Being and Belonging: Student-Teachers' Contextual Engagement in Schools

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Abstract: While School Placement is long established as a central component of Initial Teacher Education programmes, there is an increasing awareness that these placement experiences should go beyond the practical activities most directly associated with teaching. This paper considers how engagement in a school placement period with a focus on non-teaching activities contributes to the professional and personal development of student-teachers, and to their sense of 'belonging' while on placement. Drawing primarily on the analysis of data obtained from online logs maintained by student-teachers during this predominantly non-teaching placement, it establishes the activities that they engaged in, and their reflections and opinions about the value of these experiences and this practicum placement. Findings include an increased sense of belonging to the school community, greater confidence and a stronger sense of identity as teacher.

Introduction

School Placement (SP) is widely recognised as one of the most significant formative experiences for students of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes (Darling-Hammond, 2006). While such placements are often acknowledged for their importance with regard to the practical aspects in preparation for teaching (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005), there is a growing awareness that school placement experiences should be broader than an exclusive focus on classrooms and those practical activities most directly associated with teaching (Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2017). This paper considers how engagement in non-teaching activities during a specially designed period of school placement contributes to the professional and personal development of student-teachers.

The paper opens with an exploration of 'belonging' (or 'belongingness') with regard to student-teachers and teacher education, and how this has been shown to impact the student-teacher placement experience. The landscape of ITE in Ireland is then explored in order to contextualise the description that follows of a non-teaching based placement period that was designed to immerse student-teachers in the day-to-day life of the school. The study then draws on the analysis of data obtained from student-teacher placement activity logs and survey responses to establish the non-teaching activities that one cohort of pre-service teachers engaged in during such a period of placement, and their reflections and opinions about the value of these experiences and this practicum placement. We conclude by considering the relevance and implications of these findings for school placement, teacher

education and the professional development of student-teachers, and by identifying potential avenues for further investigation.

School Placement and Belonging

The school placement experience (often referred to as the 'Practicum') is long established as a central component of teacher education programmes (MacBeath, 2011; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001) and is widely acknowledged to be a critical period for the professional growth for student-teachers (Busher, Gündüz, Cakmak, & Lawson, 2015; Fazio & Volante, 2011). Much has been written about what constitutes a 'good' and positive practicum placement (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Moody, 2009) and indeed, the challenges and stresses that student-teachers can experience during periods of SP (Moos & Pitton, 2014; Murray-Harvey, 2001). One consideration within such investigations is the significance of the sense of 'belonging' (used interchangeably with 'belongingness' within the literature, as it is in this paper) experienced by a student-teacher within their placement school, and in turn the implications of this for their placement experience and their professional development (Caires, Almeida, & Vieira, 2012; Johnston, 2016).

Explorations of the concept of belonging generally acknowledge its roots in the work of Maslow (1954) who situates it as a psychological need within his Hierarchy of Needs model. Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema and Collier (1992) define sense of belonging as 'the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment' (p. 173). They delineate two key dimensions of sense of belonging: '(1) valued involvement: the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted; and (2) fit: the person's perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment' (1992, p. 173). Drawing on analysis and interpretation of study data with regard to the clinical placement experiences of nursing students, Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2008) propose that belongingness is

> a deeply personal and contextually mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels (a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group, (b) connected with or integral to the group, and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group (p. 104).

Acknowledging that several definitions for belongingness exist within the literature, Jena and Prachan (2018) suggest that a common theme with regard to belongingness appears to be the individual's perceptual assessment of relational value in the eyes of others.

This concept of belonging has been explored with regard to the placement experiences for students of a number of professions. In particular, Levett-Jones and colleagues have written extensively on the matter with regard to practicum placements for student nurses (2008). They propose that 'the sense of belonging experienced in environments that facilitate positive placement experiences allows students to progress in their learning with confidence and motivation' during nursing placements (2009, p. 323), that a significant relationship exists between nursing students' senses of belonging and workplace satisfaction, and that a sense of belonging empowers students to ask for help and support when on clinical placements (Borrott, Day, Sedgwick, & Levett-Jones, 2016). Similarly, McKenna et al. (2013) found sense of belongingness to be an important factor in influencing clinical learning in midwifery placements, while Maher, Pelly, Swanepoel, Sutakowsky and Hughes' (2015) investigations with regard to placements within a nutrition and dietetic education programme found that 'a supportive clinical environment that provides safety and security, and facilitates

a sense of belonging and perceived value, all contribute to student confidence and self-efficacy' (p. 161). Belongingness has also been explored in dental education placements (Radford & Hellyer, 2016) and in physiotherapy placements (Hamshire & Wibberley, 2015).

Consistent with this, there is a growing awareness of the significance of belonging with regard to the placement experience for student-teachers (Caires et al., 2012). Ussher (2010) for instance, found that student-teachers who experienced a sense of belonging to their host school perceived the placement to be an effective place for their learning, and the opportunity to work with several teachers within a placement to be a positive advantage. On the other hand, a study by Gray, Wright and Pascoe (2017) found that pre-service teachers who lacked this sense of belonging during their practicum experienced feelings of vulnerability, which often manifested in stress for the student-teacher, while Johnston (2016) cautions that the 'deleterious effects of failing to belong to the community cannot be overestimated' (p. 545).

Much has been written about the level of emphasis placed on the development of technical teaching skills during periods of school placement (Schulz, 2005), particularly evident in discussions and debates with regard to competence- and standards-based approaches to teacher education (Caena, 2014; Page, 2015). There is also, however, an increased awareness that the professional development of a student-teacher necessitates more than mastery of the skills required to navigate the complexities of what happens within the classroom itself (Field & Latta, 2001; Shulman, 1998), and that the practicum for student-teachers should encompass experiences and opportunities that extend beyond the walls of the classroom and the activities associated most directly with teaching (Elmer, 2002; Purdy & Gibson, 2008). This study focuses upon a school-based period of placement with a focus on non-teaching activities, which is outlined in the following section.

Context: National and Local

This study takes place at an institute of education within a university in the Republic of Ireland. It focuses on one teacher education programme which employs the concurrent model of ITE that sees undergraduate students follow a four-year joint academic subjects and education degree programme which leads to a post-primary (secondary level) teaching qualification in those subjects. SP in Ireland typically follows the workplace/host model, which sees ITE student-teachers undertake defined periods of placement within a host school, while the Higher Education Institution (HEI) is responsible for assessment of student-teacher and provides all academic aspects of the degree (Conway, Murphy, Rath, & Hall, 2009). Students of this particular programme undertake a block period of school placement during each year of their ITE degree, during which they teach both of their academic subjects in post-primary school settings.

The teacher education landscape of the Republic of Ireland has undergone a number of significant changes in recent times (Conway & Murphy, 2013; Dolan, 2016). Key among these has been the establishment of the Teaching Council of Ireland in 2006 as the professional standards body for the teaching profession in Ireland (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016). All practicing teachers in Ireland must now register with the Teaching Council, and all teacher education programmes in Ireland that qualify teachers for this registration must attain accreditation from the Council. The Teaching Council has published a number of key policy documents in this regard (2011, 2013) and while these contain a number of changes that have far-ranging implications for teaching and teacher education in Ireland, there are three developments that are of particular relevance to this current study. The first is that student-teachers are now required to undertake at least one 'extended placement' as part of their ITE

programme, a 'block placement for a minimum of ten weeks' (2013, p. 12). The second concerns the nature of the school-based activities to be undertaken as part of their ITE programme, which should now include opportunities 'to gain practice in teaching, to apply educational theory in a variety of teaching and learning situations and school contexts and to participate in school life in a way that is structured and supported' (2013, p. 6). The third is a key shift in terminology with regard to the practicum placement whereby the term 'school placement … replaces the term "teaching practice" [as it] more accurately reflects the nature of the experience as one encompassing a range of teaching and non-teaching activities' (2013, p. 6). Taken together, these represent significant shifts in policy and practice for ITE in Ireland and sees student-teachers spending greater periods of time in host schools and engaged in a wider range of activities with regard to their development as teachers than had previously been the case (Conway & Munthe, 2015).

The ITE programme at the centre of this study responded to these policy developments by introducing a Contextual Engagement Period (CEP) that student-teachers in all four years of the programme are required to take in their host school prior to commencement of their timetabled teaching. In the case of final year students, the CEP takes place at the end of August (at the beginning of the academic year) and is five days in duration. The student-teacher then returns to university lectures after the CEP and completes a full semester of study before beginning their 12-week extended placement four months later at the beginning of January. The CEP is intended to afford the student-teacher opportunities to engage in an initial orientation of the school, to liaise with cooperating teachers and school management about the forthcoming placement, and where possible to engage in observation of lessons being taught by experienced teachers, a well-established practice with regard to teacher education (Jenkins, 2014). However, student-teachers are also required (where possible) to become involved in the organisation of school events, to assist with administrative activities, to engage with extra-curricular events and preparations, and in general to become immersed in the day-to-day life of the school. In doing so, student-teachers avail of opportunities to 'engage fully in the life of the school and seek and avail of opportunities to observe and work alongside other teachers' (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2014, p. 1). Schools are provided with a 'Guide for Cooperating Schools' booklet by the ITE provider which outlines the nature of the CEP and a list of possible activities that students might engage in. During their CEP, student-teachers maintain an online 'School Activities Engagement Log' (SAEL) which forms a record of their CEP and the activities in which they engaged.

Method
Research Objectives and Participants

This paper is guided by two central research objectives. First, it aims to ascertain the activities that one cohort of final year student-teachers engaged in during their CEP. Second, it considers how engagement in these activities undertaken during CEP potentially contributed to their professional and personal development as teachers. The study is undertaken with a group of final-year (fourth year) student-teachers on a concurrent ITE programme who undertook their one-week CEP in August/September and commenced the teaching-centred bulk of their 12-week school placement four months later in January, at the beginning of the second school term in Ireland.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected from two sources. The primary source of data was the student-teachers' online SAELs. Following approval from the institution's Research Ethics Committee, an invitation was sent to all fourth-year students of the programme to invite their participation in the research in the form of retrospective access to these logs. Consistent with well-established best practice regarding informed consent (Howe & Moses, 1999), students were presented with a Plain Language Description of the research project and an Informed Consent Form to signify their willingness to participate. A total of 50 fourth year student-teachers (out of a possible 70) granted permission for access to their logs. An initial inspection of the logs was conducted in order to achieve 'a sense of the whole' (Tesch, 1990, p. 96). This revealed a variety of formats for log entries; some students explicitly recorded each activity using a separate log entry, while others opted to include a broader and more descriptive log entry for the day and to include the details of the various activities within. Thus, the logs were imported into NVivo, a well-established CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis) software package for performing the analytical tasks of coding, retrieving and annotating qualitative data (Schönfelder, 2011). The log entries were also anonymised at this time: any identifying names (schools, teachers, other student-teachers in the school) were removed and the owner of the log entry assigned a pseudonym. In total, 519 log entries were imported for analysis, and each of the 50 students established as a 'case' within NVivo.

Two rounds of coding were applied to the data. The first round specifically identified the activities that student-teachers engaged in during the CEP. Each log entry was read and coded initially with first cycle descriptive codes, which '[attribute] a class of phenomena to a segment of text' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 54), and then re-read in the light of the newly established codes, a process known as 'constant comparison' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 473). A second cycle of coding was then applied through the use of 'pattern codes' to 'group together first cycle codes into a smaller number of sets, themes or constructs' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). It emerged during the initial review of the entries that a number of students had used the logs to not only record the activities that they engaged in, but also their thoughts and opinions on these activities. Thus a second round of coding was subsequently applied to the extracted log data to identify the opinions and sentiments expressed by the students with regard to the CEP activities they engaged in.

A second source of data was student-teacher responses to a short anonymous survey which was intended to provide further insight into their opinions about the CEP. As the final-year student-teachers were still on placement during the study timeframe (and thus, it was hoped, in an ideal position to comment on the value of the CEP with regard to the placement they were currently undertaking), an online questionnaire was used to distribute the survey questions and gather the responses (a response rate of 24 out of 70 was achieved). The intention behind the surveys was to facilitate complementarity by 'seeking elaboration, illustration, enhancement, and clarification of the findings' (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008, p. 282). In this regard, the survey contributions were valuable in providing further insight into the opinions of the students regarding the activities identified in the SAELs and their experiences of undertaking the CEP week. The open-ended responses submitted for the surveys were also imported into NVivo and coded.

Results and Discussion
Analysis of Activities

The second cycle coding of CEP logs consolidated the activities undertaken by final-year student-teachers during their CEP into six categories, as follows:
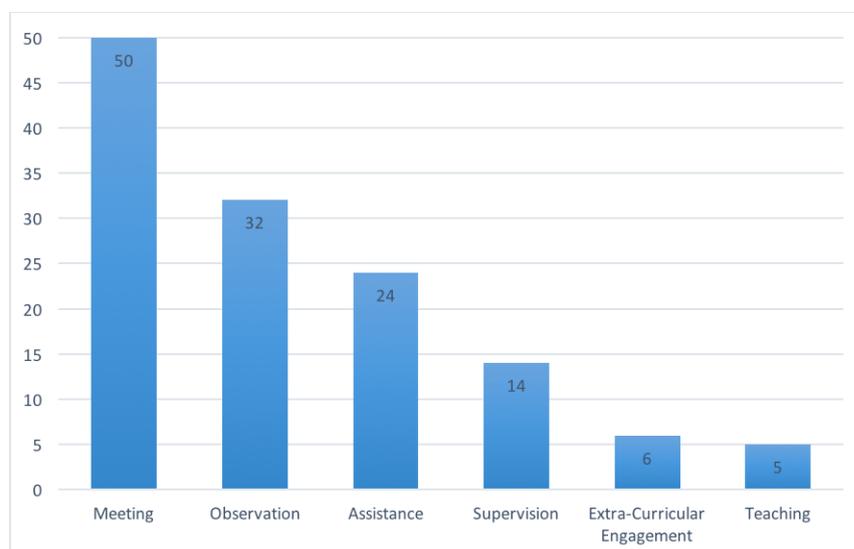

Figure 1: Number of students engaging in activities during CEP

This paper focuses on the non-teaching activities as expressed in Figure 1 above, and will now explore those in more depth.

Meetings

By far, the most common type of activity engaged in was meetings, both in terms of the number of students who engaged in them (all 50) and the number of recorded instances of this within the CEP logs (32% of all coded references). The most common type of meeting attended was with subject departments (41 students), followed by all-staff meetings (39 students). Almost half (24) of the students referred to attending a 'new staff induction' session at the beginning of the school year. Twenty students reported attending a meeting with one or more cooperating teacher (i.e. teachers who teach the classes the student-teacher will take during the block placement), while the same number recorded a dedicated meeting with the school principal or deputy principal. A number of students also made reference to meeting with 'other teachers' during the CEP (such as SEN coordinators, resource teachers, year heads and teachers of other subjects). Several of the coded entries also referred to more informal meetings with personnel within the school; ten of the students wrote about 'meeting teachers in the staffroom' and how they had spent 'time chatting with teachers and getting to know them' (SAEL 4-25), while a smaller number (7) referred to attending staff breakfasts or lunches.

The comments forthcoming from student-teachers regarding attendance at such meetings were predominantly positive in nature. Take, for example, the account provided by one student in terms of attending a structured staff induction meeting:

> *At 10:30 I attended the new staff induction meeting. This was held in the*
> *boardroom and was attended by other student teachers and new staff members.*
> *It was an opportunity for us to be introduced to the procedures and policies in*

greater detail and discuss any questions or issues that we might have. We were given a welcome pack on arrival which included a student journal, notes for home and toilet breaks, and general housekeeping. It also contained complaint forms and info on how to use them, our individual fobs and keys and a prospectus for the year ahead. We also got login names and passwords for the school system. We were then given a tour of the school and shown where to find photocopiers and printers and how to use them. This was an invaluable introduction to the school and its inner workings. [SAEL 4-12]

The largest number of comments made reference to attendance at initial subject planning meetings for the year ahead. A number of these comments referred to learning that occurred on the part of the student-teacher from attending such meetings with experienced teachers. For instance:

The department plan was discussed along with Schemes of Work, homework policy, and literacy targets. Orders for the school book rental scheme were taken and I took part in the discussion regarding what texts to use with the different classes. There was also a discussion on visits to the theatre for each set of pupils. This was a very informative meeting and the thoughts and preparations of experienced teachers in choosing texts was especially revealing to me. [SAEL 4-26]

Observation

The second most engaged in activity by student-teachers (32 of the 50 who permitted access to their CEP logs) was observation. 27 reported that they engaged in observation of the classes they would be teaching during school placement in January and 24 that they engaged in observation of other classes. Several positive comments were noted for observation of own classes and others. Notably, a number of the comments referred to witnessing experienced teachers' first meetings with their pupils and how informative this was to the ITE student-teachers in terms of how to approach such introductory lessons. For example:

On day two, I was in for the first class of the day and observed an English class of first years. It was really useful for me to see how the teacher welcomed them for the first time, how she played "the name game" and other ice breaking activities, both to get the know the students and to help them to settle in. I observed the teacher constructing a seating plan with the class and placing them in their temporary places until she gets to know them better. I helped her to organise group activities and have a quiz to get to know the names others in the class and the people in their groups and I found it very effective to observe. [SAEL 4-22]

Almost half of the students reported that they had observed lessons regarding classgroups other than those they were going to teach in their January placement, and indeed other subjects to those they would be teaching. For example, this account from a student-teacher who observed practical subjects that s/he does not teach:

I was invited in to observe and assist with a double Home Economics class - a class where I have the least amount of expertise imaginable. Nonetheless I helped with projects and engaged with both the teachers and the pupils. It was very worthwhile to see how the pupils interact and behave in this different sort of classroom environment. Later in the day, I was invited in to assist in a Woodwork class, another class which I had very little knowledge or experience

in. I found this very useful, however, as the teacher used a variety of different teaching techniques which seemed to work brilliantly. [SAEL 4-48]

However, it is also notable that a number of students made use of their survey responses to indicate that they did not engage in observation and were critical of this. This was mainly attributed to the positioning of the CEP at the beginning of the school year. For example:

The one negative about the timing of the CEP for 4th year is that you don't get to observe lessons with the groups you will be teaching. [SR4-13]

Assistance

The third most frequently recorded activities (by just under half of the students, N=24) were coded as 'assistance' in a range of contexts which included preparation of examination materials, helping in the school library, assisting the chaplain in preparing for religious services, and accompanying students on school excursions. Two types of assistance were more frequently reported than others, however. The first of these was participation in induction and orientation programmes for pupils (N=18). These mainly took the form of inductions for new pupils (first years) but also referred to orientations for Transition Year and Fifth Year pupils. Student-teacher comments were positive regarding involvement in such programmes. For instance:

The principal, year head and class tutors all spoke to the first years regarding the general organisation of the school (uniform, class rules, timetables, etc.). I found this induction useful as like the first year students I am also new to the school and therefore am largely unaware of the school rules. [SAEL 4-07]
On the same topic, another student projected a sense of optimism about participating in the induction programme and saw a certain kinship between them and the new pupils:
I am excited to participate in 1st Year induction tomorrow; it seems somewhat refreshing that the first time I interact with pupils in the school as a new teacher will be with pupils who too are just starting out in a new environment. [SAEL 4-36]

The second most-frequently reported activity coded as 'assistance' was that of assisting in the school office, which 11 students included in their SAELs. Students who elaborated on participation in this activity spoke positively about it. For instance:

I was given permission to help out the staff in the office to organise names and payments for school jackets and the new school journals. The office staff were very appreciative of my assistance and I was given the duties of confirming what pupils had paid in full for their jackets and journals and what pupils had given some of the funds in instalments. This helped me become familiar with some of the pupils' names but also become more aware of their backgrounds. [SAEL 4-28]
Friday was spent helping out in the office/administration department of [school]. The staff thought it best I experience the true hectic nature of a school office by joining them on a Friday and the first full day of the school year. My job for the day was to fetch students from their classes, assign them a locker and make sure they had a key, lock and spare keys, all of which had to be labelled. This chore gave me the chance to get to know not only the layout of the school and the classrooms different subjects were held in, but also my future pupils. [SAEL 4-15]

Supervision

Fourteen of the 50 students who granted access to their CEP logs engaged in activities that were coded as 'supervision'. Nine students engaged in academic supervision (supervising 'free classes' due to teacher absence), six took part in break and lunchtime supervision, three were involved in supervising subject tests, and two assisted with supervising class excursions. For instance:

> *Today the principal asked if I was able to supervise a free class when one of the teachers was out. This was double class of French for second year students. The teacher had left out the work for the students to complete. [SAEL 4-17]*
> *My cooperating teachers asked me to accompany them while supervising the corridors and both small break and lunch time. This is also an activity that I will be helping out with during school placement. It also gave me the opportunity to observe that first year students get break/lunch five minutes earlier than the rest of the pupils. [SAEL 4-42]*

Extra-Curricular

The final category of non-teaching activity coded within student-teacher SAEL logs was that of extra-curricular activities. The activities recorded include helping with school musical auditions and practice, helping with a new mindfulness programme that is starting in the school, and engaging with school sporting events. Although the number of students (N=6) that recorded engaging in these extra-curricular tasks is relatively small, all of the related comments recorded spoke positively about this type of engagement. For example:

> *I then accompanied the teacher to auditions for the musical. It was really nice to be a part of the process and she asked me to take notes on who stood out for me. [SAEL 4-22]*
> *In the afternoon I had the opportunity to assist in the schools Gaelic football tryouts. This required me to cooperate with other teachers and help in the selection process. [SAEL 4-26]*

Non-Teaching Activities and School Placement

It is clear from the analysis of SAELs that student-teachers engaged in a wide variety of non-teaching activities and interacted with a range of staff (teaching and non-teaching) within the school during this CEP placement, and that the comments forthcoming from the students about their engagement in these activities were predominantly positive with regard to their placement experience and their professional development as teachers. Such findings are notable in the light of academic discussions and policy decisions with regard to the role of the practicum in teacher education programmes as a broader and more holistic placement experience for preservice teachers. Zeichner (1996) for instance, argues that a narrow practicum focus on the classroom which lacks attention to the wider school context means that it 'often fails to prepare student teachers for the full scope of the teacher's role' (p. 125). He proposes that the school placement experience must give student-teachers a direct understanding of how their work in the classroom fits into the larger context of the school, and the capability to deal effectively with school colleagues and administrators, or else 'their effectiveness in the classroom will be severely compromised' (1996, p. 125). Similarly, Schulz (2005) calls for a re-imagining of 'the traditional, technical skills model of the

practicum in teacher-education' (p.147) to one that sees 'teacher candidates move beyond the classroom walls to understand the full scope of a teacher's role' (p. 153), while Purdy and Gibson (2008) observe a shift in the nature of placements due to the evolving and broadening conception of the role of the teacher as one whose responsibilities extend beyond the boundaries of subject knowledge and practical classroom expertise.

Such findings are also significant with regard to recent teacher education policy in the Republic of Ireland (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016). This is perhaps most evident in the shift in terminology with regard to the practicum which sees the term 'teaching practice' replaced by 'school placement' which, it is argued, is more reflective of 'a range of teaching and non-teaching activities' (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2013, p. 6) and is 'consistent with international policy trends of broadening school experience beyond an exclusive focus on classrooms' (Sugrue & Solbrekke, 2017, p. 136). Indeed, the issue of non-teaching activities by teachers has also been scrutinised at international level, with the results from the 2015 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) finding that, on average, teachers spend as much as half of their working time in non-teaching activities that includes planning lessons, marking, and collaborating with other teachers (OECD, 2015). In this regard, this CEP learning experience for final year student-teachers, in terms of their holistic development as teachers as they prepare to enter the profession, becomes all the more significant.

It is notable, however, that a low proportion (five) of the student-teachers in the current study engaged in teaching activities during this CEP placement and that most were therefore free of the time commitments for planning and teaching lessons, which in turn contributed to the space and time available to student-teachers to engage in these non-teaching activities. Whether or not a student-teacher undertaking their teaching-intensive block of school placement would have the necessary time to engage in this range and breath of non-teaching activities at that time is questionable. In this regard, there is clearly merit in student-teachers being afforded either a separate dedicated placement period (such as the CEP in this particular programme) or a ring-fenced portion of their main school placement experience, for engagement in these important non-teaching activities, 'collaborative work with experienced staff, and greater engagement with the life of the school' (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2013, p. 12) so that they may develop 'an appreciation of the complexity of teaching and the variety of roles undertaken by teachers' (2013, p. 7). The overall value of such a dedicated placement was articulated by a number of students in the current study through their closing observations within their SAELs. For example:

> *I was made feel very welcome in the school and already see the benefit of involving myself in the school community prior to my block placement. [SAEL 4-36]*
> *Overall, my first week in my school was most definitely an excellent way to get to know the staff, school, and students of the school I will be spending 12 weeks in. [SAEL 4-49]*
> *Overall the week proved to be productive and worthwhile and sets a good foundation on which a successful teaching placement can be experienced. [SAEL 4-38]*

Belongingness

A number of the key indicators of belongingness that are reported in the literature on this issue were evident in the SAELs and survey responses. For instance, Levett-Jones and Lethlean (2008) outline that feeling 'secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a

defined group' (p. 104) are key components of belongingness, similar to Hagerty's (1992) emphasis on feeling personal involvement to the extent that the participant feels themselves to be an integral part of the system or environment. While these constituent elements of belongingness were evident across the range of SAEL entries, three themes in particular emerged with greater prominence from the data analysis that illustrate the existence, significance and potentials of belongingness, and these are now discussed.

Belonging and the School Community

Several authors (Johnston, 2016; Solomon, Eriksen, Smestad, Rodal, & Bjerke, 2017) have explored the issue of belonging for student-teachers with regard to the school community. It is notable, therefore, that a significant proportion of comments in the current study from both the SAELs and survey responses make reference to how engagement in non-teaching activities during the CEP week contributed to student-teachers feeling an increased sense of belonging within and to the school community. Take, for example, the following account from a student's first day of CEP which was preceded by attendance at an all-staff meeting:

> There was a photographer taking a staff photo for the new academic year which will appear in the local paper and on the school website. The principal asked me to sit in for the photo as he said I am part of the school staff for the academic year. It was a lovely experience to feel like a part of the school community so soon after arriving there. [SAEL 4-03]

Indeed, many of the comments allude to how participation in meetings (the most frequently recorded activity in SAELs) helped student-teachers to feel more involved in the school community. For example, the following account of a student-teacher who engaged in a Transition Year planning meeting where the group was constructing a book list for a 'book in the bag' programme:

> I contributed a suggestion which made the final list. I felt I had made a step closer to becoming a part of the school community by contributing in this session. [SAEL 4-27]
> and this from a student who attended a planning meeting of the Religious Education department:
> This included disclosing information such as the elected subject co-ordinator, the proposed books, novels and texts to be studied for both exam and non-exam R.E, and the material suggested for upcoming school masses. I was delighted to be invited to this meeting and involved in this conversation. [SAEL 4-36]

Some students were fortunate to engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) days that were taking place in the school during their CEP week, and noted that these, too, helped them to feel a sense of increased belonging to the school community:

> As well as the day being a valuable professional experience for me as a student teacher, I also found it to be a great way to socialise with my colleagues in the school and in integrating myself as a member of the school community. [SAEL 4-28]
> It was also notable within the analysis that a significant number of references to the staffroom occurred, and how students were made to feel welcome in the staffroom. For instance:
> I spent the next part of my visit by making my way into the staff room to meet some of the other teachers in the school and introduce myself. Overall, I found all of the staff to be very friendly and approachable. They were quick to offer

> *their support and help for anything I may need in my time at the school. [SAEL 4-38]*
>
> *We then broke for coffee and were introduced to other members of the staff in the staff room. It was very nice to be able to ask questions in a very supportive and understanding environment such as this. The staff members all seem really nice and couldn't do enough to help us all. [SAEL 4-22]*

Given the well-established significance of the staffroom as 'the place in which teachers spend the majority of their non-teaching school time' (Christensen, Rossi, lisahunter, & Tinning, 2018, p. 40) and also 'an important professional learning space where beginning teachers interact to understand who they are and the nature of their professional work' (lisahunter, Rossi, Tinning, Flanagan, & Macdonald, 2011, p. 33), the sense of belonging experienced by student-teachers in this particular space would seem to be particularly important.

A final point for consideration with regard to belongingness is how the CEP placement appeared to broaden the students' perspective of the school community and the different roles that people play within this. This is evident in the log entries and survey responses from those students who engaged directly with non-teaching staff as part of their CEP. For instance:

> *It was very helpful to have been given permission to assist in the office as I became aware of the official running of the school paperwork and how in contact the school is with the pupils' parents. It is very obvious that the office have just as much of a relationship with the pupils as the teaching staff. [SAEL 4-28]*
>
> *I offered to help elsewhere around the school and found myself helping the secretary in the library sorting out books for the incoming LCAs. From previous experiences in schools I know how important it is to befriend the secretaries, cleaners and caretakers of the school as these people are equally as vital in the running of the school as teachers and principals and are often a huge help during placement. [SAEL 4-15]*

This was also to be found in the survey responses obtained from students; indeed, one student-teacher advocated that the ITE programme should place more emphasis on working with secretaries, librarians and other administrative staff during CEP 'as I did so and getting to know these extra members of staff has helped me blend in with the school community abundantly' [SR4-8, Q7]. Such comments call to mind Ussher's (2010) creative use of the proverb that 'it takes a village to raise a child' with regard to SP whereby 'it might be safe to surmise that it will take a whole school to educate a teacher' (p. 103). Closer to home, this is a significant finding in light of the Teaching Council of Ireland's (2013) increased recognition and emphasis on the value of student-teacher engagement with the whole-school community which 'recognise[es] the particular roles and responsibilities of all within the school community in relation to school placement' (p. 20) and where 'good relationships between all of these partners and a commitment to a partnership approach are vital to effective school placement' (p. 17).

Belongingness and Teacher Identity

The significance of teacher identity with regard to teacher education is well established (Chong, Low, & Goh, 2011; Hall et al., 2012). While an extended exploration of this multifaceted issue (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) is beyond the scope of this paper, there are several points that merit noting with regard to the current study. The first emerges from

the view that identity formation is an active and participative undertaking, as most notably evident in Wenger's (1998) premise of identification through engagement and that 'identification takes place in the doing' (p. 193), and it has been established previously within this paper that student-teachers are active and participative in a range of non-teaching tasks during the CEP placement. The second is that several authors have proposed belongingness to be a contributing factor to this development of professional identity on the part of practicum students (Ashktorab, Hasanvand, Seyedfatemi, Salmani, & Hosseini, 2017; Caires et al., 2012). For instance, Walker et al. (2014) propose that experiencing a sense of belonging was one the key elements that contribute to the construction of a professional identity during practicum placements in nursing, while Johnston's (2016) study of a school-based placement found that experiencing a lack of belongingness had a detrimental effect on the development of teacher professional identity.

It was notable that several comments in the current study made direct connections between the CEP experience and the student's sense of 'being a teacher' or how they perceived the school staff viewed them as a teacher. For instance, the following account from a student about their participation in a subject department meeting during CEP week:

> We discussed everything from which book should be used to how work placement could be run and everything in between. We chose a novel which could be read - Tuesdays with Morrie - and [Teacher] gave all his insight on the school and teaching Religion here. I thoroughly enjoyed this as I was not treated as an outsider but my opinion was considered and encouraged greatly, I was an equal at a table of teachers. [SAEL 4-48]

and another in a survey response by the following student-teacher:

> We got to spend a lot of time with the teachers through staff meetings, subject department meetings and just talking to them in the staffroom. This really gave a sense of being seen as and treated as a teacher and not just someone who was coming in to take some classes for a few weeks. [SR4-13]

These comments are also noteworthy in that they highlight the tension and transition between being a 'student' and being a 'teacher' that is acknowledged in the professional identity formation of preservice teachers (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). In light of the acknowledged challenges faced by student-teachers in forming this professional identity (Pillen, Beijaard, & Brok, 2013), the significance of the non-teaching CEP placement, and the associated sense of belonging experienced by student-teachers in helping to progress this critical formative process, is noteworthy. Again, a number of these comments indicated the experiencing of belongingness with regard to this particular issue; for instance, 'I felt valued and like a real member of staff as opposed to "just a dip"' [SR4-8] and 'it was incredibly fulfilling to be accepted as a teacher at that table, to feel you were really one of the team' [SAEL 4-21].

Belongingness and Confidence

A third theme which emerged from the analysis of SAELs was that of increasing confidence on the part of student-teachers as a result of participation in the CEP week. For instance:

> Overall I found this contextual engagement week very beneficial as I now feel confident in and comfortable with teaching in [school name] in January [SAEL 4-07]
> It also allowed me time to get to know members of staff further and it allowed me to grow in confidence and report back my answers to the group [SAEL 4-39]

> *Activities such as these have helped me with my confidence of the school and how everything will occur from January onwards [SAEL 4-46]*

This relationship has also been noted in several other investigations of belongingness with regard to students on placement. For instance, Maher et al. (2015) argue that placements that facilitate a sense of belonging and perceived value contribute to student-confidence and self-efficacy, while Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2008) found that a sense of belonging contributed to students being more confident in negotiating their learning needs and in asking questions, while an absence of belongingness had a negative impact on students' attitude towards learning and on their confidence to become involved in experiential learning opportunities. Given the importance of developing pre-service teachers' confidence levels (Moody, 2009; Stahl, Sharplin, & Kehrwald, 2016) this emerges as a positive finding for the current study. Related to this issue, several authors (Gray et al., 2017; Van Schagen Johnson, La Paro, & Crosby, 2017) have also identified links between sense of belongingness and increased self-efficacy on the part of placement students, another critical factor for student-teachers in terms of their school placement (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999).

Conclusion

This paper has considered how participating in a non-teaching focused period of school placement can potentially contribute to a student-teacher's professional and personal development. It finds that student-teachers engaged in a range of non-teaching activities during this CEP placement that enhanced their understanding of the teacher's role, both within and outside the classroom, as well as contributing to a more holistic and wide-ranging understanding of the operations of a school from a whole-school perspective. In the words of one student-teacher, 'the duties of the teacher go far beyond the classroom' (SAEL 4-36). The authors recommend that further emphasis be given to the issue of non-teaching activities, particularly in the light of evolving understanding of practicum placements within teacher education literature and policy, and that dedicated time should be secured for student-teachers to engage in these important aspects of school life. This paper also establishes that student-teachers were largely positive about this CEP placement and that it contributes positively to their sense of belonging in the placement school and to the school community. This increased sense of belongingness has a number of positive impacts on the student-teacher's professional development that includes a stronger sense of their evolving teacher identity, heightened levels of confidence on the part of the student, and an increased openness to approaching and interacting with other members of staff within the school community. We concur, therefore, with the observation of Gray et al. (2017) that belongingness is clearly an important need for pre-service teachers in order to thrive, and suggest that this current study contributes further to the growing body of academic literature on this important issue with regard to teacher education.

A number of potential avenues for further research emerge from this study. One such issue relates to the timing of the CEP week in terms of how this relates to the activities engaged in by student-teachers and how these, in turn, contribute to their sense of being and belonging. A small number of students commented that their fourth year CEP experience (which took place in September, at the beginning of the first teaching semester) was quite different to their third year CEP experience (which took place in December, at the end of the first teaching semester). Therefore, a comparison between third and fourth year CEP SAELs would provide further insight that would build upon the contributions of this current study. A second area for further research is to investigate if there is any correlation between the positive CEP experienced by student-teachers and their final SP grade and/or profile obtained

at the conclusion of the placement. A third issue for investigation is the possible linkage between belongingness and teacher wellbeing, the latter currently being a focus of much attention within Ireland (Buckley, Abbott, & Franey, 2017) and on a wider international stage (Zee & Koomen, 2016). While this issue has not yet been extensively explored, there is much within the current study to suggest a relationship between teacher wellbeing and the experience of belonging within the school community.

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