

3 Preparing for teaching practice

Contents

- Your practice expectations
- The practical issues
- Finding out about the school
- Contacting the school
- Getting to the school
- The first day – making the right impressions
- Summary

Learning objectives

In this chapter I will be looking at preparing yourself for your teaching practice. This will include:

- Finding out about your placement school
- Contacting the school
- Getting to school
- The first day at school.

QTS Standards

This chapter is particularly relevant to Q Standards 3a and 7b.

Frameworks

Q3 (a) Be aware of the professional duties of teachers and the statutory framework within which they work.

Personal and professional development

Q7 (b) Identify priorities for their early professional development in the context of induction.
Task 3.1

What do you expect from your first teaching practice?
How do you think you will be perceived by the staff and the students?
How much of what is perceived is in your control and how much is beyond it?

Your practice expectations

As with every teacher training course, there are times when you will be at university and there will be times when you are on placement. Your expectations of what to do in these environments will of course vary considerably. While at university, you are the student, attending your sessions and expecting someone else to deliver to you. Apart from hitting your targets in terms of assignment deadlines and other course tasks, you tend not to have many responsibilities as such. You will tend to be more relaxed, you may see it as a chance to socialize to some degree, you will work, but without others having expectations of you. You may even grumble about getting to your lectures on time or if a tutor questions you about missing a session. University is where you will get your theoretical knowledge; school is where you have to put the theory into practice.

Your experience at school will be totally different than at university. The university is interested in assessing your theoretical understanding. Your tutors will not be overly concerned at how you dress, for example, it’s not important to them. At school, it’s very different. You will be expected to behave in a professional manner, to dress and speak accordingly, be punctual, be a role model to your charges. At school, you are being assessed all the time – by your mentors, your work colleagues, parents, pupils, in fact, all the members of the school community. Some trainees find this difficult at first. This is particularly true for the young trainee who was in school until a relatively short time ago, as well as for the more mature student who has not had to deal with young students, their needs and behaviour and whose expectations may be based on their own education experiences 20 years before. Everyone is apprehensive and nervous when they go to a new school, an experienced teacher can be equally nervous when meeting a new class for the first time. We will deal with the issue of meeting your class for the first time later; however, it is important to think about the experience of preparing for your placement early on.

Your teaching placements will put you in front of a highly critical and at times unforgiving audience. You may well find out a great deal about yourself which you did not know before the placement started. New strengths may develop, old uncertainties reappear and how you deal with these issues is a personal journey for all. However, I guarantee that you will be a different person at the end of your first placement from the one who started it. Many of your
Preparing for teaching practice

initial expectations and concerns will have been addressed. You will be aware of what you may need to work on in your second placement; you will be able to see your gaps. The end of your first placement is a very good time to reflect if teaching is for you. For most people the answer will be ‘yes’, and they will embrace their next placement with enthusiasm. Whatever stage you are at, though, it is worth taking some time out to think about several key things such as:

- What is your comfort zone?
- What takes you out of your comfort zone?
- How self-aware are you?
- What are your main concerns about your placement?
- What do you consider your strengths and areas for development are?
- What do you think the school's expectations of you are?
- What do you think that the school will be expecting you to do?

The practical issues

As well as the personal and emotional issues which you need to consider, there are also the more mundane, practical issues. In most cases, the university will allocate a school to you which may be based upon a number of things such as your previous experience, a knowledge of the person you are and the type of schools who have offered placements, the depth of support you may need or the strength and experience of the mentor. This whole experience is a partnership between you, the school and the university. It is in no one's interest to turn out weak teachers and so we must all work together to get the best that we can. In some instances, your mentor may be new and may be being mentored themselves, but more likely, the mentor will have had a number of trainees over the years and will bring lots of experience to the learning process.

One point which I would like to stress concerning the placement is that you should avoid a placement close to where you live and your house should definitely not be within the catchment area. The advantages of convenience will be outweighed considerably by the disadvantages of the students knowing where you live and where you socialize. It's one thing occasionally bumping into a student in a shopping centre but quite another to have them living on the same street. It is also a good idea to avoid a placement in a school which has a relative in it. You need to stand on your own two feet as an individual and relatives can make this difficult at times.

Finding out about the school

When you have been given details of your placement school, you will be keen to find out more about it. There are many ways to find out more information.
The first and most obvious point of call would be via OfSTED where you could look at the site and download the latest report. While this may be informative in many ways in terms of grading a school on its performance, it may not give a full picture of the school. Most schools now have a website which will give you a considerable amount of information about life in the school, its staff, its extracurricular activities and so forth which is obviously a good way to get a feel for the school itself. The local press is also a good way to gain information as the schools often tend to use the press to publicize their successes wherever possible.

I am a great advocate of visiting the area surrounding the school to get a feel for the local environment. This may be as simple as driving round the area or walking around it. Either way, it is a good way to get a ‘feel’ for the area and some of the issues which may face the school.

The worst thing to do is to simply turn up to your placement with no idea of the school and its catchment area. It displays a lack of interest and possibly a lack of commitment on your behalf.

Contacting the school

When you get the details of your school, write to your mentor immediately. It creates a great impression if they receive a covering letter and an up-to-date CV. It also helps the mentor in shaping your timetable as they can match your skills to the groups which you are likely to teach. If you get the opportunity, you may also contact the school to ask if you can come to have a look around the school before you start. This will not only be informative for you but also show your mentor that you are committed and keen. In terms of what not to do, do not turn up unannounced and also make sure that you do not make any contact with students at the school via internet gaming sites, for example.

Getting to the school

You will also need to find out how to get to the school in a more practical way. Obviously, if you have a car, find the best route to the school and do a trial run. See how long it takes in terms of time and distance and make sure that you add some time on to take traffic into account. Do not think that the time for the first run will be the time that it takes you to get there on a school day. Driving on a Saturday afternoon is going to be different from 7:30 on a Monday morning. I have seen many students try this and miss briefing on their first day as a result. Always build some time in – it is much better to arrive early than late.

If you have to take public transport to get to the school, again, make sure that you do a trial run to make sure you understand the time that it will take to get to and from school. Find out the time of the bus that will get you to
school on time without sharing it with the pupils if at all possible. It is much better and more comfortable for you to arrive before them than with them.

There may be some who choose to cycle to work. While I applaud your commitment to both your personal well-being and that of our planet, try to ensure that you have access to some appropriate working clothes when you get there and, if at all possible, make sure you get a shower. No one likes a smelly teacher!

The first day – making the right impressions

Well, you have contacted your mentor with your details, you have done your dummy run to find out how to get to your school and you have found out all the information on the school that you can. Now it’s time to go to school! First, refer back to Chapter 2 on professionalism and think about how you look. That is the first thing that the staff will notice and comment upon, so make sure that you are well presented and well groomed. Make sure that you arrive in plenty of time and that you report to reception accordingly.

There is a good chance that you will be one of a number of trainees who have arrived at the school, and you will all be feeling nervous, wondering what is expected of you, what your mentor is like, and probably most importantly, what the class will be like. If this is your first placement, you are likely to feel considerably more nervous than your second or even third one. Trust me, it will be fine.

In most cases, the first week in the school will be an induction where you can be expected to be bombarded with facts, figures and policies from a range of people from around the school including the head teacher, SENCO, the senior liaison tutor who has direct links with the university, and so on. It is not unknown for some trainees not to see their mentor or department other than in passing when taken around the school by staff or students. Although this can be tiring, please make sure that you look interested at all times and that you ask questions as you go. Yawning and slumping down on a chair do not create a good impression to someone who is taking the time to show you around their school. What I can guarantee is that you will be the talk of the staffroom at the end of the day and it’s up to you what they say!
Summary

After reading this chapter, I now hope that you have a better understanding of how to prepare for your teaching practice. It is hugely important not only to consider the practical issues of how to get there and when to get there, but also to consider the importance of the impression you give when you arrive at your school. Remember the relationships you form with the staff on this first day will set the tone for the practice, and setting a bad impression is not an option for you.