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How can partnerships enhance the trainee experience?

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Editorial

Sarah Cartwright

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Welcome to this 40th edition of the Links bulletin which for the first time is electronic rather than in hard copy. I am very much hoping to return to our normal format for the next edition, but for the moment financial constraints have dictated this change.

The theme of this edition reflects that of the September ITE conference: partnership. Having worked for two years on the Our Languages project, I feel qualified to promote the benefits of “partnership working”. The cover image is taken from the Our Languages toolkit which aims to support the development of relationships between mainstream schools, both primary and secondary, and complementary or supplementary schools. If you would like a copy of the toolkit, please email me in January



with your full postal address so that I can arrange for one to be sent.

The changing face of ITE is the subject of John Trafford’s article which highlights a number of challenges ahead, including the consequences for ITE of the decline of languages take up in KS4 and the difficult job market. ‘Since he delivered this paper, the TDA has reduced the additional bursary for MFL.

Overseas placements are a feature of teacher education at Liverpool Hope University. Jan Rowe sets out the profound influence this experience of another system of education has on the professional identity of beginning teachers.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), developed in partnership with Tile Hill Wood School, is a specialism of ITE at Warwick University. This initiative, analysed by Marilyn Hunt and Ana Neofitou, fits into the concept of more integrated languages teaching as promoted by the national curriculum.

Two further joint projects likewise describe an enhanced experience of ITE: firstly, the collaboration between Languages and Art & Design led by the artist, Quentin Blake, at the Institute of Education; then an extended collaboration between French and drama at Oxford Brookes – again both very in tune with the current national curriculum.

An update on the Key Stage 3 Framework for languages completes this edition. Happy reading and all best wishes for 2010!

Directions for Modern Languages Initial Teacher Education in a changing climate

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Two issues dominated exchanges between modern languages teacher educators during 2008–09 on CILT’s ‘support for teacher trainers’ website (www.ittmfl.org.uk). These were school placements and employment prospects for newly qualified teachers.

Training

Discussions centred on the difficulty of identifying and securing suitable school placements, and providers identified as problematic the

following: the quantity of placements offered; the appropriateness of the experience, especially the range of languages available; the quality of the experience; geographical location; and the continuity of schools’ commitment and ability to host placements regularly.

Ofsted (2008) offers some thoughts about the training of teachers in what they term ‘community languages’, and reports a somewhat ad hoc system, dependent on various considerations, among which is the identification of suitable placements. The ittmfl discussions suggest that the issue is in fact much wider, affecting more mainstream modern language provision.

The underlying issue here is the balance of power and responsibility in an infrastructure which has existed for decades and has not been greatly affected by various teacher training reforms, most significantly in the early 1990s (DfE 1992). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) receive allocations of trainee numbers, recruit to courses, then have the responsibility for finding placements in schools. Schools provide placements largely as an act of goodwill; in most cases they receive some funding, and in some cases there is an agreement in place, but this is at best a moral imperative. The result is an unpredictability in the system as schools opt in and out, sometimes for understandable and

justifiable reasons, but occasionally at very short notice.

This is not to belittle the excellent contribution that many schools and mentors consistently make to PGCE partnership – at its best this gives a coherence to the student teacher's experience that has not always been present. The point is that the system runs, and sometimes limps, on a basis that is often shaky or volatile, and which appears to be creaking more audibly.

Trends in schools' language provision are significant. The fall off in the numbers of Key Stage 4 pupils studying a language, the possibility of compressing Key Stage 3 study into a shorter period, the perception of languages as 'difficult' by some school managements in pursuit of league table points – all conspire to make the situation more difficult to manage.

Ways forward

That wonderful gift, hindsight, suggests one remedy. If, when Ofsted had first designed its framework for school inspection, the quality of a school's contribution to initial teacher training had been prominently included as an indicator of quality, the ad hoc nature of placements would have been very different. Is it too late to consider such a change, especially with schools now more conscious of their responsibilities for professional development, and the arrival of the Masters in Teaching and Learning?

Higher education can play its part too. A model of training based on paired or multiple placements is nothing new, but not been very widely adopted despite its successes in some courses, such as at the University of Sheffield, my former base. Its merits would take longer to outline than space here permits, but it is a way of enhancing quality which goes beyond reducing the number of placement schools sought.

I would suggest, too, that we need to have a better overview of what language teachers we are as a sector putting into the system, to know whether schools' needs are being met by higher education's 'outturn'. Because of the way in which courses are classified and data collected, Graduate Teacher Training Registry

statistics are not presenting a complete picture – this is illustrated by the 2008 statistical report, in which the number of acceptances for each modern language training provider takes account only of those training to teach one language only – surely a minority.

First posts

For the first time in recent memory, universities reported difficulties their student teachers were experiencing in finding their first job. This ironically coincided with a time of burgeoning recruitment, in which the national economic situation plays a part. The status of modern languages as a shortage subject would be threatened if this turned out to be a long term trend.

In the short term, modern languages tutors will need to work with their students in making them more employable. Colleagues in other areas, for example history and primary teaching, have long faced a situation in which full employment for their student groups was far from certain. Relationships with local authorities can be patchy, and indeed the presence of a subject expert within a local authority cannot be guaranteed, but liaison

on local trends of language provision might help to inform selection. The motivation for student teachers to demonstrate their high quality should now be stronger than ever in a market that has quite suddenly become more competitive.

Is it also time to revive the idea of the 'second subject' (i.e. outside the modern languages specialist area) in training courses, now quite rare? Available teaching time is seriously limited, but linguists may need a broadening of their skills in a tough climate.

Over the horizon

Policy predictions are hard. In a time of recession, with an election imminent, and with language provision in some secondary schools undermined, the best answer from our sector is to continue to produce new teachers of the highest quality. They will be the best answer we can give to any difficulties that modern languages teaching and teacher education face.

References

- Ofsted (2008) *Every language matters*
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