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Exploring how the experiential narratives of cooperating teachers impact their role in supporting student teachers on school placement

Catherine Furlong and Alan Gorman 

School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

It is widely recognised in the international literature that cooperating teachers play a pivotal role in initial teacher education. Despite this, who cooperating teachers are, their lives, and their work continues to be an underexplored area. The paper unpacks theoretical perspectives on identity and mentoring. Guided by narrative research, semi-structured interviews with 12 cooperating teachers in Ireland are employed as the primary data collection method. Findings illustrate that cooperating teachers are conflicted between their role as teachers of children and as student teacher mentors, a resultant factor of national accountability policies in schools. The teacher educator identity appears rebuffed in favour of a dominant class teacher identity. In the absence of professional learning for the role, their mentorship of student teachers is informed solely by their apprenticeship of observation. The paper argues that the shaping influences on their identities, which include past experience and present roles and responsibilities, have a potential impact on student-teacher learning. Our paper concludes that the identity of cooperating teachers is complex and unique and needs to be meaningfully considered within initial teacher education policy and practice.

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Introduction

Student teachers have long regarded school placement settings and cooperating teachers as pivotal to their learning within their teacher education programmes (Clarke et al., 2014; Goldhaber et al., 2020; O'Sullivan & O'Conaill, 2022). This has not gone unnoticed by policymakers. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are now expected to establish meaningful partnerships with other key stakeholders to ensure the effective provision of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2021; European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2005). Ireland has not been immune to this practicum turn; rather, policy has embraced the call for partnership, cooperation and collaboration firmly into the teacher education policy discourse, as evidenced in the recently issued accreditation guidelines by the Teaching Council of Ireland. *Céim: Standards in Initial Teacher Education* (Teaching Council, 2020),

CONTACT Catherine Furlong  catherine.furlong@dcu.ie  School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland

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coupled with the revised version of *Guidelines on School Placement* (Teaching Council, 2021), which place a greater significance on the role of the cooperating teachers (Gorman & Furlong, 2023). A cooperating teacher in Ireland, as defined by the Teaching Council (2021, p. 6), is a 'teacher who supports and guides the student teacher during his/her school placement experience'.

As student teachers navigate their way through their professional placement, cooperating teachers serve as mentors and, therefore, directly or indirectly have a strong influence on decisions regarding teaching methodologies, behaviour management, curriculum implementation and their philosophies of teaching and learning. Indeed, they play an important role in the initial socialisation of students (Clarke et al., 2014; Matsko et al., 2020; Rajuan et al., 2007; Webster-Wright, 2009). Learning in and from clinical practice situations is regarded as a complex social process. Engaging in authentic school placements and reflecting on their experiences encourages student teachers to engage in meaning-making (Hordvik et al., 2019). Cooperating teachers, their prior experiences, professional identities, and their perspectives on teaching and learning inform their perspectives on guiding and mentoring student teachers (Clarke et al., 2014).

While cooperating teachers have been under the policy spotlight, they have also been the subject of numerous research studies (e.g. mentoring approaches, supervisory practices, the relationship dynamic between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher, and the nature and types of feedback provided by them to the student teacher). Despite this, little consideration has been given to the cooperating teachers, who they are, their perspectives on teaching and mentoring, and the influence that their teaching perspectives and supervisory practices may have on the construction of student-teacher identities. This study addresses this lack of consideration by examining the identities of cooperating teachers in an Irish context. The voices of 12 cooperating teachers are presented, exploring their past and present roles, responsibilities and identities. To support us in this analysis, we begin with foregrounding theoretical perspectives on mentoring. The professional identities of cooperating teachers are also considered. Following this, an overview of the methodological approach adopted within the study and the presentation and interpretation of findings are presented. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy and practice in the field of initial teacher education.

Theoretical perspectives

The role of mentoring in initial teacher education

Mentoring has been the focus of much of the literature published over the last 20 years on initial teacher education, teacher induction and professional development for experienced teachers (Aderibigbe et al., 2022; Ellis et al., 2020; Nesje & Lejonberg, 2022; Zeichner, 2021). Arguably, its prominence has been due to the expansion of the knowledge of how student teachers and beginning teachers learn, the recognition of the place of practitioner knowledge and the centrality of the clinical setting in the teaching profession. Andreasen (2023) contends that an additional reason for this is the calling into question the traditional method of organising initial teacher education, which was premised on the assumption that student teachers smoothly translate the academic knowledge provided at the university level into rich pedagogical practice within classrooms. The

questioning of the more traditional assumptions and practice and the subsequent exploration of more meaningful teacher education approaches have resulted in a practicum turn supported by a shift in policy agenda requiring the establishment of more collaborative and less hierarchical partnerships between HEIs and schools, which recognise the role of the cooperating teachers as guide, mentor and educator (Brennan et al., 2024; Burns et al., 2016; Burroughs et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2024; Gorman & Hall, 2023).

The literature strongly suggests that situated learning, contextualised learning, or workplace learning supported by mentors/cooperating teachers has the potential to assist student teachers in their development as teachers (Clarke et al., 2014). The evidence in the literature indicates that workplace learning is a powerful source of learning and change in individuals, groups and organisations. Indeed, the literature on teacher identity formation and learning highlights the close connection between learning, practice, discourse and identity (Lefstein et al., 2020). Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation has been frequently used as a theoretical framework to understand the nature, meaning and processes of learning trajectories at work, as well as the reconstruction of both students' and teachers' professional identities within educational settings (Wenger, 1998). For them, learning is portrayed as 'an integral part of generative practice in the lived-in world' and 'an aspect of all activity' rather than the isolated thing we do in schools or classrooms (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 55). While Lave and Wenger argue that it is informative to decouple learning from schooling, they support workplace learning theory (Eby & Robertson, 2020; Ragins and Kram, 2007) by suggesting that when workplace learning is grounded within constructivist epistemology, it has the potential to create and reciprocate a dynamic, interactive learning process that has the possibility to challenge or transform the status quo. However, learning in the workplace that is focused on the transmission of more traditional rather than progressive practitioner knowledge may also serve to severely limit the learning of individuals. Alongside this, such traditional learning may also close off more progressive notions of teaching and learning (Furlong, 2013). By way of extension, the site of clinical practice, the culture of the school and, perhaps more importantly, the professional identity of the cooperating teacher, all have the potential to enhance and extend the development of learning of a student teacher or to stunt their growth (Furlong & Monahan, 2000; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012).

Exploring cooperating teachers' identities

Wenger (1998) argues that experiential narratives, connecting past and present, possess the potential not only to shape teacher identity but also to impact teaching performance in the classrooms in both positive and negative ways. We suggest, therefore, that it is important to explore and understand critically formulated influences in the lives of cooperating teachers, the extent to which these are compounded and reinforced through lay theories, their apprenticeship of observation and their professional lives as teachers: 'Experiential narratives can become internally held narrative scripts that, without interrogation or reflection, are reproduced materially as classroom pedagogies, whether they are effective or not' (Knowles, 1992, p. 102).

Working on the premise that identity is personalised and socially and culturally constructed, Wenger (1998) stresses the individual and personal aspects of

identities and the relationship between identity and personal history. Cooperating teachers have a unique personal history, which they bring to the classroom and to the student teachers whom they opt to mentor. Their identities and practices have been shaped by their interaction and engagement in different settings and communities of practice. It is not only the current context in which these cooperating teachers find themselves that has a powerful and shaping influence. The influencing potential of the contexts in which they existed previously cannot be ignored (Leirhaug & MacPhail, 2015; O'Brien & Furlong, 2015). The cooperating teachers' prior experience of being mentored on school placement and prior experience of supporting student teachers on placement must be considered. Therefore, situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998) provide a conceptual lens through which to explore the identities of a number of cooperating teachers with a view to understanding the potential impact their prior experiences and professional identities may have on student teacher learning. The next section will unpack the approach to how we intend to undertake this exploration.

Methodology

As discussed in theoretical perspectives, we ascribed to Wenger's view that identity is personalised, socially and culturally constructed, and linked with personal history. Cooperating teachers have a unique personal history which they bring to the classroom and to the student teachers whom they opt to mentor. This led us to position the research within the qualitative paradigm. Specifically, narrative research was deemed the most appropriate approach as it captures 'the detailed stories of life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals' (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). Thus, the experiences and influences which the cooperating teachers had prior to and within their current roles were the core foci. To enable us to capture these experiences, we undertook semi-structured open-ended interviews. This method of data collection allowed us to gather information in relation to the participants' past and present contexts, explicitly having been a student teacher and now being a cooperating teacher. The semi-structured interview was designed to allow for chronological sequencing from prior to current experiences while offering opportunities to unpack various episodes or moments.

A purposive sample of 12 cooperating teachers was employed in the data collection process. All the cooperating teachers who engaged in the study had previously supported student teachers on placement for five years or more, as illustrated in Table 1. Table 1 provides a succinct overview of each participant in this study. Pseudonyms have been used in the thematic analysis to protect the identity of the participants.

This research was conducted within the ethical guidelines of our university. Specifically, three schools were selected on the basis that they continuously hosted students on placement. Written consent was received by all three schools and their participating teachers in this research. No other consent was necessary as it was based on the sole experiences of the participants. Interview schedules were shared in advance of the interview, and transcripts were shared for member checking. At all times, the voluntary nature of this research was emphasised, and participants could withdraw at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using qualitative thematic analysis.

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Participant	Years of experience	School demographic	Biographical sketch
Marie	5+	Junior mixed primary school (typically 5–8-year olds) in a middle class urban context	Postgraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experiences with supportive cooperating teachers.
Fiona	5+	Junior mixed primary school (typically 5–8 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experience with particularly young cooperating teachers.
Anne	10+	Junior mixed primary school (typically 5–8 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Mixed experience of school placement with a variety of supportive and not so supportive cooperating teachers, e.g. ‘she would take the class and I would be sent to the staffroom and after little break one of the kids would come to me and say you are allowed in now and she would leave for the rest of the day.’
Mary	5+	Large mixed rural primary school (5–12 year olds)	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experience with supportive cooperating teachers who supported in very different ways, e.g. ‘she let her do what she wanted and never really guided me, but I liked having that control.’
Josh	10+	Senior mixed primary school (typically 9–12 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experience with supportive cooperating teachers who offered him ‘a great deal of flexibility.’
Chloe	10+	Large mixed rural primary school (5–12 year olds)	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experience with supportive cooperating teachers who were all ‘welcoming and helpful.’
Liam	10+	Large mixed rural primary school (5–12 year olds)	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Very mixed school placement experience with both supportive and unsupportive cooperating teachers, e.g. ‘I was with a difficult class and never saw the class teacher at all. She just left the class.’
Annie	5+	Junior mixed primary school (typically 5–8 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experience with very supportive cooperating teachers. She is now employed in the school where she completed her final school placement.
Joan	10+	Large mixed rural primary school (5–12 year olds)	Postgraduate entry into primary teaching. Positive school placement experiences that all took place in the one school. She would have liked to go into other settings but found the benefits of the single school too as she was ‘seen as a teacher in the school’ from the outset.
Eoin	10+	Senior mixed primary school (typically 9–12 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Loved school placement and ‘each year it was the highlight of the year’. He never had any negative experiences of placement or cooperating teachers but recognised that some were ‘more supportive than others’ but it ‘never bothered’ him as he ‘loved working with kids’.
Tony	5+	Senior mixed primary school (typically 9–12 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Very mixed school placement experience.
Tom	10+	Senior mixed primary school (typically 9–12 year olds) in a middle class urban context	Undergraduate entry into primary teaching. Very mixed school placement experience, e.g. on his first placement he was given no advice from the cooperating teacher, whilst on his final placement he found the cooperating teacher ‘a little overbearing’ but he didn’t mind as he ‘likes guidance and structure.’

Transcripts were member-checked by each of the participants. None opted to make changes to the transcripts.

Thematic analysis was employed as it allows us to identify, organise and offer insights into patterns or themes across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Inductive coding was adopted as the dominant approach, where the data were coded to capture the true meaning of the participants' experiences. Deductive analysis was also used so that the coding was relevant to the research focus. Given the narrative orientation of this study, the analysis was guided by principles of narrative inquiry that recognised participants' stories as meaningful constructs of identities. Rather than breaking the data into decontextualised codes, each narrative was treated as a whole, preserving the sequence of the participant's telling with close attention paid to turning points and the ways that cooperating teachers positioned themselves within their sectors. The analysis focused on identity, which was constructed through both language and relational dynamics. Common storylines emerged between the narratives, showcasing intersecting experiences. By examining both individual narratives and points of intersection between them, the study uncovered shared sentiments, emotions and recurring identity tensions, while also respecting the uniqueness of each participant's journey. This narrative approach allowed for a richer understanding of how cooperating teachers made sense of their roles and responsibilities and evolving professional identities.

The process of analysis followed six recursive phases (Braun & Clarke, 2020) using N-Vivo 12. Phase one involved familiarisation with the data; phase two entailed systematically working through the narrative interviews holistically and recording succinct labels that were relevant to the research questions; phase three examined how the different labels that shared similar and intersecting features across the narrative accounts were combined; phase four involved reviewing potential themes; and phase five presented the final four themes. A careful examination of the four themes was conducted to ensure the theme was consistent with the data, the preceding phases of analysis, and the research focus. Table 2 provides an example of the analytical process. Phase six involved the write-up of the four themes, which is the overarching focus of the next section.

Findings

The key findings are presented as four themes: (i) identity tension and conflict; (ii) past shaping the future; (iii) traditional versus the progressive; and (iv) borderland narratives and pathways to reframed identities. While these findings are presented and analysed sequentially, they are not discrete but rather interrelated. A constant thread through these key themes is the unambiguous evidence of both tensions and conflict. The analysis is rendered cumulative, setting up a conversation between the evidence and the theoretical perspectives articulated.

Identity tension and conflict: competing and conflicting identities

Teaching was the first choice for most of the teachers involved in the study. They had opted for teacher education because they felt a personal strong desire to teach, to work with children and to make a difference in their lives. Moving into the domain of the cooperating teacher was regarded as a 'natural step' (Fiona), an extension of their current

Table 2. Codes, categories and themes.

Theme (Phase 5)	Category (Phases 3–4)	Examples of Codes (Phase 2)
Competing and conflicting identities	Altruism Capacity to juggle (role and responsibilities of cooperating teacher and class teacher)	Altruism/‘Give back’ Support the profession of teaching Challenges to altruism Capacity to support underperforming student Conflicting roles Class teacher versus mentor Impact of standardised assessment on their identity
Past shaping the future	Apprenticeship of observation Lack of professional learning for role Absence of feedback beyond verbal	Prior positive experiences Prior negative experiences Reported problems of no professional learning – can only draw on their own student placement experience Limited feedback observed by them as students Lack of clarity around feedback provision prevails (HEI tutor – paperwork vs cooperating teacher – management tips and tricks)
Traditional versus progressive	Openness to new ideas from student teachers Professional learning – collaboration and observation of new practice Preoccupation with standardised assessment in literacy and numeracy Preoccupation with classroom organisation (control) prevalent	Fresh blood with new ideas Moving beyond the egg crate to the opening of classrooms Seeking opportunities for collaboration Cascade model of professional learning Classroom organisation and management – control versus autonomy Insecurity – fear of losing control Parental influences Aversion to risk
Pathways to a new teacher educator identity	Absence of identity as teacher educators Policy disconnect	Lack of reference to being a teacher educator Role model versus teacher educator Reluctance to be regarded as teacher education Conveyors of practical knowledge only Lack of connection with HEI HEI-led partnership Lack of connection with Teaching Council (key ITE policy maker)

roles and responsibilities to the profession. The teachers offered to support a student on placement for three reasons: altruism, gaining new ideas, and the cultural context of the school.

The primary reason for opting to support a student on placement was one of altruism. Tom referred to this as ‘the give back’, believing that it was important to return the favour to other student teachers. Mary expanded on this, commenting that ‘someone took us in when we were in college [HEI], why would we not do the same’. She felt, as did all the others interviewed, that regardless of their personal experiences on placement, teachers had a responsibility to support those in a learning role. The ethic of nurture care, which informed their professional identity, stretched from the children to the student teacher and the profession. However, when discussing this ‘give-back’, tensions and conflicts began to appear. For the cooperating teachers, altruism was bound; they were willing to give, but only so far ‘as you do not get burnt’ (Tom). Others referred to it in other ways, discussing the impact of ‘incompetence’, ‘underperforming’, ‘weak’, ‘disinterest’, or indeed ‘laziness’. In essence, they were referring to the impact of a ‘weak’ student teacher or a student teacher who was not willing to put in the effort necessary to support the learning of the children within the class adequately. This is best illustrated in Marie’s comments. She remarked that ‘another worry is incompetence where you are concerned

that the student is not doing the work, and then it falls to you as the class teacher to get the work done either there and then or after they have gone'. They were evidently conflicted. While eager to support a student teacher for them, the fear of the risk an underperforming student teacher might have on the learning of children within their class was a big concern. Equally, having been 'burnt' by a 'weak' student teacher, they would be reluctant to opt for a student teacher the following year.

These tensions and conflicts are directly linked to the sometimes competing and conflicting roles and responsibilities, namely class teacher, cooperating teacher, mentor, assessor, and teacher educator. During the initial and ongoing analysis of the interviews, the notion of being primarily a teacher in terms of identity was strongly evident. A common construct of 'new' professional identities that emerged from the interviews was that of the cooperating teacher, first and foremost, a class teacher. Identity tensions can be related to one's pedagogical and socio-affective commitment. This is very evident in the data. The teachers were evidently conflicted while wanting to support a student teacher because it was the right thing to do and the expected thing to do in the context in which they worked. However, they were also hyper-aware of the 'day job' (Tony), that of a class teacher. They were very clear that their primary identity lay as class teachers and not as teacher educators or mentors. No cooperating teacher was willing to hand over the class to a student for a long period, especially not for the 10 weeks as proposed by the Teaching Council.

The revival of competitive and standardised testing has shown that the teachers interviewed are placed under performative pressures, which places them firmly under the watchful eye of parents. Joan's comment best illustrates this:

We are under pressure. The parents are pushing. In this area, there are no discipline issues. As such, there is more pressure to perform. The parents are all about test scores and putting pressure on that aspect of it ... Having a student can hinder the teacher's work on it.

Identity tensions are evident for these teachers, tensions between the willingness to provide care and support versus the demands of accountability. For many, their way of dealing with this tension when it presented itself was to take back responsibility for teaching the class and to opt not to take a student the following year for fear of 'being burnt again' (Tom). In the same way that education has been powerfully affected by the rise of neoliberal agendas of performativity and accountability (Ball, 2016), the cooperating teachers were not immune to the aforementioned discourses.

Past shaping the future

While the concept of identity has different meanings in the literature, Gee (2000) contends that these various meanings have a common connecting thread: the idea that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person but a relational phenomenon. Researchers argue that identity development occurs in an intersubjective field as a part of the social context the person lives in. It can be best characterised as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself and developing communication and engagement with others (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019; Vågan, 2011). If this is the case, then one could reasonably expect that how the cooperating teachers operationalise their roles as mentors would not be static; rather, it would be buffeted and shaped

through the context in which they work, the exchanges which they have with fellow cooperating teachers, and their interaction with student teachers and teacher education institution personnel. This does not seem to be the case for this data set. Interestingly, for the cooperating teachers interviewed, their perception of their roles in supporting or mentoring student teachers on placement appeared to be very closely aligned with their past apprenticeship of observation, not as pupils in schools but rather as student teachers whilst on placement. This is best illustrated in the comments of Mary, who remarked that 'it is kind of hard to know what to say or do really because you are not trained in the area, and you are only kind of going on your own views ... really drawing from your own experience on placement and how the teacher was with you'. In the absence of training for the role, the cooperating teachers find they have no choice but to rely on their former life experience as student teachers and to mine and exploit the experiences of cooperating teachers to inform how they engage and support their students.

Eoin, in commenting on supporting a student teacher, remarked that 'it is nice that I can actually be what I feel they would want me to be'. It is worth noting that it is what he feels they want of him rather than finding out from the student teacher. He very openly drew on his past apprenticeship of observation of working with cooperating teachers on placement. He is drawing heavily on his need as a student teacher to inform how he supports student teachers in his class. However, all is not straightforward. Like Mary, he is still unsure in many ways. He categorised these experiences of cooperating teachers as those that left him to his own devices and those that provided feedback:

There have been differences between the different settings and the teachers I have had, but most of them have been very helpful. But, as I said, a lot of them would just give you free rein and not necessarily give you as much direction as maybe you might need.

As a student teacher, he indicated that he had rather conflicting needs. At times, he respected the space and freedom that he was given to try out approaches and ideas 'without the watchful eye of the teacher', while at other times, he wanted the teacher to be there. He recognised that '... if the teacher was in the room, I had a better experience lesson-wise. The children tended to behave a little bit more as well, and things like that'.

Unlike Eoin, Annie loved the freedom she had when she had the class on her own. She remarked that:

I think you need that space sometimes. Especially during your first practice when you can be terribly self-conscious about what you are doing. To have someone constantly watching you can make you feel a little bit funny. Even if you have the class on your own for twenty or thirty minutes, it gives you that bit of confidence.

However, like Eoin, she was happy for the teacher to be there some of the time, remarking that she did not want the teacher to be absent 'full time' as she did not want the responsibility of the class full time. Annie, like Mary, was unsure of her role identity as a cooperating teacher: '... you have nothing to go on, only your past'. Annie experienced tension but it was different to Eoin. The tension she experienced primarily revolved around the provision of feedback, i.e. when and how to provide it, remarking that 'you just have to be very careful how you give it. You do not want to be very teachery about it [the provision of feedback]'. Liam also commented about the fine line of feedback: '... you

want to be supportive and not demoralise'. However, he also comments that you have to 'think of the class too and the children's learning'.

For all of the cooperating teachers, feedback was limited to what was seen in the classroom. None of the teachers indicated that they provide feedback on student planning or preparation. Their apprenticeship of observation had been that cooperating teachers did not review the paperwork, and they were operating on the same basis. In the absence of guidance from the HEIs, the tradition continued. Planning and preparation were considered the 'domain of the inspector [the tutor from the teacher education institution]' (Chloe), potentially illustrating to the student teacher that preparation is solely an HEI activity.

Traditional versus progressive

An additional tension exists in the data between two opposing constructs of teacher identity: traditional and progressive (Pring, 2010). Anchored in objectivism, traditional education emphasises a teacher-centred approach and focuses on didactic teaching, memorising, rote learning, testing of knowledge, order, and control (Cuban, 2013; Pring, 2010). Anchored in subjectivism, progressive education emphasises a student-centred approach and pivots around active project work, problem-based learning and social team-based learning from practice and construction (Land & Jonassen, 2012; Labaree, 2012).

As indicated earlier, progressive notions of teaching and learning are one of the reasons why these cooperating teachers opted to take students while on placement. For Anne, the student teachers are 'fresh blood with new ideas'. She elaborated:

... especially if you have a good student teacher coming in, it is fantastic for everyone ... when you are teaching for a few years, methods can become a bit stale, and you can be like, some days, we need to finish this book, and student teachers won't do that. They [student teachers] are active and up and doing. The stuff that you would just love to do every day, but you have to do the other stuff they do. So, they [children] definitely benefit, and you benefit as well with different ideas and methods. (Anne)

As with others, Anne welcomed the opportunity that the student teachers provided for more progressive approaches to teaching and learning: collaborative project work, group work, construction projects, and independent, self-directed learning. For Tom, unlike Annie, it wasn't about 'being stale'. His view was that teachers 'can be sheltered in their class'. His use of the word 'sheltered' is interesting, perhaps reflecting the isolated nature of teaching where teachers work within the 'egg crate structure' (Lortie, 1975). It may also reflect the 'lack of exposure to new ideas, new methodologies and approaches to teaching and learning' (Tom). Despite the push for more collaborative practice through policy change in Ireland (Clarke & O'Doherty, 2021), Tom's comments, coupled with the very real desire and appetite for new ideas in all of the narratives, serve to expose what was regarded as minimal opportunities for collaboration, engagement and learning.

All of the cooperative teachers recognised that 'teaching is evolving in relation to methodologies and ideologies' (Tom). They recognised that while they were in college, they were being exposed to those 'new ways of thinking' (Josh), and 'new theories, new practices' (Chloe). Many of the teachers acknowledged 'colleges are

constantly updating their methods and approaches' (Josh). The HEIs were regarded as the sites of new ideas and learning and the students as the purveyors of that knowledge, particularly in relation to the 'use of technology to support teaching and learning'. All of the cooperating teachers were eager to learn from the progressive methods of the student teachers. It is important to note that much of these 'new ideas' were somewhat predicated on 'if you get a good student' (Josh).

In discussing their roles as cooperating teachers, classroom management issues emerged as a significant issue for these teachers. Classroom management was bound up with support, facilitation and one other arguably less desirable concept of control. Eoin endorses the importance of being able to control the class: '... they have to be able to control the class; that is the basis of everything'. He was concerned that if he 'left the main control of the class to a student teacher for four or five weeks, it might affect the learning of the children and particularly the less able children within that class'. Josh explained that he was 'very strict' at the outset about what he wanted of the student teacher so as 'to avoid the lack of control' and 'the discipline system going all over the place'. For these teachers, the ability to manage the class and, more importantly, 'to control' are perceived as essential features of being a good teacher. The cooperating teachers, while espousing the desire for more progressive methods of teaching and learning, were also being pulled back by the traditional, more modern teacher archetypes of control. To say that there is a balance between the two perspectives within the constructs of their identities would belie the reality of a dominant progressive view. However, ignoring the more subliminal lens of traditionalism would render the data analysis flawed. Tension between the two constructs of teacher identities exists not just in the idea of control but also in the discussion of the support and guidance which they offer students. This is best illustrated in Sue's comments. She indicated that she 'offered management tips and approaches ... , things to try out ... things that you would not be told in college'. Chloe concurred, describing the ideas as 'practical advice' as opposed to the 'theories they are taught in college'. For some, college represented a disconnect from the classroom, and this is the gap that they believed they were filling in the development and learning of the student teacher. Mary commented, 'Even though placement and college tell you one thing when you get into the classroom, it is another thing to a certain extent'. There is some evidence within the narratives to suggest that this pull back was shaped by their apprenticeship of observation both as pupils and as student teachers. However, another influencing factor evident in the narratives is the power of accountability, as discussed above in the section 'Identity tension and conflict: competing and conflicting identities'. These teachers feel the pressure of accountability, especially on parents. This climate appears to create a level of insecurity within the teachers and a reluctance to take a risk, with Josh commenting, 'If they're [student teacher] not able to manage ... you're back to square one again ... you know ... do you want that and get things back in order. It is a risk if the quality of the student isn't great'. These pressures heavily shape cooperating teachers' identities, and it is evident within the narratives that this, too, strongly impacts how they direct the student teachers in the classrooms.

Pathways to new teacher educator identity

I don't feel I am a teacher educator of teachers because any comments that I would make to a student are only based on my own experience and not on anything else really, what you know and what you think ... Even though placement and college tell you one thing when you get into the classroom, it is another thing to a certain extent. (Mary)

The above quote from Mary encapsulates the perceptions of most of the cooperating teachers interviewed for this study. As indicated previously, for these cooperating teachers, their teacher identity remains firmly centre stage, with only two interviewees regarding themselves as having a role as teacher educators. Scholars (e.g. Anderson & Aronson, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Zeichner, 2014, 2021) indicate that student teachers experience mostly traditional education in which they internalise the dominant cultural beliefs. Examples of these beliefs include knowledge being given by the teacher and learning to teach occurring through 'what works' experiences. The teacher should control the classroom to provide the highest learning opportunities for the pupils. As indicated previously, this is undoubtedly reinforced in this data set. Cooperating teachers like Mary regarded themselves as informal role models and modeller instructors, especially in the area of classroom management. They believed that it was their job to transmit information, tell student teachers what is right and wrong and give ready-made 'tips' that proved useful to them as teachers in their classrooms. These beliefs may also strengthen other beliefs that teaching is a craft and technical work instead of teaching as an intellectual and professional endeavour. For those who were happy to recognise themselves as teacher educators, none was willing to embrace that identity fully: they stopped short of having any role in the formal grading of student teachers whilst on placement. They perceived that this was solely the responsibility and remit of the relevant HEI.

While the policy push in Ireland for a meaningful partnership between schools and initial teacher educator providers mirrors that of other jurisdictions (Teaching Council, 2020, 2021), a significant issue raised by the teachers was the lack of a formalised partnership between the school and the teacher education institution. While the cooperating teachers welcomed a greater dialogue and partnership with the HEIs, the current lack of meaningful communication, the lack of professional learning and unclear roles and expectations for all stakeholders in the supervisory process led to them feeling somewhat disillusioned and vague in their roles. This may well explain why, as indicated earlier, they are drawing on their own apprenticeship of observation to inform how they support a student on placement with the past shaping the future.

The findings reveal that cooperating teachers navigate a demanding environment of performativity and accountability, where multiple roles and responsibilities often stretch them. The upcoming discussion explores their evolving identities and considers how these identities may influence their mentoring role in guiding and supporting student teachers.

Discussion

There appears to be almost a 'push and pull' (Furlong, 2013) at play between roles and responsibilities, between creativity, flexibility and control, between theory and practice,

and between policy and reality. On the surface, the cooperating teachers seem to crave the new methodologies and approaches that these student teachers bring into their classrooms, as for them, it broadens the community of learning to include not only the students and children but themselves as teachers. This resonates with Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice in which identity and learning are co-constructed through participation in shared activities. The cooperating teachers appear to espouse progressive views of teaching and learning, group work, project-based work, and independent learning. However, they appear pulled back by the traditional, more modern teacher archetypes, who are very much in control. For them, being in control and having the ability to control and manage their behaviour in the classroom appears to be the key characteristic of an effective teacher. This thinking underpins their practice with the student teachers, reflective of what Lave and Wenger (1991) caution against when learning is reduced to the transmission of mere established practices. While we are not arguing that possessing the ability to manage behaviour in a class in a meaningful way is not important for teacher and student teacher alike, what concerns us is the rigid and controlling perspectives conveyed in the narratives. While this aspect of their identities appears shaped by their own apprenticeship of observation (Knowles, 1992; Lortie, 1975), it is also strongly informed by the climate of accountability and performance. The teachers are under pressure to ensure that the 'work is done' (Josh) and that the children succeed academically, especially in the areas of literacy and numeracy. This tension is problematic at a number of levels. Classroom teachers who engage with their own pupils in creative, adaptive and experiential learning and who are themselves reflective and adaptive professionals in their teaching can and do adopt these practices to the mentoring and guiding of student teachers. These teachers are more likely to mentor in a way that supports legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), facilitating a dynamic process through which student teachers gradually move from the periphery to full participation in professional practice. If, however, teachers espouse the modern and traditional approaches within the classroom, how does this inform the way that they guide and support student teachers, and where does it leave the student teacher who is expected to engage in constructivist and constructionist approaches in the classroom? This risk perpetuates outdated practices and stifles the development of a student teacher's evolving identity. This dissonance, between what is practised and what is preached, can significantly influence the identity formation of student teachers. As the literature on teacher learning and identity formation suggests (Lefstein et al., 2020), identity is closely tied to practice and discourse. The dissonance created has the potential to buffer and shape the identity formation of a student teacher in positive ways. Still, it requires the intervention and support of a critical reflective tutor or mentor who is willing and able to engage the student in critical reflection on what is happening in the classroom (Gorman & Hall, 2023). In the absence of this support and guidance regarding critical reflection, the dissonance has the potential to leave the student teacher confused at best and, at worst, aligning themselves with the prevailing culture and practices of the school, which may espouse traditional approaches towards teaching and learning (Zeichner, 2021).

The privileging of the class teacher's identity over that of the cooperating teacher is equally concerning as it illustrates a hierarchy of roles that is not conducive to collaborative mentorship (Clarke et al., 2014). This reflects a lack of recognition for the cooperating teachers' role as educators in their own right, one that has been increasingly

acknowledged in policy and research (Brennan et al., 2024; Burns et al., 2016). This issue is highlighted by participants who expressed reluctance to accept student teachers for placements if they believed that classroom learning would be disrupted. A significant underlying factor contributing to this dissonance may be the lack of professional learning opportunities for cooperating teachers (Andreasen, 2023). We argue that the roles and responsibilities of both class teachers and cooperating teachers can coexist harmoniously. However, achieving this requires meaningful dialogue and engagement among policy-makers, HEIs and schools. Such collaboration is essential to create an authentic partnership that respects the positions and realities of all stakeholders through the provision of comprehensive professional learning.

Conclusion

While this paper is bound to the Irish context, it is of international significance, given the value that is placed on cooperating teachers in teacher education. Despite the increased emphasis placed on the practicum, our research illustrates that little attention has been given to the professional identity formation of cooperating teachers (Gallchóir et al., 2019) and the potential impact that this may have on student teacher development and learning. Through in-depth narrative inquiry, we have illustrated that professional identity is complex and subjective, and the methodological approach that we adopted in this study has equipped us to unpack this. Of particular importance is that the identity of cooperating teachers is unique to HEI-based teacher educators, yet research to date has predominantly focussed on the latter. The paper addresses this gap, but we call on further research in relation to the identities of cooperating teachers to further heighten the understanding of their role. We also conclude that unpacking and understanding cooperating teachers' identities is pivotal in how professional learning could support cooperating teachers in their roles. Thus, we conclude that policy makers and HEIs need to take careful consideration of the findings presented herein. In rhetoric, cooperating teachers are seen as key stakeholders in teacher education. In reality, our paper illustrates that cooperating teachers do not regard themselves as key stakeholders, as they remain largely ignored by both policymakers and HEIs alike.

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ORCID

Alan Gorman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5024-448X>

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