Learning in practice: Support for professional development

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> *We need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forma are established ... To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes-from birth to death-fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for 'it is only in movement that a body shows what it is'.* (Vygostsky, 1978, pp. 64-65)

Professional development in education is a career-long process. It is on this view of teacher education that this chapter will rest. It is not a single event, or a course of study, though both may form a part of the overall process. Rather it is a continuum: a complex, often uncertain but potentially creative journey from the earliest stages of initial teacher education, through to the latest stages of being an educational professional. For if professional development is about real change, it can only realistically take place over time and in the context of continuity of personal goals and aspirations as well as institutional purposes. It will almost always include periods of supported training, study or research; sometimes involving risks, almost always doubt, but hopefully also exhilaration and insight.

  For real professional growth, however, there must be a direct relationship between such education and practice itself. Professional development, as this chapter will argue, is also essentially a social as well as a personal practice. If its fundamental purpose is ultimately not only to question, challenge and develop the individual teacher but also to consider the kind of teaching and learning that young people experience, it cannot be done in isolation. Teac-her education, in whatever context it takes place, needs to be rooted in a theory of learning as social practice.   The pattern of relationships evolved to support 'distance' professional development programmes will therefore be critical, and can in turn provide a dynamic model in general for teacher education and change. Drawing on this broad view of professional development this chapter begins by briefly outlining current debates about teacher education, moving on to examine the concept of student support and its role in the context of distance programmes [1].Two case studies of innovative, distance teacher education programmes follow which focus on frameworks for student support: an initial teacher education programme in the UY, and an in-service education programme in Eastern Europe. The chapter concludes by outlining some key issues for student support in open and distance teacher education.

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[1]The term 'student support' is used interchangeably in this chapter with 'learner' support and 't@' support. The term 'student' has traditionally been used in the Open University to refer to any course user. Although in some ways it seems an inappropriate term for experienced teachers engaged in continuing professional development, the interweaving here of the terms student/learner/teacher highlights the fluidity of These roles in the teaching and learning process.

Professional development and distance education: global issues

Over the past decade, debates about both the nature and quality of teacher education and development have been accompanied by widespread educational, political and social change. Education systems across the world are undergoing transformation and traditional forms of teacher education are being questioned. In many areas, such as Eastern Europe and South Africa, the scale of need for both initial and in-service education is colossal. It is also high on political agendas (Glennie, 1995; Breger, 1995). Such change has been accompanied, and in some places facilitated by, the revolution taking place in technological communication, which gives new meaning not only to the way in which knowledge and new ideas can be accessed but also to the way individuals and institutions, although distant in place, can be instantly linked in time via cable, satellite or computer networks. In this context there is growing acknowledgement worldwide that all teachers are entitled to high quality, up-to-date programmes of professional development.

Another parallel change in g is taking place in many parts of the world: namely, a debate about the increased significance that schools should play in professional development at all stages. This dialogue, both in Europe and across the USA, has been well documented (Booth *et al.,* 1990; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992). Hargreaves (1995) has drawn attention to the new 'social geography' of teacher education as it rapidly becomes de-institutionalised and dispersed across a variety of schools and clusters. 're-embedded in other sites and spaces'. The rationale for this shift of focus has varied from system to system and, as Moon points out within both national and regional systems diverse models exist, as our two case studies illustrate. In this new context he argues:

> *the school as a site for training is unambiguously central to the task of establishing new and more challenging expectations* (Moon, 1996, p. 12).

Open and distance teaching and learning (ODTL) has, over the last twenty-five years, offered, an important routeway to professional development for many teachers across the world. This changing global educational context however, provides a new and even more significant role for open learning. Its underlying methodology is ideally placed to facilitate a responsive and flexible model of teacher development, shifting the focus as it does from what institutions provide to how learners can be actively engaged in the process of their own learning through a wide variety of teaching and learning strategies. Indeed, if we define open and distance education as an underlying methodology, rather than seeing it as uniquely something that happens 'at a distance', then it has as much applicability for teaching and learning in the face-to-face setting of conventional institutions, as it has for students who are home-based or studying independently with little face-to-face contact. In addition, debates about the provision and nature of support for teachers engaged in professional development are becoming increasingly pertinent across all institutions, not just those engaged in 'distance' teaching and learning.

Conceptualising student support in distance education

Tait (1995) asserts that the rationale for student support in ODTL *'has been weakly conceived over the last twenty years'*. Despite the widespread growth of commitment by many open learning institutions to its provision, the many examples of excellent practice in different

countries are *'born out of educational instinct rather than theoretical understanding'*. He argues that those activities which are commonly referred to within distance education as 'student support' (e.g. tuition, whether face-to-face, by correspondence, Telephone or computer; counselling; the organisation of study centres and interaction though video) should have as a 'key conceptual component' the notion of supporting individual lean-ting. Such provision stands in contrast to resources such as printed course units, audio and video materials, course readers and set books that have so often been seen as characterising distance education. Student support, whether provided in an individual or group setting, or birth, is essential and complementary to the mass-produced materials which are provided for students regardless of prior experience, personal needs and preferred learning styles.

Placing learning at the heart of any discussion about student support is clearly vital. It is all the more pertinent in the context of teacher education programmes where the learning process itself is a main object of study. It would seem important, therefore, to explore Tait's argument further. Is there broad consensus about what 'supporting individual learning' might mean in distance education? Thorpe suggests there is:

> *... the concept of* **facilitating learning...** *has attained such popularity that teaching and its role threatens to be displaced by the idea of the management of learning.*

She goes on to argue:

> *In place of a transmission model of teaching we now have the facilitation of learning, which may in practice take on a variety of less than satisfactory forms. It is all too possible, for example, to hand back to the learner all the responsibility for what and how to learn, while retaining all the power to judge whether or not that learning has been successful.*
> *The other source of danger, in shifting attention wholly away from teaching and on to learning, is that we know as yet too little about the process of how confident independence is achieved, and about the proper role of teaching in that process.* (Thorpe, 1995, p. 176)

Such debate is vital, raising as it does crucial issues in relation to student support and the nature of the learning process. For those involved in teacher development it must be the heart of the venture.

Teacher education programmes have drawn extensively on social theory over the last decade in their account of the learning process. Social constructivism has moved thinking away from purely individual perspectives, focusing as it does on how knowledge is developed in contexts of shared learning. As a theory of intellectual development it is well known. It suggests that human learning presupposes a specific social nature: the ways in which children's and adults' reason has been shown to be closely bound up both with the nature of social transaction and the discourse with which this reasoning is done. In dialogue, knowledge is continually not only constructed but transformed: thus when two or more people communicate, there is a real possibility that, by pooling their knowledge and experience, they achieve a new level of understanding beyond that which either had before (Edwards and Mercer, 1987). In addition, by taking into account the differing goals, contexts, experience, knowledge and cultures of every learner, constructivism places firmly on the agenda issues of social diversity, inequality, co-operation and conflict differences of power and knowledge, and the way in which these are socially produced, reproduced and transformed in educational institutions as well as everyday settings.

Constructivism also provides a rigorous theoretical basis for pedagogy that moves beyond generalised concepts such as the 'facilitation of learning'. The concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978), for example, familiar to many through Bruner's

(1986) account of 'scaffolding', provides a clear role for the teacher, whilst showing the familiar dichotomy between a transmission view of education and a learner-centred view to be false. Although this theory is most developed in accounts of childhood learning, it remains an important concept for adult development too, an interactive System:

> *within which people work on a problem which at least one of them could not, alone, work on effectively. Cognitive change takes place within this zone, where the zone is considered both in terms of an individual's developmental history and in terms of the support structure created by other people and cultural tools in the setting.* (Newman *et al.,* 1989, p. 61)

The process of teaching and learning from this perspective becomes a dialogue, a constant meeting of minds, which Burner has called a 'forum' in which teachers and learners engage in a negotiation of shared meaning.

> *The language of education, if it is to be an invitation to reflection and culture creating, cannot be the so-called uncontaminated language of fact and objectivity. It must express stance and counter-stance and, in the process, leave place for reflection ,for metacognition. It is this that permits one to reach higher ground: this process of objectifying in language and image what one has thought and then turning around on it and reconsidering it.* (Bruner, 1986, p. 129)-

This theory critically extends the role of 'teacher' or more experienced peer in the learning process well beyond that of mere 'facilitator'. Although the courses within our case studies draw widely on theories of learning, it is this perspective that centrally informs their structure and which provides a model for learner support, both as an overarching concept and as a teaching methodology within specific settings such as face-to-face tutorials, correspondence tuition and electronic communication.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, for distance programmes of teacher education is to develop frameworks of support not only for the study of course materials but also for school-based learning. This challenge moves us straight to the heart of important questions about the nature of teacher education and the interrelation between theory and practice: an ongoing and international debate, as our case studies illustrate. The questions are many and diverse but they include:

- **For course development** To what extent should students be presented with theoretical knowledge, such **as** theories of learning or child development, in advance of practical experience? What is most appropriately taught in the context of school practice, what by university or colleges? How, if at **all,** should this interrelate?

- **For support and training:** What knowledge and skills are needed for those involved in the training of teachers? How, if at all, does the knowledge differ for those engaged in supporting school experience and theoretical studies? Does the nature of support differ also?

The questions of course intermix.
  The practical dimension of teacher education has led to the development of the concept of *partnership* between institutions responsible for teacher education courses and schools which provide experience of practice. It has also led to the concept of *mentoring:*

*The **mentor** within the **practicum** provides the crucial link that mediates the beginning knowledge and skills of the teacher with practical experience in schools. In school-focused professional development programmes the role of more experienced teachers in assisting the professional growth of their less-experienced colleagues is becoming increasingly acknowledged. Most significantly the mentor role is crucial to the forging of pedagogic knowledge and academic or subject domain knowledge.* (Moon, 1996, p. 18)

Those involved with the development of mentoring as both a concept and a practice have drawn substantially on *experiential learning theory* which focuses primarily on the professional aspect of teaching. Schon's (1987) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' has been influential here, particularly for those directly engaged in supporting students in school-based experience. Schon's work has established an epistemology of practice based on a process of interaction and reflection on the part of the learner and structured feedback from a teacher or 'mentor'. Indeed the concept of 'reflective practice' has become commonplace in models of mentor support. It accords much needed status both to 'knowledge in practice' and to the mentoring role.

As an account of learning, however, this concept of reflective practice demands close attention. The notion of 'reflection in action', for example, relies on a learner's ability to make solitary reflections on his/her own and others' practice. But as McIntyre points out:

the limitations of student teachers' perceptions, information-processing, understanding and awareness of alternatives are likely to restrict their learning about teaching as much as they restrict their teaching. (McIntyre, 1990, pp. 124-125)

Similarly, applications of the concept of 'reflection on action' can divert attention away from the major issues for mentoring practice which Moon locates. Research by Burgess and Harris (1995), for example, has highlighted the high degree of personal responsibility some mentors feel for novice teachers, particularly those involved in a school-based programme. The mentoring role becomes identified in these cases with 'counselling' and , empathising', whilst continuing to be informed by generalised notions of , reflective practice'. Personal relations thus predominate at the expense of the systematic challenge and evaluation of novice teachers' progress and development. In searching for models of learning that will inform student support not only in relation to the theoretical aspects of teaching, but also in school practice and professionalism, we need to embrace those models which enable rigorous attention to be paid to the process of teaching and learning. How, for example, can experienced teachers make pedagogic strategies and their practice in action explicit to 'novice' teachers (Banks *et al.,* 1995)? What role can collaborative teaching and classroom observation play in teacher development? Here, too, constructivist approaches would seem to have as much to offer as theories of reflective practice.

Recent critiques of cognitive theory help to connect what might seem to be otherwise important but distinct perspectives for support of teacher development: parallel furrows which tend towards seeing learning theory and professional practice as separate and distinct (Lave, 1988; Chaiklin and Lave, 1993). Extensive research into adult learning in 'everyday life' has led Lave to propose that:

cognition is distributed-stretched over, not divided among-mind, body, activity and culturally organised settings (which include other actors), across persons, activity and setting.

She argues against persistent formulations of theory that create gulfs between minds and their 'environments', between public and domestic domains, theory and practice:

> *the everyday world is just that: what people do in daily, weekly, monthly, ordinary cycles of activity. A schoolteacher and pupils in a classroom are engaged in 'everyday activity' in the same sense as a person shopping for groceries in the supermarket after work and a scientist in the laboratory.* (Lave, 1988, p. 15)

In this theory of cognition, situated knowledge becomes the crucial component which drives reflection and in turn the process of learning. This perspective challenges traditional dichotomies- between theory and practice, institutional (or school) learning and 'everyday learning', between thinking and doing, mind and body. As an account of learning it presents a view of cognition as ongoing, unfolding and experiential, which has important insights not only for curriculum development but also for learner support in teacher education.

We would wish to argue that although support for professional development should draw on a range of theories of learning, *it must be centrally grounded in social practice,* recognising that knowledge is constantly created and transformed at the intersection of dialogue between people, their collective knowledge and experience, in particular settings and context. It follows that support should be set in a framework which provides for a range of opportunities: of relationships and activities in a variety of settings, which include schools and classrooms. We would also argue that support in the professional development context must ensure that opportunities for learning continually challenge traditional dichotomies of theory and practice, teacher and learner, institutional learning and 'everyday' experience. The variety of opportunities provided by such support are not a series of unconnected events but should provide, in an ongoing, unfolding way, the basis for 'learning in practice' that stretches across time and space. The nature and quality of these opportunities are key, whether they be large day schools, co-teaching in classrooms, one-to-one discussion on the Telephone about written assignments, or electronic conferencing across national borders. This is a shared endeavour and has important implications for course construction and for ongoing developments in mentor and tutor training. In establishing such a framework of support we are, of course, also describing a model framework for learning: for we would argue that support for professional development should fully mirror what is expected of the best practice in students' own schools/ teaching contexts (see Fig. 8.1).

In the case studies of innovative distance programmes of teacher education that follow, we will focus in particular on learner support.

Initial teacher education at a distance: a study in innovation

The UK context

Broad educational debates about teacher development in the UK have taken place against the background of radical changes in government policy in relation to both initial and in-service training. Since the early 1970s, initial teacher training has been compulsory for all except maths and science graduates in England and Wales and, until recently, was seen primarily to be the responsibility of colleges or university departments of education, who in turn made

context

Shared Learning

gender/race/cultural background

professional history

knowledge/experience

Individual learners

personal biography

learning style

Relationships
- tutor/formator
- mentor
- school staff
- pupils
- peers

Activity
- correspondence tuition
- telephone tuition
- mentor session
- co-teaching
- co-analysis of practice
- tutorials: group, pairs, small groups, specialist input
- self-help groups
- computer: private chat, general chat, subject conferencing
- day schools

Settings
- home: telephone/computer/ television
- school: staffroom, classroom
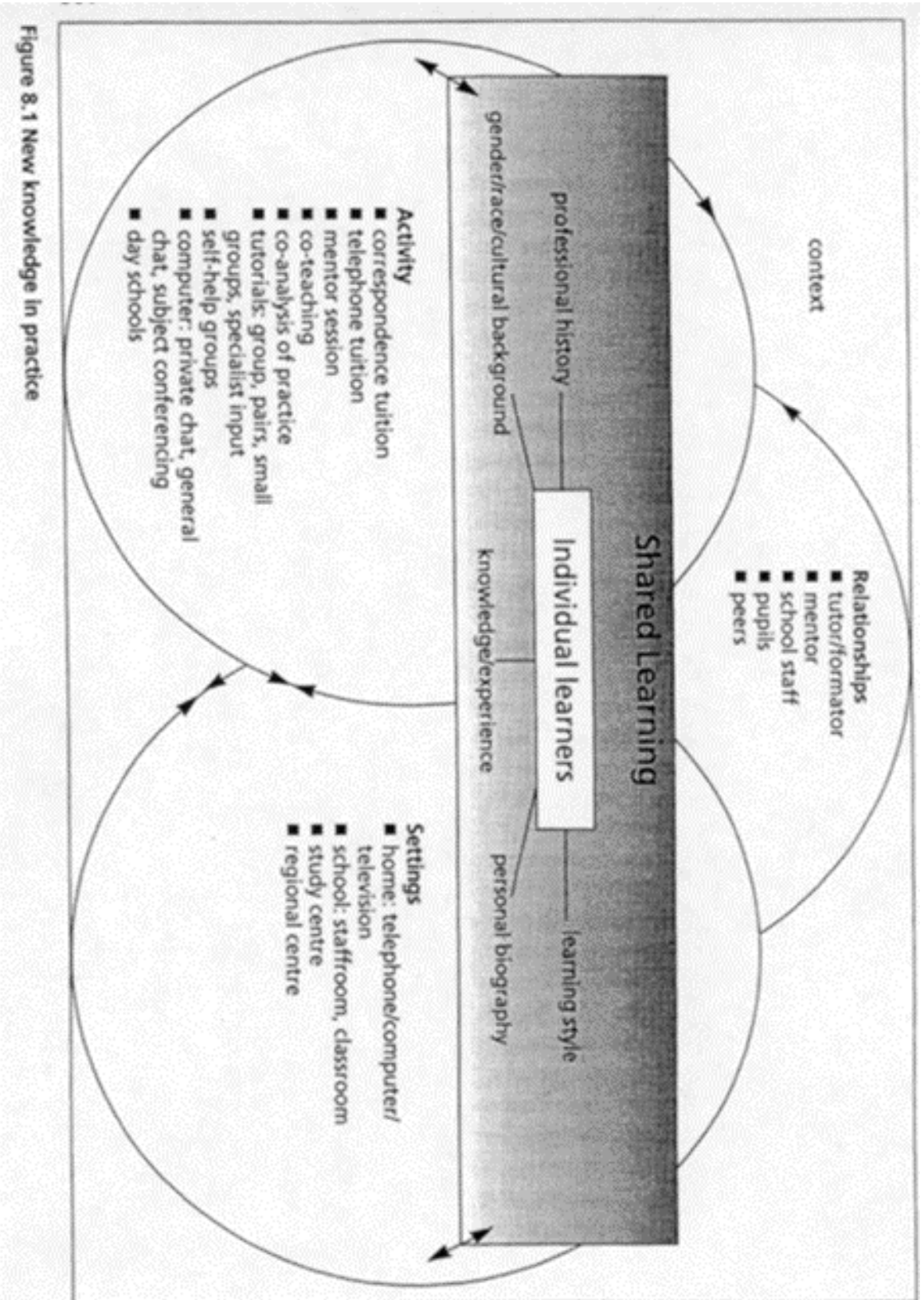- study centre
- regional centre

Figure 8.1 New knowledge in practice

individual decisions about the way in which students would gain practical experience of school. The establishment of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) in 1984, however, made partnership between Higher Education Institutes (HEIS) and schools more systematic and wide-ranging, requiring that teachers be involved in course planning and writing and interviewing of students, as well as playing an increasingly influential role in the assessment of school experience (DES, 1984). W@ (1990) has argued, however, that the underlying impetus towards a more significant role for schools in initial teacher education over the last decade in the UK grew primarily out of the theory/practice debate, being both a testing in practice of that relationship and a response to critical argument. The wider political context has cut across this key educational debate, polarising and at times side-tracking important dialogue concerning the nature of the relationship between schools and teacher education. In 1992 the government implemented new procedures for the accreditation of initial teacher education, which in a single move more than doubled the statutory period of time that teachers in training were required to spend in schools; simultaneously, a competence model was introduced on which accreditation was to be based (DFE, 1992). Thus, whilst many educational professionals had been concerned with developing a broad view of teacher education, that took into account the personal, intellectual and cognitive dimensions of learning and the importance of developing teachers who could critically engage in the 'reflective practice' previously described. Conservative policies implemented far-reaching Legislation, rooted in a predominantly skills-based, functional view of teacher education. Ironically, many of those who had both argued for and implemented more school-based programmes of teacher education found themselves opposing this very policy. Such opposition arose in part from disquiet about the narrow concept of teacher education and learning on which such policy was grounded, as well as concern about the way in which an explicitly political agenda was driving a fundamentally complex and critical educational debate about the interrelationship between theory and practice.

Recent government policy in the LTK has also foreground the responsibility of the school for continuing professional development, whilst simultaneously weakening the leading role that Local Education Authorities (LEAS) have traditionally played in this aspect of teacher education. Parallel debates to those taking place in initial teacher education in the 1980s had led many His and LEAs to acknowledge teachers' responsibility for their own professional development and the importance of schools as the site of professional training. Here, too, broader, holistic models of professional development, conceived and implemented in partnership with teachers and schools, were strongly influenced by the increasing interest in experiential learning and Schon's concept of the 'reflective practitioner'. Swingeing government cuts in the early 1990s, however, and the devolving of funding for professional development to schools put an end to numerous authority-wide initiatives, effectively removing local authority structures that in many places had facilitated the articulation of wide-ranging discussions about effective professional development and had also provided vital support for exploratory developments of practice in schools. Political intervention has thus enforced a school-based agenda in both initial and in-service education, whilst simultaneously removing many of the mechanisms of support that schools relied on in developing their new and critical role in teacher education [2]. One of the challenges for both schools and partner institutions in this new climate is to continue dialogue and research into the ways in which teacher development can be continually improved and renewed.

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[2]A Teacher Training Agency has now been established by the Secretary of State for Education, committed to school-based Training and charged with administering the central funds for initial teacher education in England. The Agency has also taken responsibility for establishing national standards for continuing professional development (DFE, 1995; TTA, 1995).

The OU PGCE

The development of the Open University UK's new Postgraduate Certificate in Education (OU PGCE) was coincidental to the move to school-based teacher education. The OU PGCE was launched in February 1994 and is currently one of Europe's largest programmes for the initial education and training of teachers. The impetus for the programme lay principally in the findings of two research exercises carried out in the late 1980s which indicated that there were a significant number of graduates with a real interest in a part-time distance education route to teaching, a large proportion of whom were specialists in science and technology (Moon, 1992). It is an eighteen-month, part-time postgraduate course which includes eighteen weeks of full-time school experience. A key priority for the course team from the outset was the development of a clear conceptual framework for student support which would be integral to the programme.

The majority of OU PGCE students are mature people who come to the course from a wide variety of employment and life experiences? Just 20 per cent of them are under 30 years old, compared to the national PGCE profile which indicates that 52 per cent of students are under 26. OU students have also, for reasons of work, personal circumstances or learning preference, deliberately chosen a part-time distance education course. Seventy-five per cent of them are women, many of whom are intending to return to paid employment after time at home employed in full-time parenting (see Fig. 8.2).

We emphasised at the outset the importance of teacher development as a lifelong process.

Figure 8.2 1995 Open University PGCE students—by age
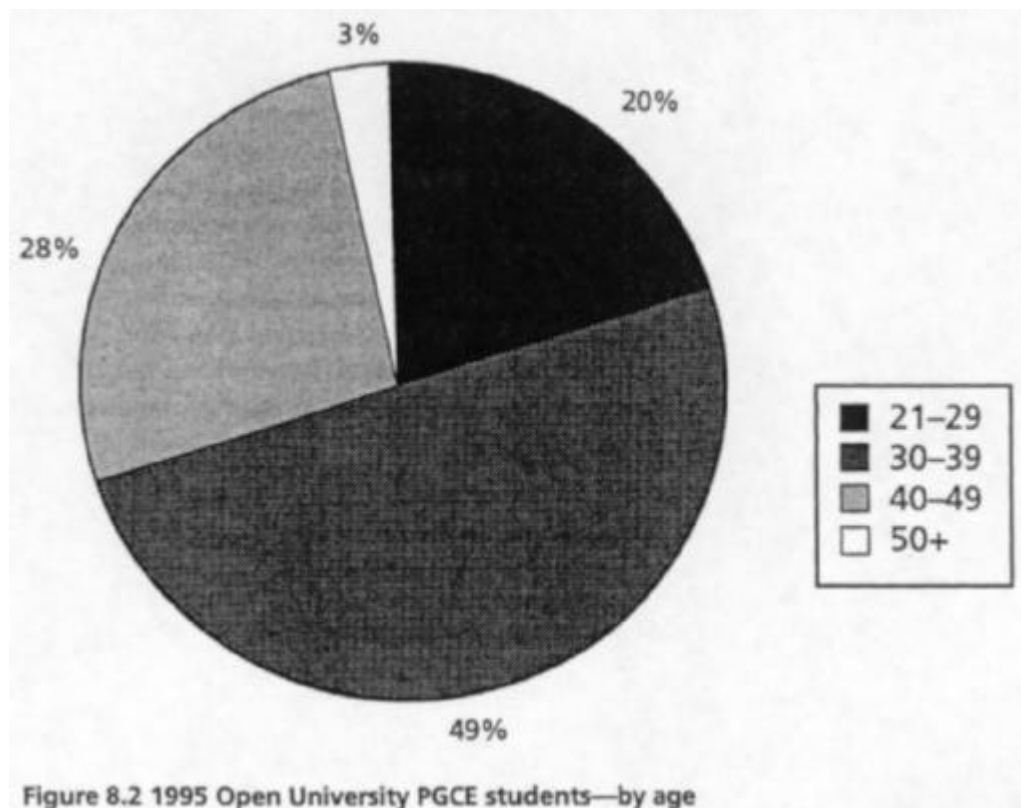
Recent work on teacher development has begun to look at the implications of life span or life cycle research in relation to teachers' careers: Huberman (1992) has suggested that life

cycle concerns are deeply implicated in teachers' approaches to instruction. However, the OU PGCE student challenges the notion of a traditional teaching 'career cycle' which defines those involved in initial teacher education, for example, as:

> *usually young adults, still in the process of establishing their personal identities and independence, frequently insecure and vulnerable.* (Alexander, 1990, p. 66)

In fact, evidence testifies to the *'definite expectations, strong motivation to succeed and high level of personal independence and* organisation' displayed by students on this course (Bourne and Leach, 1995).

A common course framework runs across the whole PGCE programme; although the different course lines (primary/secondary) and subjects (English, mathematics, music, science, technology, history and French) have distinctive activities and materials, the order and sequence in which they are addressed is common. A feature of the course is the emphasis placed on understanding pupil learning. Students are therefore introduced to the main theories of learning and, progressively, as the course develops, they observe these ideas and practise integrating them into different teaching strategies. A 'School Experience Guide' is a key element in the course, structuring the school placements through a range of directed activities which cross-reference to the study programme as a whole. This provides a basic 'entitlement' which each student can expect from their school experience.

Students are provided with a wide range of open learning materials and resources to support their study. Some of these are commonplace in distance education programmes: a course study guide; video, audio materials and audio-visual guides; course readers and set books. Other aspects of provision are-e unique to the OU PGCE. First students are given substantial resource packs for each phase and secondary subject line, which contain a wide range of documents, facsimile material and other texts. Second, an Apple Macintosh computer, printer, keyboard, modem and associated software are lent to the student for the duration of the course.

Student support

Although these extensive resources constitute a fundamental element of the PGCE course, the other 'complementary but essential' provision is its wide-ranging student support. This aspect of the programme involved the Open University in the development of new structures, as well as the modification of existing forms of support.

The PGCE is administered on a day-to-day basis by academic staff located in twelve regional offices across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These regional staff *tutors,* like their counterparts in other faculties, are responsible for appointing and training local part-time OU tutors for the course. A unique aspect of their role in terms of the OU structure, however, is the direct face-to-face contact with schools and students: sample monitoring the interviews of students by schools; briefing mentors; supporting partner schools and moderating the assessment of school experience. Staff tutors thus provide a vital link between regions and the central academic team.

A crucial new element of student support for the OU is based on its partnership with schools. The PGCE's 'partner schools' are essentially those schools which, in collaboration with the OU, implement the PGCE course for over 1000 students each year, providing student support during full-time school placements. As the eighteen-month course cycles overlap, the OU can, in theory, have up to 3000 schools involved in the partnership scheme for six months of the year. Such a large enterprise requires a clear framework of responsibilities and student entitlements, but one within which local strengths must be
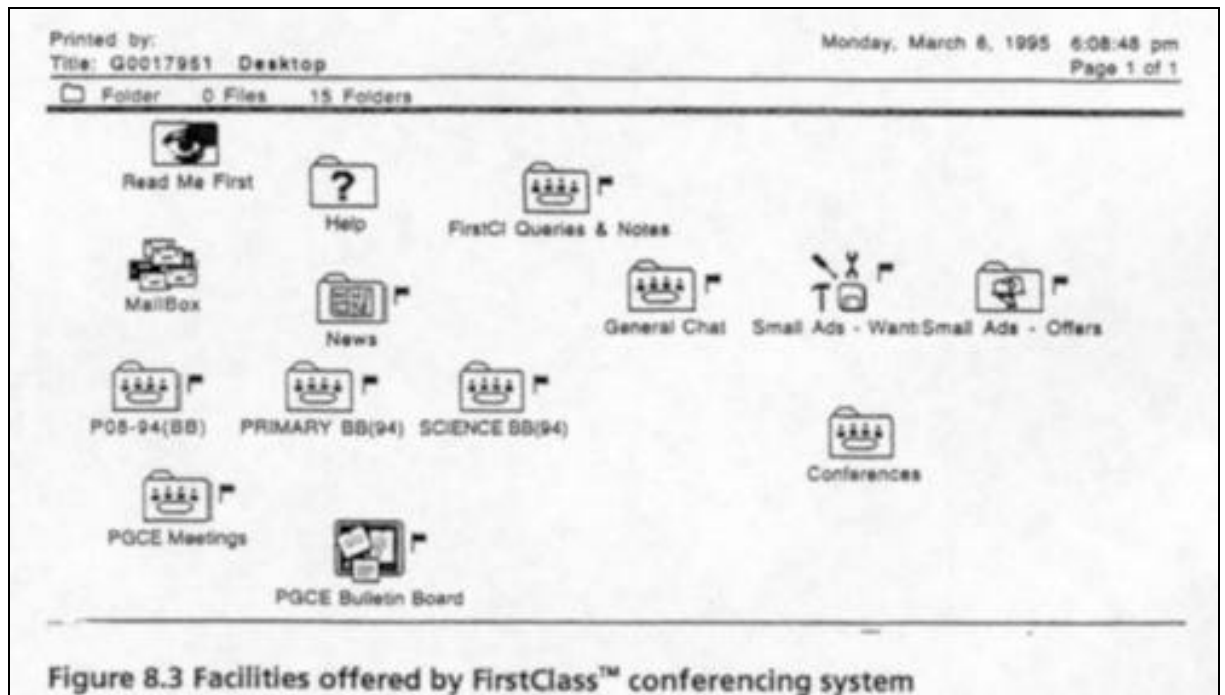
accommodated. A simple but rigorous framework sets out the roles and responsibilities of the institutions and the people involved (Open University, 1995).

Within this partnership the *mentor* plays a key role, with responsibility for support and training as well as assessment of the students' three school experiences. As we have emphasised, it is the School Experience Guide which provides for consistency of experience and acts as a tool for negotiating a variety of teaching opportunities within and between schools in the programme. These include involving the students in extensive classroom observation and evaluation, as well as giving them the opportunity to teach collaboratively with their mentor and engage in 'co-analysis of practice'. This Guide is one element of a substantial pack of mentor training materials which is given to every partner school and which guides the mentor in his/her various roles. To support both mentor and student, the partner school nominates a senior member of staff or *school co-ordinator,* who also acts as a management link to the University, ensuring the student can experience school-wide activities as well as validating school-based assessments of the student's progress.

The PGCE *tutors* are also experienced teachers and provide readily accessible personal support for individual students throughout the course, as well as through regular group tutorials and day schools. Although the mentor provides in-depth knowledge of classroom teaching and the opportunity for students to observe and discuss practice with an experienced teacher, the role of the tutor complements that of the mentor by drawing links, in tutorials and in correspondence tuition on written assignments, between the student's experience in schools and the course materials. This support provides breadth as well as depth of experience, and gives students the opportunity to analyse a range of practice outside the pressures of the school context. In regional day schools and tutorials, students share experiences and draw support from their peers.

The variety of opportunities for student support that the PGCE programme provides is integral to the course. Statistics show that in the first two years of the programme, attendance at both optional tutorials and day schools has been far higher than in conventional OU courses: 80 per cent nationally. All those involved in student support are not only given written briefing materials but are provided with face-to-face training in their respective rotes. Tutors and mentors are briefed together before each school experience, and so although their roles are separate and distinct, they are able to share a common approach to both the course's methodology and the interpretation of the assessment framework. The nationally prescribed framework for briefing and training, along with the monitoring of tutorials and school experience, is an important aspect of the programme's extensive quality assurance procedures.

There is a similarly high participation rate in the other innovative element of student support within the OU framework: the provision of *electronic communication* via a personal computer and modem, controlled by the FirstClass^{TM'} program. The system is facilitated by a team from the Open University's Academic Computing Service whose aim was to make the Internet available to all OU students by the beginning of 1996. The PGCE environment within the FirstClass^{TM} system is managed by members of the central academic team, including the director of the programme, the IT co-ordinator, the course writing team, course managers and administrators, as well as the regional academic staff tutors. FirstClass^{TM'} enables access to electronic mail, computer conferencing, 'real-time chats', and the facility to attach and send documents. Students can operate in numerous environments depending on need: access to 'read only' bulletin boards providing course-related details; general conferencing; an e-mail facility; discussions about their subject speculums; and private synchronous on-line 'chat' (see Fig. 8.3).

Folder   0 Files   15 Folders

Read Me First

Help

FirstCl Queries & Notes

MailBox

News

General Chat   Small Ads - Want Small Ads - Offers

P05-94(BB)   PRIMARY BB(94)   SCIENCE BB(94)

Conferences

PGCE Meetings

PGCE Bulletin Board

Figure 8.3 Facilities offered by FirstClass™ conferencing system

The system's pervasiveness over time and space, as well as its capacity to provide for both synchronous and asynchronous communication, makes it a fascinating and highly flexible mode of student support, unexplored in most traditional teacher education courses. Log-in times reveal patterns of use which illustrate well the medium's accessibility for students with differing time constraints for study.   This is reflected in a secondary (Modern Foreign Languages) student's contribution in the 'General Chat':

> *I've noticed that people tend to log in at particular times. I'm usually a night person, and there are several 'people' I 'meet' regularly. 1 logged in this morning, and I didn't recognise a single name.*

The 'permanent' nature of student contributions, on means that the variety of purposes which this mode of support fulfils is transparent. Contributions also provide an insight into the way different aspects of the course interrelate; for this reason, FirstClass™ is described here in more detail.

Over a two-month period, the monitoring of contributions made by PGCE students within the English subject conference alone showed more than a hundred students logging in regularly and 39 active contributors. One advantage of asynchronous communication is that students can plan and edit a contribution to an on-line conference without the pressure that the immediacy of live discussion can entail: clearly helpful for less confident students. Discussion included references to 140 individual texts or authors, ranging from Spencer's sixteenth-century poem 7he *Faerie Queene* to contemporary media texts and teenage 'point horror'. Monitoring also revealed exchange of information about events nationally from Edinburgh and Dublin, to Armagh in Northern Ireland and West Stow in Sussex. Students were-e shown to be engaged in a wide range of activities including queries about course materials, arrangements for the exchange of correspondence between pupils in Cumbria and Essex, debates on issues such as gender in the teaching of reading, as well as discussion of

individual pupils' problems, such as spelling. Patterns of use illustrate the way in which the personal and public, the intellectual and affective, the trivial and humorous, as well as the highly serious, interweave in a form of support that is accessible twenty-four hours a day.

   This variety of purpose is illustrated by evaluations made by a group of students electronically during the course of subject conferencing:

I use FirstClass^{TM} because it's something related to the course which I can accomplish in 3 to 20 minutes (not normally a useful size block of study time).

Course content related.

I have drawn some relief from finding that others are in the same boat with regard to overload.

Study support

I have traded ideas for teaching which has been stimulating of further ideas for me.

School experience related

I like private chat for meeting peers: sometimes it is hard to have a strong sense of achievement, or humour.

Personal relationships

I find direct contact with people (like the course team) is very helpful (they have been very supportive).

Personal and course related

I am just beginning to talk about exchanging lesson plans and materials with a couple of MFL students.

School experience related

...and it does give one the feeling of belonging to a community: providing support, chat and a feeling that one is not alone.

Personal relationships

Such evaluations illustrate the interplay between private and professional, course-related and personal, affective and cognitive engagement with the whole person, the learner. This theme is reflected in a conference contribution which simultaneously links the student's engagement with her subject study (English poetry conference), relationships with fellow students, her role as a single parent, and the setting (11 p.m. at home across the hall from her sleeping 5-year-old daughter):

I think nearly all we regular users are mothers, using this in lieu of meeting flesh and blood people. I attach Flour Adcock-though I don't think this poem would work in school:

FOR A FIVE-YEAR-OLD

A snail is climbing up the window-sill
Into your room, after a night of rain.
You call me in to see, and I explain
That it would be unkind to leave it there:

It might crawl to the floor, we must take care
That no one squashes it. You understand,
And carry it outside, with careful hand,
To eat a daffodil.
I see, then, that a kind of faith prevails:

Your gentleness is moulded still by words
From me, who have trapped mice and shot wild birds,
From me, who drowned your kittens, who betrayed
Your closest relatives, and who purveyed
The harshest kind of truth to many another
But that is how things are: I am your mother,
And we are kind to snails.

Fleur Adcock (1994)

   The OU PGCE illustrates one framework of support for professional development in a distance context. We have emphasised the range of learning opportunities the programme seeks to provide, which operate both across and throughout the course in an unfolding, interrelated way. FirstClass^{TM} has been used to illustrate the constant dialogue that student support can and must engender between course 'theory' and 'practical' school experience, the public and the personal, between learners, and between teachers and learners and their collective knowledge and experience. Key areas for the development of the PGCE programme clearly lie in the refining and constant evaluation of each and every aspect of student support within the programme. By turning now to an in-service teacher education programme in Eastern Europe for our second case study and its framework for teacher support, we emphasise the centrality *of* continuing professional development in our view of teacher education. In contrast to the OU PGCE, those involved in this programme have access neither to advanced technology nor to sophisticated mechanisms for course production and publication.

In-service teacher education at a distance: An Eastern European experience

The Albanian context

Recent changes in teacher education in the UK throw into sharp relief the educational context in Albania, Eastern Europe, the focus of the second case study of this chapter. There, teacher training is not routine and no national assessment policy exists. There too, however, broad debates about teacher education are taking place against the background of fundamental political and social change. After years of enforced economic, political and cultural isolation, such change has propelled Albania into contact with the rest of Europe and the international community, yet it remains Europe's poorest country. The grave economic situation faced by Albania not only impedes desperately-needed teacher education programmes but educational reform in general. Indeed, priorities are difficult to establish when the needs are so varied and pressing. In 1994, for example, reports showed that 60 per cent of basic and secondary school classrooms needed repair or complete replacement, having seriously deteriorated during the interregnum which followed the demise of the communist system. There is a

severe shortage of basic textbooks and paper. There is no educational technology. Vital infrastructures such as roads and telecommunications remain fragile and unreliable.

In a country where almost one in three of the population is of school age, recent declines in school enrolment testify to a potentially serious breakdown in the education system. This situation is most acute in remote areas. Multiple factors contribute to enrolment decline nationally: one issue is that of reneging popular commitment to education which has traditionally been associated with a controlling and punitive regime. In the north and east of Albania the Ministry of Education faces difficulty in recruiting teachers; 64 per cent of the population live in rural and mountainous districts and the quality of education provided is often poorer in these areas. Only 19 per cent of teachers in rural areas, for example, have a high school qualification at senior primary level (10-14 years); the figure nationally is 30.6 per cent. Poor public Transport makes aggregating students or moving teachers among schools on a daily basis difficult. This is another factor which is crippling small village schools' ability to provide quality instruction (World Bank, 1994).

Prior to 1991, educational policy was prescribed by a national education plan co-ordinated with the national economic plan; its administration was highly centralised. So too was the curriculum, with its 'red threads' of political doctrine particularly evident in philosophy, civics, history and geography. Albania's political and geographical isolation meant that educationalists have been unable to keep abreast of modern developments in curriculum and pedagogy. Teacher educators thus face a long-term need to create curricular frameworks that reflect current subject knowledge and the best pedagogical practice within the Albanian context.

All aspects of education, including the curriculum, are under review: a major priority for the Ministry of Education is teacher education and retraining. Discussion, however, about how such professional development might best be achieved is painful and parallels the UK debate. Although an ambitious national policy has been formulated, with the country's Pedagogical Institute responsible overall for the development of this aspect of educational policy, there are certain key decisions to be made against the urgently felt need in some quarters to shift the focus of debate towards schools, and towards the development of new knowledge in the context of classroom practice. How, for example, will intending teachers gain experience of - new ideas and real classrooms? What strategies are best used for in-service education? Should there be demonstration schools where innovative ideas can be piloted before introducing them 'system-wide'?; if so, how can good practice spread beyond such schools, and what incentive is there for teachers to seek out and use better practice? Where does the cascade model of in-service education fit in as it is currently delivered? What of the 'formators' who have responsibility for such programmes, many of whom are associated with outdated approaches and thinking? A World Bank strategy report on educational development in Albania summarises the 'retraining challenge' facing the country thus:

> *cascade training can behave like gossip, the message becoming increasingly distorted as it travels from person to person. More fundamentally, unless training combines new knowledge with its guided and corrected application (for example in simulated classroom), it will change teachers'verbal repertoire but not their practice. 7hus the retraining challenge will be to design curricula that help trainees transfer what they know into what they do, and to design school or district-level mechanisms that reinforce the new learning.* (World Bank, 1994, p. 64)

This dialogic relationship between theory and practice, as we have already seen, remains the challenge for teacher education and development world-wide.

Kualida Education Development Project

Kualida Education Development Project is a pilot project for the in-service training of elementary teachers (Grades 5-8) in three districts of Albania. The impetus for the development of this three-month programme arose from the urgent need for teacher retraining in Albania, as previously described. The specific courses which are being piloted arose out of a feasibility study into the potential for using open learning in the Albanian context. The study was commissioned by the Albanian Education Development Project as part of the Ministry of Education's development strategy. Although there is no experience of open and distance lean-ting in Albania, the study found a wide interest in such a methodology amongst members of the universities and pedagogic institutes, teachers themselves and members of the teaching unions (Moon and Leach,1995).

The course is designed for 815 teachers of English, history, geography and French: subjects that members of the pedagogic institute and teachers had identified as most in need of in-service programmes. The course materials include four study texts: *Aspect Te Mesimdhenies Gjuhe Frenge/Angleze/ Histori/Gjeografi* (Aspects of Teaching in French/English/History/Geography) (Musai, 1995). There is one text for each subject area, and each is designed round a common framework. There is a two-part introduction: 'Why change?' and 'Distance education as a methodology'. The first main section focuses on Metodolgji (methodologies) which are new to Albanian teachers generally, such as strategies for teaching and learning (e.g. problem solving, brainstorming, role play), the use of questioning, and pupil assessment. The second section, *Veprimtari* (activities), provides teachers with exemplar material to be adapted to their own teaching contexts. Each study text is bound in a plastic folder containing A4 notebook and pen to be used by the teachers for written assignments; the texts' layout graphics, print and binding are far superior in quality to those of the subject-focused text that teachers have routinely been issued with. Three 45-minute television programmes to complement these study texts have been filmed in Albanian classrooms, illustrating the new teaching approaches and accompanied by interviews with teachers and pupils about this classroom innovation. The programmes have been aired on national Albanian television at peak viewing times (Fridays at 5.15 p.m.) and also on satellite television, in order to generate wide public discussion about educational change. They include video sequences that have been recorded for replay in the newly-equipped study centres in each of the three pilot regions.

The materials are innovative in two respects in the Albanian context. The first is that they have been written by academics drawn from the pedagogic institutes in collaboration with practising teachers in each of the four subject areas. Hitherto, teachers were used to an imposed curriculum. These writing teams were trained in open learning approaches and wrote to a very tight three-month deadline, which reflected the urgency of the task. The second respect is the way in which methodology and practice are interlinked in the programme. Teachers are invited to try out new approaches to teaching and learning in their own classrooms and then to evaluate these in discussion with colleagues and pupils themselves.

Teacher support

Not only is open learning a completely new concept in Albania, the whole constructivist agenda on which the course rests is unfamiliar to most teachers. It has not been customary for Albanian teachers to make choices about teaching and learning strategies, even less common to involve pupils in activities that demand active approaches in the classroom. The

Kualida writing team was well aware that the teaching methodologies being introduced would present a challenge to many teachers. Indeed they acknowledge this directly in the introduction to the course materials:

> *I dashior mesues ... Dear teacher*
>
> *Recent years have seen many changes. We have both a need and a desire to change things in our profession. But it has been hard to re . respond to the many questions such as What is change? Why change? How do we change? ... Our society is changing in many different directions. There are new requirements ahead of us. We cannot meet these demands with old concepts and practices.* (Musai, 1995; Translation from the Albanian by Zana Lita, Kualida project officer)

For all these reasons the provision of teacher support for Kualida was carefully considered by the project team. This was seen as crucial to the success of the pilot programme. Any chosen infrastructure of support for teachers involved in the project needed to be consonant with the existing culture, providing stability at a time of change and a secure framework for reflection and evaluation. The project team judiciously decided to work within the existing regional networks of formators. There were some obvious drawbacks to this plan: we have already mentioned, for example, that some formators are identified with the controversial cascade model of training.

Teachers involved in the pilot project are therefore assigned to a subject-specific formator in groups of twenty-five. Three tutors are provided-at the beginning, in the middle and towards the end of the programme-led by the formator, who is also responsible for assessing the teachers' written notebooks according to agreed criteria. As with the PGCE programme, links are made in tutorials between school Activities and the course materials, and teachers are given the opportunity to analyse new practice outside the pressures of the school context. Early monitoring shows that attendance at the tutorials has been high and most formators have taken their new role seriously.

All formators in the pilot regions have been given extensive face-to-face training: in open learning methodology, in the course materials and in 'tutorial' provision. This training has taken place centrally in Tirana, followed by regional briefings in the three pilot districts: Elbasan, Skodra, to the north, and Girokastra in the south of the country, encompassing both rural and town communities. Some members of the writing team are also formators, therefore regional teams are able to benefit from their detailed knowledge of the course materials. Formators have also been provided with clear written guidance, including notes on their role and how tutorials can be planned and run. Members of the programme team visit a proportion of tutorials to evaluate and review the programme. The combination of country-wide training, written guidance and tutorial monitoring forms an important component of quality assurance within the Kualida project.

As noted earlier, a course that interlinks methodology directly with classroom activities is innovative in Albania. School-based support was clearly vital within the Kualida programme, but what form should it take at this pilot stage? No formal mentoring system currently exists in Albanian schools and although expertise in classroom methods is being developed, support operates on an informal basis. It was decided to combine this informal approach with the work of formators. The programme therefore explicitly urges teachers to invite formators to visit their classrooms to discuss the school-based work, whilst also encouraging them to build on traditional practice by meeting with colleagues from neighbouring schools and visiting each other's classrooms.

As with the PGCE School Experience Guide, the Activities in the Kualida course materials provide a common frame of reference both for teachers working together and for visiting

formators. Traditionally, formators have attended schools without warning, but the programme emphasises that visits to discuss course activities are by invitation of the teacher concerned and in a context of professionals working together. It is hoped that this new approach will inform and modify relationships between formators and teachers in positive ways; it remains to be seen how those involved adapt to change. Inevitably some teachers and formators are resistant to the new ideas and methodologies, but early indications show a groundswell of interest in and commitment to the programme, both from the grassroots and amongst formators themselves. Vigorous debate about the new approaches to teaching and learning is taking place in the pilot districts. This debate has been fuelled by the screening of the Kualida television programmes on the mainstream television network, as well as by a national television programme focusing on distance learning and innovation in teacher education. The establishment of new study centres in each of the regions creates a further context in which teachers can work together.

The creation of new knowledge 'in practice' is nowhere more acutely realised than in the Kualida project, where the transformation of both pedagogical understanding and teachers' classroom activities are profoundly open-ended processes. Most of the Albanian teachers in this programme are, for the first time in their professional fives, being encouraged to actively engage with new approaches to teaching and learning. How such approaches, in individual schools and classrooms, will develop in the longer term is as yet unclear. But for those that engage in this unfolding dialogue stretched across 'everyday activities'-including tutorials, watching and discussing project television programmes at home, school-based meetings and classroom teaching-new learning in practice is inevitable. Engeström has suggested that when people learn to do things that they have not done before:

> *zones of proximal development are collective, rather than individual, phenomena ... 'the new' is a collective invention in the face of felt dilemmas and contradictions that impede ongoing activity and impel movement and change.* (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993, p. 13)

This is an appropriate metaphor for the potentially radical change we have described.

Student support: Some conclusions

Student support would seem to be a process through which understanding is both created and transformed, rather than a 'provision' to be 'managed'.

Within teacher development it is an essential and integral part of the overall learning process and the quality of its constituent elements are key. Essentially a social practice, it occurs at the intersection of-.

- **setting** (be it home, school, classroom or study centre)

- **relationships** between learner(s) and teacher(s)

- the **activities** taking place

- the **knowledge and experience** brought to bear by participants (we can include as 'participants' the invisible authors of course materials, school experience guides or video tapes)

- **context**.

In conclusion, six key issues for professional development arise from this study. Although the context is teacher education, the issues raised are common to other vocational and professional areas.

1 Support should provide model learning environments: Teaching and learning should fully mirror that which is expected of the best practice in students' own school/teaching contexts, be it in face-to-face provision, written communication on course assignments, one-to-one support or electronic conferencing. This has critical implications for the provision and development of tutor and mentor training.

2 Support should build on existing frameworks as far as possible and be consonant with the culture in which it is developed: We have shown the way, for example, in which the role of formator has been used and developed in new programmes in Albania.

3 Support should be developmental and exploratory, providing experience of a wide variety of teaching and learning opportunities: It should seek to challenge over time traditional dichotomies such as the distinction between the transmission of knowledge and learner-centred approaches, theory and practice, teacher and learner. We have noted, for example, the need for more research into how mentors can successfully make pedagogic strategies and their practice in action explicit to novice teachers.

4 Support should recognise and build on the variety of professional experiences of its participants: Distance learning courses traditionally attract adults from a wide variety of life experiences and with a range of expertise. Such experiences powerfully affect frames of reference, some of which will conflict with new knowledge and experience, as we have seen in the implementation of the Kualida programme.

5 Support should acknowledge both the private and professional aspects of learners' experiences and their interconnectedness in the development of learning: The Open University students' use of the FirstClass^{TM} system illustrates the ongoing, unfolding nature of learning and the importance of the interrelatedness of the personal and professional in the development process.

6 Support should have a firm base in schools and classrooms: It should be seen as an ongoing process across initial, induction and ongoing phases of teacher development.

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