agency as related to the influence of their cooperating teachers and university tutors. For the purposes of this paper, only these eight PSTs will be reported upon. The findings present a number of these cases in order

to highlight the influence of the current model on the PSTs perceived level of autonomy in practicum schools.

### *Analysis of Data*

In analysing the transcripts, a "directed content analysis" (Hseih & Shannon, 2005, p.1281) was undertaken of the eight cases identified by exploring the issues of the pre-determined categories of autonomy and agency evident within participants' descriptions of their school placement experience. The first step in our data analysis was to read the transcripts thoroughly to identify what could be classified as issues pertaining to the autonomy of participants as well as practices that might support or compromise their agency. To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, the next step utilised inter-rater reliability (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997) as the three researchers independently coded each of the transcripts only exploring any incidents that corresponded to the agreed-upon criteria pertaining to the issues of PST autonomy and agency. When the researchers came together for the next phase of the analysis, a sequence of three discussions occurred to determine if the identified cases met the criteria as well as how they might highlight distinctive practices of PST agency on placement. Although the criteria for the inclusion of events and cases was decided before comprehensive analysis was undertaken, the final cases and examples were only articulated and refined in the subsequent dialogues of the researchers to ground the authenticity (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) of PSTs' experiences and thereby speak to the realities for other PSTs. Cases are often used to illustrate rich examples of the contextual nuances for practitioners (Stake, 1978; Flyvberg, 2006) and therefore issues of generalisability are not useful when comprehending the extent of representation of themes, indeed Fine (2006, p.98) describes the use of cases within qualitative research as providing "theoretical generalisability". Therefore the cases identified in this study

were not intended to outline the breadth of feeling by participants but simply highlight the various emergent themes pertaining to the relationships between the university tutor, PST, and cooperating teacher as well as how these relationships were navigated by PSTs.

## Findings

The findings of the eight cases are discussed in three sections and each case is numbered within the findings to identify the source. First, we discuss nature of the triadic relationship between the university tutor, the PST, and the cooperating teacher. Secondly, we explore examples of both functional and dysfunctional relationships. Finally, we discuss the strategies than PSTs employed in order to navigate dysfunctional relationships while on placement.

### *The Triadic relationship: University Tutor/Pre-service Teacher/Cooperating Teacher*

While teacher education policy in Ireland recommends greater school-university partnerships in the school placement process into the future (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2013), the current mode of operation has its roots in a more traditional model. Currently, the majority of school placement is assessed by university tutors who visit schools during the school placement to conduct observations. In many institutions, this tutoring role is conducted by part-time staff, often retired senior teachers, and university staff. One of the challenges that some PSTs face is dealing with the different understandings that exist in relation to teaching and learning between university tutors, despite professional development aimed at improving the validity and reliability of the assessment process and the uniformity of the tutoring experience. For example, one

participant identified that one of his university tutors directed him towards a more conservative approach to teaching that contradicted the espoused models within his initial teacher education:

> The motto for one of my tutors was "old school is good school" and some of the things that I was doing in class he didn't really like them because they were too new...he really emphasised on, you know, discipline, give the notes, make sure you learn them and that's it like. And I can remember…being a bit shocked thinking "Jesus, that's a bit… opposite to what we are kind of being told inside in [the HEI]". (1)

There were frequent references to the school-based cooperating teacher and how they influenced the PST's practice. Cooperating teachers are playing an increasingly supportive role and providing greater levels of mentoring. However, this is not uniform across schools, hence there is significant variation in the level of school-based mentoring experienced. In the data of this study, there is a notable absence of statements pertaining to interactions between cooperating teachers and university tutors; perhaps thus indicating a missing link in the triadic relationship. In the absence of such cooperation, the university expectations of the PSTs can frequently be at odds with the norms and practices within the cooperating schools who volunteer to accept PSTs for the allocated placements. Such scenarios can, understandably, result in difficulties in the professional relationships between their cooperating teacher and university tutor.

### ***Professional Relationships***

#### *Dysfunctional Relationships*

Though the university issued guidelines for schools in relation to the cooperating teachers' engagement with the PSTs, no nationally agreed principles are in place to guide this practice. Therefore, the practices reported vary greatly in relation to how

these cooperating teachers engage in professional relationships with the PSTs. These range from very challenging and difficult experiences to ones that are productive and educative. These challenging experiences were often articulated as a constrained sense of autonomy that focused on the restrictive control of the cooperating teacher:

> One springs to mind and it happened on numerous occasions. One of my cooperating teachers would come into class, five minutes into class. So, I would be taking the roll and he would come in [and say] "what are you doing?" …I would take out the lesson plan to show him…then he would say "Nah, scrap that, do this instead". So once or twice a week, I would have to wing a class and it was, it was very much "s***, I have nothing prepared". It was literally doing everything off the top of my head…I found it hard to predict him...Sometimes I would, kind of, try to orientate the lesson towards what he would want, rather than what I would do normally myself. (4)`

A number of issues appear to be evident in this example. Firstly, the cooperating teacher appeared to show little, if any, understanding of their mentoring role. This has left the PST feeling that they were "winging" the lesson and teaching "off the top of their head". It is also apparent that the PST appears to have reoriented their teaching to align with the teacher's expectations regardless of the merits of this approach or their own professional opinion. In a similar tone, another PSTs spoke of getting a 'grilling' from one of their cooperating teachers and being 'left in the dark' after engagement with them:

> Tuesday morning she came to me right before the lesson and said "What are you doing with them today?" and I was like "I was just going to do like I said to you on Thursday, I am going to do this. I typed up these worksheets and things like this" and she was like "How come I haven't seen you since the weekend?" and I was like "well I spoke to you on Thursday evening. I didn't realise you wanted me to speak to you about the same lesson after the weekend" ...And she just basically gave me a grilling over not speaking to her after the weekend...I was like "I am

> sorry, this won't happen again", and then she was like "well I would like you to include this in your lesson as well" and I was like "okay". (6)

The PST appeared to find it unusual and unfair that the cooperating teacher would speak to her in this manner just prior to informing her that a university tutor would visit this lesson:

> And she was like "And your tutor is outside the office." I was like "you chose now of all times to, to, to do this with me. Really like?" I was just, I was furious, I really was and I just felt that there was absolutely no need for that. No need. Like, I still am looking back on the situation going "what exactly did I do wrong there?" (6)

However, the PST did not seem to suspect that the cooperating teacher might have been self-conscious or insecure in her capability as a mentor and was thus setting up deniability if the university tutor considered the lesson to be of low standard. This highlights the subtle dimensions of power relations between the university tutor and cooperating teacher. Again, in this example it is evident that the relationship with the cooperating teacher was not productive and there appeared to be little opportunity for professional dialogue.

*Functional Relationships*

Not all of the professional relationships were dysfunctional, however. There were positive experiences described where PSTs valued the support, advice and guidance from their cooperating teachers. Comparing her two school placements, this participant showed how different the experience of a PSTs can be with their cooperating teachers.

> [In second year placement] I didn't know my cooperating teachers…They helped me and they were a help but they weren't what I got on my fourth-year placement… My cooperating teacher [on fourth-year placement], as I said, did our course, so he decided we would start this whole mentoring relationship. So, he said to me "I am going to come in and look at your classes to see if I can learn anything.

> I will give you some constructive criticism where you need it. You come in and look at mine and see what you learn, see what you think." (7)

This participant provided very detailed descriptions of her positive mentoring interactions with this cooperating teacher and explained how there was a reciprocal learning relationship. For example, while reflecting on an experiment conducted in class, she said:

> I was trying to explain everything and I started getting bombarded with [questions]… I just started panicking and freaking out. I kind of looked at him and I went down to him and I was like 'I can't! I am just not able to answer all of these questions'. (7)

She continued to explain how her cooperating teacher calmed her and took over the lesson to model useful pedagogical devices to her and scaffold her learning as a teacher as 'he just started from scratch with them. And he started a "predict / observe / explain" task …They [students] had to figure that out. So it just got rid of all of the headache that I had gotten from it'. She asserted that this experience was instrumental in her development 'but that man, like, made me. He improved me in so many ways' (7).

*The perceived norm - functional or dysfunctional?*

While dysfunctional relationships were not always present, it appeared that being assigned to a cooperating teacher who facilitated professional dialogue was far from the expected norm as well. When professional dialogue took place it appeared to be a shock to some PSTs. One PST said of his cooperating teachers "it took me aback and I was impressed…He was genuinely trying to get as much out of me… Their willingness to help took me aback a bit. That was different" (8). This stood in a comparison to his previous school placement where his cooperating teachers "used to go golfing on a Wednesday because the three of them had the entire Wednesday off because of the two of us [PSTs]" (8). Another PSTs pointed out that while "a cooperating teacher should be

there to help and assist you" (5), the onus would have to be on the PST to seek that assistance, because this is not the norm "the cooperating teacher won't be the one to initiate it. That's just the way it is in schools" (5). Similarly, in the case of a PST who felt that they created a strong professional relationship with their university tutor, the responsibility for this was placed with the PST who must "take the reins" or "take things into your own hands" (8).

### *PST strategies employed to navigate dysfunctional relationships*

While the above cases provide examples of positive or negative relationships with the cooperating teacher, it was noted that PSTs used certain strategies in order to cope with dysfunctional relationships in their school placement.

#### *"Biting one's lip"*

Within the dynamics of these relationships there were times when PSTs were exposed to practices and perspectives that did not align with their understanding of teaching and learning. In these instances, it appears the PSTs engaged in 'biting one's lip', i.e. not commenting publicly on the practices observed regardless of how much they disagreed with them. These practices ranged from dealing with mixed ability student to issues of student misbehaviour. For example, in relation to mixed ability teaching one PST was taken aback by the practice of one teacher where all the effort was focused on the 'honours' students to the neglect of the 'pass' students:

> It was my first insight of mixed ability teaching and I kind of went "Oh my god" …just because you have six honours students that want to go on and they all need 80% [in their terminal examination] at least versus the three pass students… they are still there, they are still your students. Keep up both sides, you know. And you

> need to figure out a way to make work for the class as a whole, as opposed to the six important students. (3)

A similar experience was reported by another PST. In speaking about his disagreement with the school's approach to a student that was experiencing high levels of depression the PST didn't want to "step on anyone's toes" or "shake things up" when that student was isolated so he appeared to accept that the teachers' experience held greater weight.

> If it did happen in my class when I am teaching full-time myself and I did find out that there was a student and he is depressed… I definitely wouldn't isolate him anyway. I would do my level best to make sure he enjoys my lessons and …that he is engaged because I think that would have, that might be the highlight of his day … I really didn't know what to do, I didn't really want to step on anyone's toes and, you know, if that was a normal school, you know why should someone, you know, coming in for a few weeks try and shake things up like, you know? (1)

In hindsight, this PST felt that he should have been able to articulate his views to the other professionals, but it is evident in his speech that he felt a reservation in doing so. Though he feels this type of professional dialogue should take place during school placement, his lived experience suggests an atmosphere where it is safer to stay quiet in the face of conflicting beliefs about practice. "I think what I should have done was, I should have put my opinion out there in a professional way … it is something that I should have done looking back on it, you know?" (1).

These cases highlight the precarious position of the PST in these practicum placements and the perceived limited opportunities for them to engage in professional debate about the practices and procedures they observed. The highest priority in these cases appeared to be in avoiding being a voice of dissension "when you're on teaching practice you don't like rocking the boat" (3).

*Distancing*

"Distancing" was another practice that was utilised by PSTs in navigating the relationships of their school placement. In contrast to "biting one's lip", which involves a focused restraint on the part of the PST, "distancing" is a strategy of not placing oneself in a position where a professional judgement may be required, and therefore critiqued, often emanating from a position of professional insecurity. PSTs advised that maintaining distance in relationships in schools was an important element of navigating their professional placement.

> Well, my first advice would be not to take any notice of any divides within the staffroom. And not to, Jesus, most definitely not to become engaged with it…just avoid it and don't almost pick a side to stay with. You are going in there as a pre-service teacher… You want to stay "in-between" as such. A much safer zone to be in. (5)

Distance was not limited to staffroom politics, however. PSTs also talked about distance in terms of interactions with events concerning pupils also. For example, in avoiding to intervene in a situation of student misbehaviour in the corridor one student commented, "I didn't feel, I didn't feel entitled to, kind of, get involved there in that kind of situation like. Whereas I know, like, it was the right thing to do but I still wouldn't felt comfortable" (2). Perhaps as a result of these feelings of disempowerment there were some cases where the PSTs felt uncomfortable taking greater professional ownership of issues. Some PSTs appeared to make a concerted effort to distance themselves, and have very little relational engagement, with the other teachers in the school:

> Whereas half of the teachers in the school I was in in second year they wouldn't have noticed me there. I kind of felt a bit out of place. I didn't feel like a real teacher, if that makes sense. I kind of felt like an impostor (6)

> I was only a trainee teacher inside there, I didn't really want to suggest anything (1)

## Discussion

### *A dysfunctional triadic relationship?*

As has been highlighted previously, the PSTs in this study have to navigate a complex terrain when engaged in school placement. The relationship between the PST, university tutor, and cooperating teacher could be seen as a triadic arrangement (Young et al., 2015) involving engagement with all three parties - the PST, university tutor, and the cooperating teacher. Within the current policy rhetoric this provides a space for the PSTs to interact with professional teachers and university tutors to develop their practice.

The lived reality of the PST however is frequently at odds with the policy at national level (Teaching Council, 2013) and the perceived triadic relationship was not evident from the PSTs interviewed. As has been highlighted from the cases above, PSTs frequently have to deal with the tension between 1) different university tutors, 2) between university tutors and cooperating teachers, and 3) between the espoused teacher education curriculum, the university tutor, and cooperating teacher. University tutors can range from full-time staff members of the university to part-time retired teachers who are employed on a part-time basis for school placement supervision. These tutors may vary in their expectations, from suggesting practices that are in-line with school's traditions and at odds with the university expectations, to practices congruent with university policy but at odds with the school setting. On occasion some

PSTs also find themselves assigned to two tutors with different expectations. Dealing with conflicting tutor expectations can be a challenging situation, but added to this mix is the relationship with the cooperating teacher(s) that can vary from little or no engagement with the PSTs, to very supportive and educative, to overbearing and controlling.

In that context the triadic relationship between the PST, university tutor and cooperating teacher varies quite significantly from PST to PST. This appears to be dependent on a number of factors such as: the university tutor's expectations and the extent to which they align more with the school or university; the PST's relationship with the cooperating teacher; and the relationship, if any, between the university tutor and cooperating teacher. While recognising that it may be quite simplistic to present the school and university in an oppositional manner it does appear that the significant tensions experienced by some of the PSTs were reduced to the level of congruency in practices between the university and school. In some instances, the PSTs act as the conduit between the two institutions and, as in some of the examples outlined in this research, get "caught in the crossfire" when expectations between the cooperating teacher and the university tutor differs. On other occasions, the tensions appear to lie between the university expectations with the cooperating teacher and tutor(s) where the tutor's expectations of the PSTs would be more in line with the school's expectations and conflicting with the university expectations. The absence of meaningful partnerships with schools and universities exacerbates this problem and it could be argued that, with a lack of resources in the ITE sector in Ireland to develop stronger partnerships, these challenges will not be addressed in the immediate future. Perhaps, in this context, dealing with professional differences should be brought to the fore more in teacher preparation so PSTs can develop the skills to operate within these differing

understandings of 'good' teaching for their practicum placement and subsequently within their professional careers.

### *Coping strategies as antithetical to developing professional voice*

What emerges as distinctive from this research is the manner in which the PSTs navigates these tensions. The over-riding approach appears to be in "keeping the head down". This was evident in the "biting one's lip" and "distancing" that occurred when they experienced practices incongruent with the university expectations or their own personal views of teaching and learning. Within this context, the extent to which these placements are educative and beneficial is questionable. While recognising that for many PSTs placement is a very beneficial and educative experience, for others it appears to be a practice to tolerate and to ultimately 'get through' (Hobson & Malderez, 2005; Moody, 2009; Rutherford et al., 2015; Buckworth, 2017). If, as is argued in the national policy literature, school placement is a central experience for the PSTs, more consideration needs to be given to the unintended consequences and experiences of some PSTs placed in these challenging arrangements. In these cases there appears to be little room for questioning and professional dialogue which calls into question the opportunities for PSTs to critically reflect on the relational practices of their professional engagement. Essentially, if "biting one's lip" is the dominant tactic how does one develop a professional voice?

The current arrangement also tends to encourage PSTs to replicate existing practices with them in order to maximise their chances of 'fitting in' within their school and achieving a high grade from the university tutor. Instead of an opportunity to develop professional agency and explore innovative practices it could be argued that the current model encourages compliance and conformity with prevailing norms and practices. This current model therefore adds to the theory-practice divide that is

perceived by many PSTs (Loughran, 2006; Allen & Wright, 2014; McGarr, O'Grady, & Guilfoyle, 2017). As the teacher education model moves towards greater school-university partnerships into the future it is important that these differing expectations are explicitly addressed and not side-lined, which is often the case. It should also be noted while recognising that this is not an issue for all PSTs in the current model, the cases outlined in this study shows it is a significant issue for some.

### *Implications of these findings*

As highlighted, both "biting one's lip" and "distancing" appear to be indicators of a dysfunctional relationship with a tutor/mentor where holding back comment or simply withdrawing from engagement is seen as the best option. It may be beneficial however to bring this behaviour, and its implications for the PSTs' professional development, to the attention of the PST perhaps encouraging them to purposefully reflect on the nature of their professional relationships with university tutors and cooperating teachers during school placement. Asking PSTs to identify their own "distancing" and "lip biting" behaviours would be particularly educative if these insights help them to consider the value of professional dialogue with colleagues that hold differing opinions. This would stand in contrast to the hegemonic practice of avoidance of these issues by all within the triad. It may also help them to develop greater agency during their placement and help them to take greater ownership of resolving professional disagreements. If one of the aims of school placement is to facilitate the professional growth of the PST, then these aspects should be explicitly sought to ensure PSTs can begin to articulate this professional voice. Therefore the manifestation of such strategies as "biting one's lip" and "distancing" could be explicit topics for reflections for PSTs to help them explore these aspects of their practice. Similarly, for mentor teachers and perhaps more importantly for university tutors, exploring these dilemmas faced by PSTs during the

practicum could heighten awareness of the power dynamics at play on the practicum and the complex choreography employed by some PSTs to navigate these power dynamics. Making such aspects of power and compliance explicit for university tutors could enable them to challenge their own assumptions and practices which could result in a more meaningful and authentic experience for the PST.

We have, to this point, suggested that the main source of the professional tensions on the practicum relate to differences in opinions about what constitutes 'good' teaching and learning. These tensions, however, can be heightened or reduced by the university tutor's approach to the tutoring process and how the PST is scaffolded in understanding this micro-political context. The extent to which these challenges can be seen by the university tutor as an opportunity to unpack and explore professional understandings of teaching and learning can significantly influence the educational opportunity for the PST. In that context, university tutors should perhaps pay more attention to the professional context of the school and its implications for the PST's development rather than focusing solely on the classroom context as a site of the PST's work and development. To advance this, university tutors could be encouraged to explore the wider professional context of the school with the PSTs as part of site visits. In addition, PSTs should be encouraged to reflect on these power dynamics and the implications for their development as part of placement portfolio requirements. These issues of power are complex and multi-layered but are unavoidable and an inevitable aspect where assessment and judgement are required. Therefore we are not suggesting that these tensions can be eradicated, but making them more explicit and bringing the reality of them to the fore is a good first step in empowering PSTs to take a more proactive stance towards these challenges rather than simply 'tolerating' them.

## Conclusions

Teacher education policy has undergone substantial change in Ireland in recent years and now seeks different relationships between universities and schools in terms of school placement. However the extent to which the espoused models can be realised within the current system remains to be seen. Under the current arrangements where informal engagement with the university and cooperating teachers exists there is considerable variation in term of the professional development experience of the PSTs. For many it has served them well and their engagement with professional teachers who provide excellent mentoring and support highlights the goodwill and expertise within the system at present. For others however, the informal arrangement has led to dysfunctional professional relationships. In these instances, the subtle power dynamics that underpin these relationships are more pronounced and can radically distort their educative potential. Therefore, under these frustrated conditions, PSTs must manage the tensions and differing expectations of the various actors in the process. As the study has highlighted, the main tactics employed by the PSTs in these circumstances is standing back, tolerating the contradictory messages, by "biting one's lip" or avoiding any professional dialogue where they may feel discomfited. It is unrealistic in these situations, particularly given the high stakes nature of the assessment and power dynamics present, for them to voice professional concerns about these tensions. Therefore, the significant prevalence of dysfunctional relationships for PSTs (Ortlipp, 2003) with those teachers, who mentor them in the practice of their profession, at this delicate phase of their career can have profound effects throughout the remainder of their careers. The two coping strategies identified within this research offer teacher educators the capacity to account for how PSTs who endure such relationships (during their practicum) will manifest itself and, instead of being ignored, we have outlined how

these strategies can be used as opportunities for an educative dialogue. Arguably, the extent to which some PSTs feel that their professional agency, and the development of a professional voice, is stifled undermines the rich potential of the practicum experience and should be the explicit attention of further research as to how dysfunctional practicum relationships manifest themselves and the effect it has on the PST's practicum.

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