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Student teacher participation in school placement: a micropolitical analysis of students' experiences of system tensions

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Abstract

This article examines Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) student teachers' experiences on school placement through the lens of 'community tensions' and 'micropolitics'. Based on the semi-structured interviews of 14 student teachers who were training to be secondary school teachers (of pupils aged 12-18), it argues that school placement is an undertaking with strong micropolitical dimensions that come into focus through the tensions that student teachers encounter in managing the occupational expectations that define the professional culture of the school. It also asserts that the experience of teaching in a school can be enhanced for student teachers if teacher educators, in universities and schools, help them to identify and navigate the tensions that are at play in the particular teaching community to which they are seeking to belong. The paper identifies four tensions and illustrates each with evidence from the qualitative data. It concludes by arguing that student teachers are also proactive participants in their own occupational socialisation and thus would benefit from developing the appropriate strategies in dealing with the micropolitical challenges that emerge in a school system where different interests are pursued.

Keywords: micropolitics, system tensions/dualities, student teachers of secondary level, school placement

Introduction

Learning to teach, as a novice, has increasingly been conceptualised not simply as a matter of developing appropriate subject knowledge and of learning classroom skills (McNamara, 1996), but also of enculturation within an existing community of practising teachers (Craig, 2013). From such a perspective, newcomers develop understanding of the ways of thinking and practising that characterise a particular community (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2011). In situated learning terms, this is a transformational process of engaging in increasingly sophisticated and mature participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2002) and in moving centripetally from the periphery of a community to more central roles. In many countries, including Scotland where the research for this paper took place, student teachers undertake periods of learning both in the university context and in the practical context of a school. However, schools are busy workplaces (Davis and Sumara, 2001) and the process of learning to become a teacher is complex and uncertain (Hinchion and Hall, 2016). Negotiating the contradictions and difficulties embedded in schools as organisations therefore involves students in developing a range of capabilities beyond working solely with young learners (Toompalu *et al*, 2016). Student teachers learn by becoming members of the teaching community to which they become attached during placement – and much of what they learn is organisational socialisation (Cherubini, 2009), a term that requires an understanding of the continual interplay between individual choice and situational constraint (Lassila and Uitto, 2016). Learning how to meet community expectations, while simultaneously fulfilling personal aspirations thus becomes a crucial component of student teachers' ability to fit into the social system of a school as an organisation (Jokikokko *et al*, 2017).

Seeking to integrate personal aspirations within the cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher can be stressful however (Alsup, 2006) as student teachers have to confront the micropolitical nature of the school. Micropolitics is about power and how people use power to further their own interests and aims (Blase, 1997) and, as such, participating in a school placement is a political endeavour for student teachers (Zhu, Waxman, Rivera and Burlbaw, 2018). As well as experiencing co-operation and coalition-building (Tan, 2015), they may also encounter hostility, rivalry, struggle and conflict – the darker side of institutional life (Lukes, 2005). In productive placement communities, student teachers are supported in the process of balancing personal aspirations and understandings with institutional demands by a socially skilled school (Roberts and Graham, 2007) characterised by encouraging colleagues who draw them in to the community in a welcoming manner (Dewhurst and McMurtry, 2008; Johnston, 2010; Johnston, 2016) and who subsequently help them to become involved in community activity as a valued member engaged in important and valued work (Printy, 2008).

However, 'occupational induction' (Schempp *et al*, 1993) is rarely a smooth process and school placements can be problematic for many students who experience a sense of 'struggle' in reconciling the personal and the institutional (Pillen, Beijaard and den Brok, 2013). Donaldson (2011), in a comprehensive Review of Teacher Education in Scotland, reports that 23% of 2381 respondents claim to have had 'variable or very poor' placement experiences (p43). This reflects a more widespread concern about the potentially problematic nature of early teacher professional development (Day, Elliott and Kington, 2005). Zhu *et al* (2018), for example, describe the 'intricate journey' (p163) of Chinese

student teachers as they navigate the competing interests of other stakeholders, using strategic means to position themselves in ways that enable them to fulfil their personal ambitions as teachers, while often coming into tension with colleagues who were positioning them in different ways according to the expectations of the school.

This paper argues that school placement is an undertaking with strong micropolitical dimensions that come into focus through the tensions that student teachers encounter in managing the occupational expectations that define the professional culture of the school (Valencia *et al*, 2009). It also argues that the experience of teaching in a school can be enhanced for student teachers if those supporting them help them to identify and navigate the tensions (Barab *et al* 2002) or dualities (Wenger, 1998) that are at play in their particular teaching community. This necessitates teacher educators, both in university and in school, engaging in discussions around the micropolitical nature of the systemic tensions inherent in the communities of professional teachers to which students are seeking to belong (Uitto *et al*, 2015). It also implies student teachers developing the appropriate strategies in dealing with such challenges. In this study, working effectively as a student teacher is framed as a matter of fulfilling organisational expectations while simultaneously meeting one's own needs as an individual, thus highlighting the interactive nature of socialisation (Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1985).

Conceptual framework

In order to make explicit the analytic framework within which the study was carried out, the concepts of community tensions will be analysed. Moreover, as it is argued that negotiating system tensions is essentially a micropolitical process, discussion of micropolitics will also be developed.

Communities as systems: tensions/dualities

Community is a rich, multi-faceted term which defies particular definition. Yet it has also been seen as a useful analytical tool with which to examine group and individual learning. Barab, Barret and Squire (2002) have argued that one analytical lens that has proved useful for interpreting community life is to characterise community dynamics in terms of system tensions (Engeström, 1999) or dualities (Wenger, 1998). Engeström views tensions as an inevitable aspect of system activity characterised by overlapping yet conflicting activities that drive the dynamics of that system. For him, tensions are the focal points around which system activity comes into being. They drive system innovation through generating the desire in community participants to commit to finding solutions to the conflicting needs that develop in the system. Wenger (1998), too, has found analytical value in characterising communities in terms of the interplay between system dualities. A duality is a 'single, conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements whose inherent tensions and complementarity give the concept richness and dynamism' (p66). The term implies two separate units of analysis but Wenger uses the notion of a distinction not to classify different things but to explain an inherent interplay (p68). They are not polar opposites but paired needs (Barab *et al*, 2002, p526) that are dialectically co-constitutive. The categories around which tensions in a system form do not exist along a linear continuum, but exist in continual relations, in constant transaction. They come into being together and exist mutually and reciprocally; one cannot be considered without taking into account its

interplay with the other. The challenge for researchers according to Barab *et al* (2002) is to try to understand this interplay; the challenge for those responsible for nurturing communities is to harness such understandings that are developed, in invigorating system dynamics in order to enhance learning.

By way of illustration, Wenger gives examples of four dualities that are central to an understanding of community life: participation/reification; designed/emergent learning; local/global interaction; identification/negotiation. Barab, Makinster and Scheckler (2003), in their study of an on-line community add two more: on-line/face-to-face; coherence/diversity. In another paper, Barab, Barnett and Squire (2002) identify the core tensions characterising their study of a Community of Teachers as involving: the instructor as facilitator and gatekeeper; learning theory and doing practice; the portfolio as supporting reflection and as accountability device; stability and change.

Micropolitics

Micropolitics is a term used by educational writers (Hoyle, 1999; Blase, 1997; Ball, 2012) to capture the notion of the school as an organisation and of teachers as workers whose actions are strongly influenced by their different interests. Through this lens, teaching is less a technical endeavour and more a political one (Zhu *et al*, 2018) which necessitates reading and navigating the complex landscapes of roles, power, interests and norms within an organisation (Curry *et al*, 2008). Micropolitics refers to the strategies and tactics used by individuals and groups within the organisational structure to further their interests. Schempp *et al* (1993) see beginning teachers' classroom responsibilities as having less to do with teaching children and more to do with juggling the multiple demands of a functioning institution. When teachers enter a school for the first time, they quickly become aware of the practices that are acceptable and unacceptable, what can be said and how, who the principal power brokers are and how they work and the values and attitudes that hold sway (Lassila *et al*, 2018). This is a 'bewildering organisational landscape' (Curry *et al*, 2008, p661). Kardos *et al* (2001, p254) talk of professional culture as, 'the distinctive blend of norms, values and accepted modes of professional practice, both formal and informal that prevail among colleagues' and of the need to develop 'integrated cultures' (ibid, p254) which recognise and address the micropolitical needs of the new teacher.

New teachers learn these cultural codes as they interact with colleagues, pupils and senior managers, quickly building an understanding of the social expectations around their actions and attitudes. Within the norms of the group, individuals achieve identity; newcomers normally have to subscribe to the prevailing norms and ways of the group in order to build acceptance as a full member (Uitto *et al*, 2015). Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) argue that the person of the teacher is at stake in micropolitical actions, with teachers engaged in a politics of identity, striving to be recognised and in the process developing an identity that is acknowledged and validated by others. While Ball (2012) sees schools as arenas of struggle, ideologically diverse and riven with actual or potential conflict, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) look at the power dimensions of schools as also including collaboration and coalition-building in order to achieve certain valued goals. They see micropolitics as central to the instituting of actions that aim at establishing, safeguarding or restoring the desired working conditions. Learning how to deal with the micropolitical realities of teaching involves developing micropolitical literacy – the ability to read situations through a micropolitical lens. In doing this effectively, a range of strategies are called on that

take account of the demands of the situation and the individuals' notion of what appropriate working conditions might be like. Jokikkoko *et al* (2016) see an emotional dimension to developing micropolitical understanding, with an experiential aspect referring to the degree of satisfaction felt by the individual about his/her emotional literacy.

Micropolitical issues have been largely ignored in teacher education programmes (Curry *et al*, 2008) but it has been argued (Tan, 2015) that their understanding should be more central to the learning of new teachers for a number of reasons. Without micropolitical sensitivity, beginning teachers cannot contribute to change/improvement processes, and are unable to fulfil expectations of their role as change agents. Helping new teachers to manoeuvre through the organisational milieu of their schools may also help stem attrition and improve retention (Curry *et al*, 2008). Nias (1996) says that new teachers may blunder into the new culture and so induction should focus on helping them to avoid being unnecessarily scarred. Hayes (1998) indicates that the effort involved in navigating the tricky waters of school placement can exert its emotional toll, and that being constantly at the mercy of those with greater power can detract from the important business of classroom teaching.

Micropolitics as a lens for coming to understand the process of becoming a member of a teaching community has not been widely used in the research on student teacher school placement experiences, thus this paper addresses a gap in the Initial Teacher Education literature, adding to the existing knowledge base.

This study aims to explore the student teachers' micropolitical negotiation of community tensions during school placement by asking the question: What micropolitical tensions do PGDE students experience on school placement? In doing so it was hoped to shed light on the kind of dilemmas faced by student teachers on placement and the way these manifested themselves in the tensions between the complex competing demands on their decision-making.

Context

Scotland's new teachers enter an all-graduate profession at the heart of which is the strongly held belief that the contribution of the university is a 'fundamental requirement for high quality teacher education' (Menter, 2017, p8). Teacher education is therefore led by higher education and is based in higher education (Gray and Weir, 2014), supported by partnership agreements with schools and local authorities to provide school placement opportunities. One of the key means of accessing the teaching profession, the PGDE (Professional Graduate Diploma in Education) was introduced in 2005 to supersede the PGCE (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education). The PGDE is a 36 week long programme, with 18 weeks in university and, in the university within which this research took place, 18 weeks of teaching practice in two different schools. Students begin their school placement experiences in September, with an Enquiry period of orientation, where they learn about their host school and carry out a range of tasks in preparation for their first extended, continuous block of five weeks' teaching in November. A second block of three weeks' continuous teaching in the same school takes place in January. University classes are interspersed within these placements. A second placement in a new school begins in February, with 5 weeks of teaching, and a three-week continuous block in May/June

completes their school placement experiences. Again, students move between university and school in blocks of time which enable them to work on building links between theory and practice.

Research Process

In response to a general email call, 14 PGDE students (9 female and 5 male) volunteered to take part, providing evidence through semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour's duration at the completion of their course. The students were training to become secondary school teachers (of pupils aged 12-18) and the sample comprised 8 English students, 3 Maths, 2 Science and 1 Social Subjects students. All were between the ages of 25 and 35.

Data Analysis

Interviews pursued a series of questions enquiring into dilemmas faced by students on placement where their individual aspirations came into conflict with situational expectations. Students were also asked to express their reactions to the tensions they experienced. All fourteen interviews were transcribed and, following thematic analysis, extended chunks of texts where students referred to the more problematic aspects of their placement were manually highlighted in order to determine the most intensely experienced aspects of their placement. Particular attention was placed on data revealing instances where dilemmas arose and where students had to make decisions in order to address the tensions implicit in making decisions where answers are not necessarily straightforward. The contradictory nature of student teachers' experiences was focused on specifically and, commensurate with the theoretical positioning around community tensions, these contradictions were brought together in a tightly coupled pairing during the process of analysis.

It was believed that this method would have more explanatory force than capturing the nature of the students' problematic experience in separate codes. This was because of the closely linked relationship between the two concepts. To illustrate with an example, students often identified the importance of fitting in to the ways of working that characterised a particular department's *modus operandi*. But they also reported that they were expected to bring something of themselves to the placement, in addition to something new that host teachers might learn from. The inherent tension here became the basis of the first duality, 'continuity and innovation'. This tension was explored further by looking for a range of different experiences to provide a more nuanced account of the different ways in which this tension played out among the different student participants. Four tensions were identified in all and these are extrapolated in the results section below. While it is accepted that the nature of a small, purposive sample meant that making generalisations beyond the group is problematic, it is hoped that those reading the results will be able to recognise something of their own experiences in the depiction of the multiple realities of the participant group. It is also accepted that problematic experiences alone were focused on for the purposes of this paper. However, future research should also consider the more positive, coalition building aspects of students' interactions within their subject departments, seeking to understand how tensions can be productive (Ward *et al*, 2011) as well as inhibitive.

Results

Tension 1: Continuity and Innovation

One of the essential tensions in being a student teacher on placement involved the interplay between continuity and innovation. Students informed us that when they entered their department for the first time, they very quickly became aware of their presence as a newcomer within a context that has a history to which they have no prior knowledge. There were student reports in the data that ‘trying to find one’s way’ in this complex situation could lead to problems, as there was potential to ‘put one’s foot in it’ (Participant A, English), as one struggled to understand the nature of the community to which one was trying to belong. In order to fit in to the new environment, students regularly alluded to experiencing pressures on them to do things the same way as colleagues. ‘It makes life easier if you adopt similar views and attitudes to the most experienced members of the team’ (Participant C, English). The drive to move from outsider to insider was a strong one then; to become ‘one of us’ rather than ‘one of them’ (Participant F, Science). This involved making the transition within the team a seamless one, maintaining the continuity of existing practices by undertaking activity in a similar manner to that of more established members. Data revealed that some students felt ‘under pressure’ to adopt pedagogical practices that were the same as their class teacher – in terms of teaching strategies, resources, methods of assessment, and ways of working with young learners:

“I was sort of told that, em, just the way that I was doing things was wrong, she had a very definite way of organising things, the class had to sit exactly like this, they had to have their ten minutes of private reading at the beginning and I had to let them out a row at a time. I was told that if I messed about with the way that she did things, you know, it would take her a year to get them on track again. I thought, well, you know, as far as I’m concerned I’m here to try out new things but I didn’t feel I got the chance to do that.” (Participant B, English)

Students simultaneously indicated that one of the things that experienced teachers often expected was their willingness to bring into the department new ways of working, new ideas and materials. For student teachers in the study, therefore, there was a tension between fitting in through maintaining practices that have come to characterise teachers’ personal ways of working over time, and doing things differently in order to reinvigorate colleagues and their manner of engagement with pupils. This is a tension between continuity and innovation.

Finding the balance was problematic for 11 of the students. They reported that if one was overly focused on doing things the same way as more experienced teachers, this might impact on the capacity one had to find one’s own style, to fulfil one’s own goals in being a particular kind of teacher – ‘a teacher who makes a difference by trying to be different’ (Participant M, English). The data regularly evidenced students expressing a vision of the kind of teacher they would like to be, of the kind of ways of working that they would like to adopt in their classrooms, of the kind of relationship they would like to have with their young learners. But there was evidence, too, that if their practices were overly different, this could lead to difficulties in the decisions they had to make as to how they should move forward in meeting their personal aspirations:

“My problem was should I stick to the established ways of doing things and risk going against my ideals, or should I risk becoming alienated by doing things my way?”

(Participant A, English)

Data revealed 11 of the students wrestling with their individual needs to find a personal style that suited their teaching vision, while simultaneously fitting in to established ways of working. This involved students in making micropolitical decisions around the need to balance institutional expectations with personal goals. The results of these decisions had consequences around the extent to which students felt they would be validated by host colleagues, to the extent that a number of students expressed concerns that their capacity to pass the placement might be at stake if they didn't get the balance right:

“...and it was awkward when teachers had very set ideas about how they wanted things done, and they wanted them done in the way that they would do them so rather than sort of empowering you and getting you to sort of open up and try new things you were too frightened to try the things that you wanted because you were frightened it was going to come back at you in some way, if it went wrong then suddenly, you know God forbid that it would all go wrong, but if it did you'd be frightened that it would go back on you and they'd fail you.” (Participant J, Social Subjects)

This tension was played out along different lines in a number of student teacher narratives – in terms of pedagogical dilemmas in particular. Pedagogic tensions emerged around the content that students should teach and how they should teach this. Students talked about their anxieties around planning materials that did not meet their class teachers' expectations. There was other evidence of what one student referred to as 'a clash of cultures' (Participant L, English): using learning resources from university readings that teachers didn't trust – for example DARTs (Directed Activities Related to Texts) instead of comprehension exercises; or oral work instead of written exercises; or using approaches that teachers felt were ineffective (group work instead of individual exercises); or even bringing in new assessment procedures related to formative assessment methodologies such as learning intentions, success criteria and self and peer assessment.

The data showed evidence that students' confidence could be undermined if they were unable to bring into alignment these co-present needs – to fulfil community expectations while meeting personal aspirations:

“Sometimes I came out of her classes absolutely drained and sort of worried, you know, my God, what's she going to say to the Head of department about me, you know, I'm awful at this. I just can't do what it is she's asking me to do.” (Participant C, English)

Six other students made reference to worrying about failing their final report if they did not adhere to the practical norms expected by their teacher mentors.

Tension 2: being a learner and being a teacher

Another important tension emerged in the interplay between the contrasting roles that students were expected to play in the school. On the one hand students were expected to be learners. Learning was often given a high priority in terms of reflective practice, with emphasis on the need to make improvements and on keeping an open mind in order to do things more effectively as the placement progressed. Students who were positioned by colleagues as learners were not expected to be fully fledged practitioners right from the start and, as novices, were expected to make mistakes. On the other hand, student teachers were often given responsibility for teaching classes quite quickly and soon realised that they had to be a credible teaching presence in the classes to which they were assigned. It was thus important to their success in the classroom that they were quickly seen by class teachers and pupils alike as 'real' or 'proper' teachers. Making mistakes or doing things wrong could have a deleterious effect on their relationship with pupils –and potentially with their host teachers – particularly if classes were senior ones with important exams looming. One student (Participant D, Maths) admitted to 'huge pressure' in ensuring that the class teacher wouldn't have to 'pick up the pieces' after she had returned to university, especially if pupil learning had been hampered.

Overemphasis on being a learner compromised the student's status as teacher in important ways – if there were too few opportunities to teach a range of classes, for example. There was evidence in the data of teaching timetables that students were given that were light in terms of teaching opportunities. Sometimes students (6 out of 8 English students) were not given the senior classes, thus impinging on their confidence in teaching the full range of pupils. Sometimes students (9 out of 14 participants) were not given the more 'difficult' classes, thus being protected from the kind of challenges that they would face as fully registered teachers. The reasons for such decisions were often understandable, with the students accepting that as learners they did not have the experience to manage all situations, but the consequences actually impacted negatively on the student's sense of him/herself as teacher. As one student said, 'How can I be a real teacher if I'm not given a real teacher's load?' (Participant K, English). Most students in the sample (13 out of 14 participants) expressed the wish to learn in real life situations, even if these were challenging.

But sometimes the emphasis was overly on being a teacher – to the detriment of being a learner. This could happen if students were allocated too many classes, with the expectation to 'get on with it'. Some students encountered what they viewed as a 'sink or swim' approach'. As one said, 'The Head's attitude was you're either a teacher or you're not and the only way to find out was to be pitched in at the deep end' (Participant G, Science). Some class teachers very quickly withdrew from contact with the student and there was evidence of teachers failing to monitor the student's management of the class, giving little in the way of feedback on taught lessons:

"I had an example where I was handed over her class and she told me she had no intention of going anywhere near the classroom and disappeared for the entire time that I was there. So I did have power entirely handed over to me but I also had no sense whether I was using it right because I wasn't getting any feedback from her. I was being given no reassurance about my performance and I felt that she just washed

her hands of the class for the duration I was there, and that wasn't a good feeling either." (Participant L, English)

Over-emphasis on 'being a real teacher in the real world' (Participant A, English) impinged negatively on some students' capacity to learn how to be a better teacher, leaving them often feeling lost and demotivated. Being an effective learner in such situations was hard to achieve and the negative impact on the student teacher's sense of self as teacher could be detrimental to progress:

"I know a lot of students are put in a classroom and left to it. I'd rather know that what I was doing was all right or not to do it again because at least that way you know where you should be going. You need that feedback and you need to know that you're doing okay. I think that has a huge impact on how you thrive in your placement." (Participant N, Maths)

All students expressing such views were asked if they felt able to communicate their anxieties to their host teachers and whether they felt able to ask them to be more present in classrooms, but each of the six involved indicated that they did not have the confidence to enter into such negotiations due to fears about their final report.

Tension 3: Autonomy and Collegiality

Students accepted that, in order to demonstrate their skills as teachers, they had to manage classes independent of the presence of the class teacher. This enabled them to develop a credible teaching presence with pupils. In many cases, as we have already seen, students valued highly their class teachers' favourable comments on their capacity to 'get on with it' without asking too many questions or without bothering them too much. But students also realised that being independent in the classroom could only get them so far in supporting their progression as teachers. They realised that the best way to learn in the longer term was to build collegial relations with class teachers in getting feedback on their planning and on their teaching performance. If the pull of autonomy was too strong, this could be detrimental to their confidence in developing a sense that what they were doing was in fact meeting the department's expectations of a student teacher. On the other hand, being perceived by colleagues as too independent by not consulting with the class teacher could also become problematic, with perceptions of students as unwilling to share plans leading to allegations of lack of commitment. 'The Principal Teacher thought I was a slacker, but he didn't even know what I was doing with his class most of the time as he expected me to work on my own – a very confusing situation'. (Participant G, Science)

Yet, on the other hand, being in excessive contact could be judged as being too needy. Students could be viewed as asking too many questions, spending too much time seeking the support and help of more experienced colleagues who were busy with other priorities. Such students felt that there was thus the danger of being perceived as being a 'hassle', as being 'overly high maintenance' and as being a 'burden' (Participant N, Maths). There was a fine line between working autonomously and working collegially, with over emphasis on either potentially getting the student into difficulties. The dilemma here was how one could prove one's mettle as a real teacher who adds positively to the department by managing all one's responsibilities competently and professionally without too much help, while

simultaneously proving to others that one still has a lot to learn and is prepared to work alongside others collegially. Learning to navigate such tensions successfully was crucial to success on placement, requiring considerable interpersonal skill in complex, social situations. Seven of the students felt that they did not have the skills or the confidence necessary to do this effectively.

Tension 4: Proactivity and Receptivity

The above tension often worked itself out in terms of a related pull between proactivity and receptiveness. Evidence from student reports suggested that many teachers wanted them to 'seize the initiative' in order to 'grab opportunities to get the most out of the placement', to 'look for openings' and to 'take their chance to make a difference to the dept and to children's learning' (Participant A, English). They wanted students to 'try out new ideas' and to 'find their own style of teaching', to 'do things their way in order to stamp a mark on classes' (Participant I, Maths). Yet being overly proactive could be threatening to some teachers who were intimidated by what became perceived as the student's naive enthusiasm. Students, in their own words, could be 'too energetic', 'too forward', 'too much in their face'. They could also be 'too confident in the staffroom' (Participant G, Science).

Being too receptive, however, could mean being perceived as being too passive, as 'sponging off the dept without bringing enough of your own ideas into play', as one student confessed (Participant J, Social Subjects). Students had to be active agents, but not too proactive in case they alienated some teachers with their overenthusiastic exuberance; they had to be receptive to advice, but not too much in case they were criticised for not coming forward with their own ideas sufficiently. Again they had to tread a fine line between being proactive enough to demonstrate their commitment, dedication and creativity, and receptive enough to show that they were willing listeners who still had a lot to learn. The consequences of problems in negotiating this tension manifested themselves in relational terms, with reports of strained relationships and tense interactions (in 7 out of 14 participants). In such situations, a small number of students (4 out of 14) reported high levels of stress and discomfort and this impacted further on their capacity to get the most from the placement – by being fearful about asking questions, seeking feedback, taking risks, making suggestions, contributing new ideas or personal opinions. Representative of this was a student (Participant H, English) who said, 'How can you have professional discussions with your mentor when the atmosphere is so strained and tense?'. When professional relationships were tense, students admitted that it made building a sense of belonging to the team very hard. Four participants explicitly made reference to never really being able to feel at home in their department.

Discussion and Implications

Being a student on placement is thus hard micropolitical work that involves negotiating the tensions inherent in the school as an organisational system. There may be particular problems in terms of managing the relationships with more experienced colleagues (Lassila and Uitto, 2016), within wider practices that may be hard to commit to. These tensions manifest themselves most acutely in those interactions between student and host teachers characterised by difference, where different teachers hold different values, attitudes and expectations and where adjusting to these differences may involve

the student in making complex decisions with particularly important consequences as regards colleagues' evaluations of them. The cost of misjudging situations or getting the balancing of the tensions wrong could lead to relational difficulties, hindering the good relationships which are at the heart of successful placement experiences (Lassila *et al*, 2018). The most significant problems highlighted in the study tended to materialise when the aspirations, attitudes and practices of the individual student teacher came into conflict with the ways of thinking and acting characteristic of those in the community to which the student was trying to become affiliated (Pillen *et al*, 2013). This was exacerbated when an inability to resolve these tensions prevented the student from ever fully fitting in (Jones, 2005) or developing feelings of belonging (Johnston, 2010). There were emotional consequences, too in such situations (Yuan and Lee, 2016), with students expressing increased anxiety and a decrease in confidence levels (Olsen, 2010). Such vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 2005; Shanks, 2014) made them less likely to maintain contact with host teachers, lessening their opportunities for engaging in professional discussion and thus for asking questions, gaining advice, securing feedback and ultimately for making judgments about their progress on the placement.

There are implications for all those involved in supporting student teachers. University tutors could capitalise on the findings of this research study by ensuring a focus on 'learning about teaching' as well as 'learning how to teach' (Kuzmic, 1994), preparing students to consider schools as organisations and as sites of potential tension (Pearce and Morrison, 2011). This might involve sustained exploration of co-operating teachers' interests and how these inform school and departmental norms, practices, values and attitudes. In the context of enquiry around the organisational realities of schools, work could usefully be undertaken at University around the importance of developing appropriate strategies and practices in order to take account of the micropolitical tensions that characterise life in an educational institution (Curry *et al*, 2008). Helping students to build knowledge and understanding of the way power is exercised in their school could be an important contribution to the way they go about negotiating their place within the school. University input - around how to go about ensuring that students fit in to the mores of the school, while still stamping their own mark on the placement – is essential here. Students need to be aware of the importance of impression management (Maynard, 2001) in their host school and how processes of self-presentation impact on their capacity to learn effectively on and from placement. Being sensitive to the micropolitical landscape of their host school (Kelchtermans and Ballet, 2002) is key to the student teacher's success and should be a focus of on-going attention at university.

Schools, through their supporting teachers, can help students to manage the tensions revealed in this article by broadening the focus beyond the classroom skills that student teachers need to develop to achieve acceptable standards of competence. Host teachers could see their role as also encompassing the important task of helping student teachers to interpret and respond appropriately to the school's organisational culture (Correa *et al*, 2015). Sharing the school's expectations around 'how we do things here' and 'how you need to work to be effective here' could be a vital part of host teachers' responsibilities, and a focus could also be placed on helping student teachers to manage the tricky process of working with teachers who may have very different expectations of their student and different ways of working. If teacher colleagues can help students to marry community aspirations with the

student's own personal goals (Lassila *et al*, 2018), they will have gone a long way to providing the basis of a productive placement for students. Supporting teachers can also help student teachers to realise their own goals and aspirations by treating them as individuals with differing needs and purposes (Dewhurst and McMurtry, 2006).

Student teachers, finally, should remember that they are not passive recipients of the school's culture (Uitto *et al*, 2015) but rather, proactive contributors to their own organisational socialisation (Jokikkoko, 2017) and that their actions affect the outcomes of their placement in significant ways (Bullough *et al*, 1989). Making purposeful decisions around the systemic tensions that have been described in this article will enable them to develop the confidence to get the most from the learning opportunities afforded by their placement school. They need to read the cultural codes inscribed in the school (Sparkes, 1989) by tuning into the ways of working, belief systems and power dynamics that underpin and drive the school. Sympathetic understanding of these will enable them to position themselves more astutely as professional agents within the system (Turnbull, 2005), enabling them to come across to host teachers in ways that meet the expectations of the school. Students will also require skill in building strategies of compromise which will enable them simultaneously to fulfil the expectations of their teachers, while also being true to their personal vision of practice (Lassila *et al*, 2018). They will need to find ways of balancing the need to be a learner with the equally important requirement of being accepted as a teacher, ensuring that they are able to carry out all their responsibilities independently and making a positive contribution to the school, while also working productively within a team situation. This is complex, demanding and highly skilled work and involves an approach to learning that positions student teachers as requiring capabilities far beyond the learning of classroom skills (McNamara, 1996).

Being micropolitically aware is not one of the competences that students have to demonstrate in order to achieve the Standard for Provisional Registration in Scotland (GTCS, 2012), but the research around which this paper has been constructed suggests that it should be granted greater significance. Placing closer emphasis on the tensions or dualities that characterise life in a teaching community and helping students to manage these tensions is something that all of us with a stake in the education of beginning teachers should take seriously.

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Appendix:

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Supporting quotations
Tension 1: Continuity and Innovation	<p>Pedagogical practices: Doing it their way v bringing in new ways</p> <p>Finding the balance: Established ways of working v finding a personal style</p> <p>Fear of failure</p>	<p>'It makes life easier if you adopt similar views and attitudes to the most experienced members of the team' V 'I thought, well, you know, as far as I'm concerned I'm here to try out new things'</p> <p>'she had a very definite way of organising things, the class had to sit exactly like this, they had to have their ten minutes of private reading at the beginning and I had to let them out a row at a time' V 'I wanted to do it my way and be a teacher who makes a difference by trying to be different'</p> <p>'you were too scared to try the things that you wanted because you were frightened it was going to come back at you in some way'</p>
Tension 2: Being a learner and being a teacher	<p>Being a novice v being perceived as a proper teacher</p> <p>Making mistakes v not hampering pupils' learning</p> <p>Being left to it v too few opportunities to be a teacher</p>	<p>'being a newcomer, you immediately had a sense of not being as good as everyone else' V 'you have to get in there quickly and show you're a real teacher'</p> <p>'when you're inexperienced you expect to make mistakes' V 'my teacher was terrified she'd have to pick up the pieces when I left and that the learning of her class would be ruined'</p> <p>'I know a lot of students are put in a classroom and left to it' V 'How can I be a real teacher if I'm not given a real teacher's load?'</p>
Tension 3: Autonomy and Collegiality	<p>Being independent v requiring feedback and support</p> <p>Being too independent v not being too needy</p> <p>Managing responsibility v showing willingness to learn collegially</p>	<p>'I wanted to be perceived as being able to get on with it and stand on my own two feet' V 'the best way to learn is by getting good feedback and support'</p> <p>'if you don't consult with your teachers, it can rebound on you' V 'you can be seen as a hassle and overly high maintenance'</p> <p>'it's important to manage all that's asked of you competently' V 'you have to show you're able to work alongside them'</p>
Tension 4: Proactivity and Receptivity	<p>Seizing the initiative v not being too confident</p> <p>Being a willing listener v not being too passive</p> <p>Being an active agent v not being too confident</p>	<p>'she wanted me to grab opportunities to get the most out of the placement' V 'I was too energetic for them I think. Too confident in the staffroom'</p> <p>'they needed me to show I was keen to listen to show I had a lot to learn still' V 'you were given the feeling that you were sponging off the department without bringing enough of your own ideas into play'</p> <p>'They said I should try out new ideas and do things my way to stamp a mark on classes' V 'you can't be too forward or too much in their face'</p>

Table 1: Identifying the Key Themes with supporting quotations