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Beginning teachers' perceptions of their first year's teaching experience

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims

This study focuses on beginning teachers of English in Omani schools, exploring their perceptions of their first year's experiences. Using a socio-cultural framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I aim to learn how these teachers move from the periphery to become full participants in their communities of practice, with the help of others, such as Headteachers and Senior Teachers.

1.2 Background

Due to Omanization, increasing numbers of Omani beginning teachers (BTs) of English are recruited every year. These join the profession from various sources, including the prestigious Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Entry to SQU is highly competitive, requiring very high marks in school-leaving exams (currently over 90%). The university course has a good reputation, and SQU graduates are generally regarded highly in the school community in Oman for their commitment, teaching quality and language competency. SQU BTs are normally assigned to teach higher grades in secondary schools.

The other main source of Omani English language teachers is Ajman University (AU), run by the private sector in a neighbouring country and staffed by foreign non-native academics. Anecdotal reports suggest that AU accepts entrants who, without having distinguished themselves at school, have passed the school-leaving exam (thus getting a minimum of 60%) and have private means. BTs from this university are often prejudicially less highly regarded in the school community in Oman. At AU, teaching practice is held in the neighbouring country's schools, which means that BTs graduating from this university may possess limited knowledge of the Omani curriculum they will be teaching.

1.3 Rationale

BTs, as entrants to the school community, face problems in understanding the 'community of practice' which they have joined (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To become confident in their work, they need to head centripetally from the periphery, gaining access to key people and forming relationships as they do so, before becoming full participants. I wish to explore BTs' perceptions of the challenges they face in making this journey, with a view to suggesting ways of helping them.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 BTs & communities of practice

BTs bring various useful experiences to their work in schools, e.g.; theoretical studies, teaching practice sessions and most importantly their 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975). Nevertheless, as is demonstrated by Veenman (1984), who reviewed studies of BTs in different countries, they perceive a variety of problems in their first year. These can be classified as relating to 'in' and 'outside the class', as BTs struggle to build relationships with different members of the school community; students, colleagues and administration personnel (Bullough, 1989).

Workplace conditions have been examined for their supportiveness; in promoting BTs' collegial interaction and professional development (Weiss, 1999), in providing opportunities for them to learn indirectly through staffroom conversations (McNally et al., 1997). Workplace conditions can be 'empowering' or 'disempowering' for newcomers (Fuller et al., 2005), 'conducive or obstructive' for professional learning (Smylie, 1994), and can shape BTs' attitudes towards teaching (Flores, 2001).

As Street (2004, p. 8) argues: "human learning and development are intrinsically social and interactive". Socio-cultural theories suggest the greater the participation, the greater the learning and development, and, in turn, the greater the influence on the learning of others. In a teaching context, as BTs increasingly interact more, they get more involved in the different activities of the community, becoming fuller members, continually learning and contributing (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Other important concepts related to socio-cultural learning are skills learning through "cyclical processes of supported trial and error" (Malderez & Wedell, 2007, p. 14) and social constructivist help, centred on encouraging reflection and providing contextually-sensitive interactive support (ibid). For the purposes of this article, I prefer to draw on these concepts in relation to Lave & Wenger's (1991) socio-cultural theory, though I recognise that they also have separate characteristics.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is the abstract concept Lave & Wenger (1991) use to describe the social process whereby learners (i.e., BTs) participate 'inevitably' as 'newcomers' in any community of practitioners. The movement towards full participation, i.e. to the centripetal, as they reject the existence of a core (Smith, 2003), may be marked by isolation, conflicts, rejection, and/or increase in complexity of participation through easy access. The movement towards 'full participation', in the view of Lave & Wenger (1991), depends on the diverse

relations of members of the community, so that a newcomer can be a 'partial participant'. Factors that lead to 'full participation' include the degree of access allowed.

Through engaging in the community of practice and 'negotiating meaning' with its members, BTs have the opportunity to learn context-specific knowledge and skills. When BTs or 'newcomers' join in they help reproduce the practice of the community or more optimistically 'transform it' for the better. They join the people already there and form a new 'societal activity' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They affect others and are affected by them, but also, as Wenger (1998) argues, need to 'catch up' with the practice already in place in the school. They learn the local discourse and also observe, notice and build beliefs and attitudes. These might determine both their peripherality and their 'trajectory' in moving inbound, i.e. assessing how far they are from being full participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

"In order to be on an inbound trajectory, newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members" (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). It is important, then, that the communities they work in, such as those described by Lave & Wenger (1991), are cohesive and welcoming. However, as Fuller et al. (2005) point out, in reality, the contrary can be the case. On the whole, BTs in Oman, despite some prejudice against AU graduates (2, above), are already legitimate agents because they meet the requirements of the community of practice (i.e. they are graduate of an educational system in a country governed by rules that allows them to be teachers in schools). As a consequence, they can act legitimately on the edge, participating in the varied activities of the community of practice peripherally, generally asked, as newcomers, to perform less risky tasks (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As BTs become less peripheral, so they become more familiar with the cohesive dimensions shaping their particular community of practice. These relate to mutual engagement (through discussing ideas), joint enterprise (sharing group goals) and a shared repertoire (an accepted way of going about things) (Wenger, 1998).

2.2 Communities of practice in Oman

The communities of practice that BTs in Oman join are organized in the following way: The school's administration consists of the Headmaster/mistress (HM), deputy headmaster/mistress, social worker, senior teachers (STs) who head subject sections, including the Senior English Teacher (SET). Then, there are subject teachers, including the experienced and beginners. Supervisors for different subjects are responsible for a number of schools they visit in an advisory capacity.

BTs of English thus report to a SET, who is directly responsible for teachers' work and their professional development. The duties of SETs include providing guidance on issues of teaching and learning, observing classes, organizing workshops and writing end-of-year appraisals on teachers in conjunction with the HM and supervisor (ELCD, 1998).

HMs delegate much of their work through STs, but also hold general meetings with all school staff, occasionally observe teachers and oversee BTs' work in conjunction with the SET. Besides this, they involve BTs in the school's cross-curricular activities.

Supervisors bring another dimension to the support provided BTs. Through their sporadic visits, they mainly supervise, by skilfully listening to and scaffolding the reflections of SETs and other teachers, particularly BTs, who are often given extra attention in their first year. Supervisors have more authority than SETs, especially regarding teachers' evaluation and promotion.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions

Having considered the literature of socio-cultural theories and the research context, I now turn to my research questions. These were as follows:

1. What kinds of experiences do Omani BTs report with regard to their relationships with and access to HMs, SETs, English language teachers (ELTs) and non-English language teachers (NELTs)?
2. How can these perceptions be explained from the perspective of LPP?
3. What can be done to address the negative/less supportive aspects of their experiences?

I decided to collect both quantitative and qualitative data through the use of questionnaires and interviews.

3.2 Participants

The sample population of the study included all those BTs who were appointed at the beginning of the academic year 2006/07 to lower secondary Basic Education schools in the Batinah North region. 65 questionnaires were distributed and 32 were returned, making a response rate of 49%.

Of these 32, 23 were graduates of AU, 6 were from SQU, and 1 was from a private college in Oman, while the other 2 were from different universities. Most responses were from female teachers (87.5%) and AU dominated amongst these. In total, 69% of respondents were female AU BTs. The one teacher I interviewed for the study was from amongst this majority group. (I also interviewed her SET and HM, and conducted two other interviews I did not use.) Anonymity was ensured.

3.3 Methods

Questionnaires are useful for gathering a lot of information in a short time from a large number of people (Oppenheim, 1992), but can tend to put ideas in the head of respondents and may result in superficial answers the respondent does not need to explain (Drever, 2003). They can also be time-consuming to produce. My reading of Lave & Wenger (1991) and their concepts of relationship and access, amongst other intertwined variables, encouraged me to use questionnaires extensively as a data collection method, though I later regretted this (6, below).

I also used interviews, which have certain advantages. Open-ended questions can give interviewees the opportunity to say what "they think and to do so with greater richness and spontaneity", as Oppenheim (1992, p. 81) argues. They also allow requests for clarification on both sides, which can shape the discourse.

Leading questions must be avoided. Fixing a time convenient for both researcher and interviewee can be difficult, as I found.

After designing the questionnaire in English, I piloted it with an English language supervisor and then translated it into Arabic, checking my translation with an Arabic language teacher, though not piloting it again afterwards due to lack of time. I translated to reduce the chance of misinterpretation, as BTs have varying English language competence. The questionnaires were sent to schools and returned by internal Ministry post.

Like the questionnaires, the interviews were also conducted in Arabic. Again, this was my choice, as I felt it might help respondents express their feelings and attitudes, discuss concepts and give examples. The interviews lasted about 45 minutes each. I conducted them after analysing the questionnaires to seek clarifications and insights into the relationships between members of the school community and the BT. All interviews were audio-recorded and parts were transcribed in Arabic. I then translated extracts into English. Findings follow:

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Questionnaire Data

With regard to my first research question, I first consider BTs' relationships with others in the school, starting with the HM (Table 1, below).

Table 1: Relationships with the HM

		1	2	3	4	5
21	The Headmaster/mistress talks to me every now and then about my concerns about work.	3%	34%	31%	22%	9%
22	The Headmaster/mistress only talks to me whenever I ask to talk to her/him	19%	44%	22%	13%	3%

Clearly, from BTs' perceptions, communication with HMs is limited. Fewer than a third indicate HMs initiated conversations regarding work concerns (21). Conversations did take place (22), but perhaps in impersonal settings, such as staff meetings. This suggests a power relationship on the side of the HM.

HMs might attend to the school's needs in general, without being too concerned with individual teachers - in this case, BTs' concerns. Also, BTs may lack the means to extend talk so as to gain attention and support they need.

Responses to the next statements (Table 2, below) relate to BTs' relationships with their SETs.

Table 2: Relationship with SETs

	1	2	3	4	5
1 I normally engage in a friendly non-threatening discussion about my work responsibilities/ concerns with my Senior Teacher	0%	3%	3%	59%	34%
4 I normally have an honest conversation with my Senior Teacher whenever we discuss issues related to my work	0%	0%	3%	75%	22%

Clearly, the majority of BTs agreed they have a positive working relationship with their SET, one characterized by friendly discussions and transparency. This may help BTs feel relaxed and willing to seek advice and support. From Table 3, below, it appears that BTs also enjoy good relationships with their English teaching colleagues in the school (ELTs).

Table 3: Relationship with the ELTs

	1	2	3	4	5
24 Generally speaking, I have a good rapport with my English language colleagues.	0%	0%	3%	25%	72%
27 I normally talk with my English language colleagues about different life issues in addition to classroom teaching issues	0%	0%	0%	59%	41%

Relationships between BTs and other subject teachers (NELTs) also seem fairly positive, as Table 4, below, reveals.

Table 4: Relationship with the NELTs

	1	2	3	4	5
31 I can express my views quite freely regarding my concerns/difficulties in the classroom with other non-English teachers	0%	6%	31%	53%	9%

Perhaps BTs talk more to ELTs than NELTs, though, as BTs' concerns as English teachers may be irrelevant to other subject teachers. Also, BTs may not want to reveal they have problems or concerns which may be looked down upon by teachers they know less well. Nevertheless, a majority reported good relationships.

Having considered BTs' relationships, I now focus on their access to the same groups: HMs, SETs, ELTs and NELTs. As suggested by Table 1, above, access to HMs might be limited. If a BT rarely talks to the HM on professional issues of personal concern, this might indicate distance between them. BTs may think that HMs are busy or wait for them to initiate conversations, as HMs are in a more powerful position. Clearly, HMs need to initiate dialogues to give BTs access.

Regarding access to SETs, which Table 2 (above) suggests might be better, as the relationships seem closer than those with HMs, I turn, for additional information, to data presented in Table 5 (below).

Table 5: Access provided by SETs

		1	2	3	4	5
2	I find it easy to do what I plan to do (e.g. using a new technique not mentioned in the course book or adapting a task) without intervention from the Senior teacher	0%	9%	13%	53%	25%
3	The Senior Teacher normally has a transparent discussion with me about my work (i.e. s/he tells me how to develop myself)	0%	0%	6%	59%	34%
13	I found it easy to share my concerns with the Senior Teacher at the beginning of this year	0%	6%	3%	66%	25%
14	I find it now (at the end of the year) much easier to share my ideas with the Senior Teacher.	0%	6%	3%	44%	47%

These four items could be said to relate to the access SETs provide BTs. Through giving BTs freedom to try things out, talking transparently to make learning clearer, sharing concerns from the beginning of the year till the end, it seems many SETs provide BTs with the access required. SETs may be playing a pivotal role in providing BTs access to the school's community of practice.

I now consider the access provided by ELTs in Table 6 (below), which might be supportive, considering the positive relationships earlier reported (Table 3, above).

Table 6: Access provided by ELTs

		1	2	3	4	5
9	I find it easy to participate in the different activities held by the English language department in the school (e.g. taking part in the workshops)	0%	3%	22%	53%	22%
25	Teachers of English talk amongst themselves about their classroom concerns / interests in the staffroom (e.g. I hear different stories about some teaching events / incidents)	0%	0%	0%	47%	53%
32	I am able to express my views freely, contributing to the process of decision-making in the English language section.	0%	6%	16%	69%	9%
5	I found it easy to integrate with my English teaching colleagues at the beginning of the year.	0%	6%	13%	31%	50%
6	Now (towards the end of the year) I find it easier to integrate with my English teaching colleagues.	10%	10%	3%	23%	55%

As can be seen, most BTs agree ELTs help them. They gain access through hearing stories, expressing their views freely with others and integrating more as the year progresses. They get to know others better, both personally and professionally.

Besides ELTs, NELTs were also helpful in providing access, as Table 4 (above) suggests, though this may have been to a lesser extent. This is understandable, as in some schools, English teachers have specially designated staffrooms and contacts between BTs and NELTs may be limited.

4.2 Interview Data: Zahra's case

For more in-depth analysis, I now focus on a case study, that of Zahra (pseudonym used), a female BT. Before turning to interview data relating to her case, I first review her responses to the questionnaire.

4.2.1 Zahra's perceptions

In general, Zahra's questionnaire responses seem to be quite typical, except with regard to three items where they represent a minority view. Firstly, in item 22 she reported that her HM only talked to her when she (Zahra) requested it. Secondly, in item 23, she said she was not sure whom to contact in the school in case she had

a specific problem. Thirdly, in item 31, Zahra indicated she was unable to express her views freely with NELTs regarding teaching difficulties. Her responses to these three items might suggest she found it difficult to form relationships and gain access in the community of practice, keeping her on the periphery. Interview data might shed light on her perceptions.

Discussing her relationship with the school's HM, Zahra seemed intimidated. There was a bad experience in relation to a day's absence without prior notification, and classroom visits by the HM were to some extent frightening. The pupils did not participate, which the HM criticized her for, putting Zahra's teaching under investigation. This led to tension, and Zahra became afraid. After concluding: "talk causes harm", Zahra tried to protect herself by not talking with other people in the school. She was conscious that the HM listened to what other people said about her, but was not interested in her side of the story. As a result, Zahra wanted to transfer to another school.

Notwithstanding this poor relationship, Zahra did gain access to the HM's ideas, through feedback on three classroom visits. Zahra learned what the HM wanted to see in Zahra's English lessons, particularly in terms of classroom management. Access, though, seemed limited to classroom visits and other administrative issues.

Zahra seemed to have a good relationship with her SET. She described her as "frank and tough", but complimented her method of conducting post-lesson discussions:

Her way is encouraging.....she takes me with her in a discussion, 'what did you do in the lesson? Why did you do this here? Wouldn't it have been better if you had done this in this way?' And I accept that because she has experience and this is good for me.

Access to the SET's ideas was gained through post-lesson discussions and workshops. Clearly, Zahra was accessing both SET's and HM's views, as she was able to criticize their ideas, e.g.; with regard to groupwork. Zahra argued that encouraging groupwork was not always useful, due to noise levels and the dependence of weak girls on clever ones. Her access to the SET's views might have helped her develop her own opinions.

Regarding relationships with other ELTs, Zahra initially reported these were positive, particularly with two non-Omani English teachers. There was also another BT she shared ideas with. However, Zahra had become more withdrawn as the year progressed. She now feared talking in the school, reporting: "I discuss very little and most of the time I listen. I have become afraid of expressing my views about the school.....there are teachers who will tell on me to the HM." It seems a lack of trust had developed.

Workshops had provided access to other teachers' ideas and the techniques they reported using in the classroom. In the staffroom, she also asked how to do certain things. However, by the end of the year, when she heard teachers discuss "life matters and teaching", she tended not to contribute, busying herself with marking. It seems access was diminishing.

Zahra's relationships with NELTs seemed similar to those she had with ELTs. She felt she could not confide in them. Access was limited, with Zahra's self-confidence

apparently low. Perhaps she sensed that other teachers in the school had doubts about her teaching ability.

It is fortunate that Zahra did gain access to new ideas through external sources. Through a short in-service methodology course that took her out of the school one day a week, she gained new ideas and practical experiences. She was also helped by an older sister, who taught in another school. Unfortunately, though, due to the training course, her 5-day timetable was condensed into four days, which put her under extra pressure.

4.2.2 *The HM's perceptions*

Regarding the HM's relationship with Zahra, this also seemed poor. In general, she said, recent BTs suffer from 'an inferiority complex', lacking confidence in their academic abilities, methodological knowledge and language proficiency. She also complained that English teachers, and even the SET, were uncooperative. She compared AU BTs negatively with a BT from the past, a graduate from SQU, who she described as more active. Moreover, the HM confessed that 80% of her time was dedicated to administrative issues and she met BTs very little; she relied on the SET to inform teachers of in-school circulars and memos. Regarding observations, she said she clarified the purpose beforehand, and outlined, she reported,

what we want in the school from different teaching methods as we don't rely on one way....then when I visit her I ask her what did you notice in your lesson....if she doesn't agree I ask her to convince me with her idea.

Overall, it seemed the HM did not have much trust in Zahra's teaching and work behaviour in the school, at least in part because of her academic history.

4.2.3 *The SET's perceptions*

In contrast to her relationship with the HM, Zahra's relationship with the SET seemed to be good. The SET was aware that many members of the school staff questioned the academic background of the AU BTs, but emphasized they were able to carry out their duties, and had put forward this point of view at an STs' meeting. She also emphasized her 'emotional support' (Maynard, 2000), saying that first she wanted BTs to trust her "as a sister not as a boss".

Access towards learning experiences was provided by helping them in lesson planning, observing them and encouraging peer observations of lessons taught by experienced teachers in the school (though not herself). She helped BTs understand their duties and responsibilities in the school by explaining these orally, before they would do them practically. However, she felt BTs missed a lot of learning experiences in the school because they were busy teaching all day 4 days a week, making up for the periods missed due to the in-service training course on the fifth day. Nevertheless, despite this limitation, access to school practice seemed to be organized in a structured way, through peer visits, workshops and demonstration lessons.

5 DISCUSSION

I organize this section around the research questions introduced (in 3) above, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data. My first two questions (which I will address together) were as follows:

1. What kinds of experiences do Omani BTs report with regard to their relationships with and access to HMs, SETs, English language teachers (ELTs) and non-English language teachers (NELTs)?

2. How can these perceptions be explained from the perspective of LPP?

BTs & HMs

BTs' relationships with HMs seem imbalanced. This may be because HMs have more power, status and control in dealing with different issues in the school. As the case study revealed, prejudice might affect their dealings with AU BTs.

Many BTs reported that HMs rarely talk to them, reducing their opportunities to benefit from such interaction. As Wenger (1998, p. 126) argues, the less members of a community interact, "the more their configuration looks like a personal network or a set of interrelated practices rather than a single community of practice". For BTs' development, this is a concern.

In Zahra's case, the imbalanced relationship with the HM kept her stuck on the periphery of the practice in the school. Being legitimately peripheral is a natural initial step, as Lave & Wenger (1991) argue, but gradual engagement is needed for a BT to become a 'full participant', and Zahra's experience of LPP was 'disempowering' (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003). Yet good relationships with HMs can help BTs gain access to resources and tools available in the school, including talk. Through hearing stories, BTs learn strategies to help them solve problems (Williams et al., 2004).

The prejudice the HM holds against the academic background of Zahra (as an AU graduate) and criticisms of her teaching may make it easy for the HM not to provide help and support as an excuse. It appears the HM favours those BTs who have the ability to be independent (e.g. SQU BTs) in granting access. Paradoxically, therefore, those with greatest need for interaction may be getting least.

HMs need to grant newcomers enough legitimacy for them to be treated as potential members (Wenger, 1998). They need to consider BTs as potentially good teachers capable of doing the job professionally. Most BTs sampled were from AU and if they suffer prejudice, they might find themselves constantly vulnerable and insecure, which might have a domino effect on pupils' learning.

BTs like Zahra may become isolated, keeping their problems to themselves, with no-one to confide in, as Weiss (1999) describes the problem. Building healthy relationships is vital.

Access depends on such relationships. Yet questionnaire data suggest BTs' access to HMs may be marked by distance and limited communication, conditions

compounded in Zahra's case study by lack of acceptance. Access appears rare, apart from when HMs observe teachers. Most of the time, Zahra's HM reported she was busy with administrative work, a situation that might be common, as many schools in Oman share a similar organizational structure.

The lack of access in such situations is unfortunate, as BTs would benefit if it was provided. As Flores (2001, p. 145) argues: "Beginning teachers in supportive and informative settings are more likely to seek advice and overcome their doubts and difficulties more effectively". BTs may need training in gaining access to HMs, who, in turn, may need to put doubts aside and focus on developing nurturing skills. There seems to be a domino effect between relationship and access. If relationships suffer, access may be denied and the inbound trajectory (to full participation in the school community) may be delayed.

BTs & SETs

Turning to BTs' relationships with SETs, both sets of data suggest these were characterized by friendliness and transparency. Indeed, the two groups seemed close emotionally and spatially. Their positive relationships were helped by 'dialogue' that helped shape learning, as Street (2004) argues can happen, and led to 'empowering' learning experiences of the type described by Fuller et al. (2005).

As both quantitative and qualitative data indicate, good relationships appear to have correlated with the provision of access, with regard to transparent discussions, a sharing of concerns and the freedom to make decisions about teaching. It is important that SETs have an understanding of mentoring roles (Malderez & Bodóczy, 1999), as well as sufficient time and space to share with BTs.

The main limitation to access from this source, reported by both Zahra and her SET, was lack of time, though, overall, the mentoring in this case was clearly beneficial. There seemed to be much 'emotional support' and professional help through demonstration lessons and observations plus feedback. These involved the BT in taking on less risky roles while being on the periphery.

The following diagrammatic representation shows ideally how relationships and access contribute to the development of BTs. Fine relationship-----> open access-----> talk or dialogue (e.g. through stories, asking e.g. how to plan a lesson; how to deal with pupils' behaviour etc...)-> gain 'professional knowledge' through 'mentoring' support and teaching of skills-> more reflection (e.g. the BT learns to act differently based on what she hears and observes) -----> constructing and accumulating knowledge about practice in the school-----> becoming a successful 'full participant' BT-----> advancing towards other ambitions

BTs & ELTs

BTs appear to enjoy good personal relationships with ELTs, as the quantitative data indicate, a condition which would facilitate cooperation, though it does not necessarily imply that they worked cooperatively. In Zahra's case, her closest relationships were with others on the periphery; non-Omani ELTs and another AU BT. As Zahra's SET made clear, AU BTs' performances in the classroom and

academic background are criticized by other teachers. This might contribute negatively to their self-esteem and make them withdraw. SETs need to encourage teamwork.

In terms of gaining access, the staffroom (the 'heart of the school community', Maynard, 2000) provides a place where BTs can hear different stories about the community of practice and express their views. In addition, they can participate in events such as workshops, as both sets of data show. Zahra participated in these workshops and benefited from asking ELTs about activities. It is important that BTs can negotiate their understanding of how learning takes place in the school context by asking old-timers for clarification.

BTs & NELTs

Quantitative data showed BTs' relationships with NELTs were fairly positive, though, conversely, Zahra reported being unable to express her views freely to NELTs. This is unusual, for if teachers are physically proximal, they are more likely to build relationships (Wenger, 1998). Moreover, old-timers may enjoy seeing new faces in the school, I believe, and wish to initiate discussions with BTs. However, gossip and jealousy may sometimes interfere, as Wenger points out, creating a competitive atmosphere as teachers vie to win a superior's approval. Zahra was afraid of teachers 'telling on her' to the HM; teachers who may have known the HM had doubts about her. This is unfortunate, as chance encounters and conversation with other teachers in informal learning contexts like the staffroom help BTs learn about teaching in all sorts of indirect ways (McNally et al., 1997). A supportive atmosphere within the school is very important for BTs (Flores, 2001), shaping their attitudes towards teaching (Weiss, 1999) and helping them move from the periphery. Thus, Zahra, by withdrawing, was losing access. I turn to my third research question:

3. What can be done to address the negative/less supportive aspects of BTs' experiences?

- One suggestion is that BTs choose a learning partner in the school to reflect on their learning experiences with, share concerns and ask questions, negotiating their understanding of the community of practice (Williams, 2004).
- HMs and SETs need to work in harmony to support BTs, listening to their concerns, monitoring their engagement with other school members and opening channels for communication. They also need to monitor BTs' engagement in school activities and build an image of their interests, needs and potential.
- HMs may need special training in how to deal with BTs and help them become 'full participants'. Some training in group dynamics (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999) and ways of managing these may be helpful.
- SETs need to develop mentoring skills, through formal and informal dialogues, being spatially proximal, 'showing' not 'telling', challenging BTs to do more complex tasks, simultaneously scaffolding their learning while praising them.

- STs also need to develop the role of 'sponsor', introducing BTs to people in the community of practice who can help them (Malderez & Bodóczy, 1999).
- More use needs to be made of in-service training courses to help BTs understand the context they work in. Zahra's experiences demonstrate that these courses, through offering support from the wider educational community, can help teachers negotiate LPP in their own schools.
- Teaching loads for BTs could be reduced, as they are required to teach very full timetables four days a week to make up for time spent on the in-service course. These full timetables can reduce their learning opportunities (e.g.; peer observations) in the school. In contrast, in the UK, 'statutory induction period entitlements' for first year teachers (Hobson et al., 2007) include a 10% reduction of teaching load.
- To conclude, these suggestions could be implemented in various ways to help legitimize BTs' peripherality in their communities of practice. Otherwise negative learning experiences may limit BTs' personal and professional development.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research has provided insights into how the relationships and access afforded BTs, operating as legitimate participants on the periphery in Omani schools, seem to help or hinder their progress. It has also provided recommendations for how their less positive learning experiences during the first inductive year can be addressed.

The recommendations made above, though, need to be seen in the context of the following limitations. Firstly, 69% of questionnaire respondents were female AU BTs, affecting generalization beyond this population (as well as within it, given that the response rate was 49%, 32 of 65 questionnaires distributed). As the qualitative data pertained to one female AU BT, the study related far more to this group than others. Secondly, as questionnaire responses may be superficial, I feel it would have been useful to conduct more in-depth interviews with BTs in different schools. If these BTs had graduated from different universities, and had other biographical differences (e.g. age, ethnicity), this might have added depth to the picture painted. With hindsight, I also feel some questionnaire items could have been worded more incisively. I am also unsure as to the extent to which respondents provided socially acceptable rather than honest answers. During the interview, Zahra first told me she would change school for reasons of distance (a socially acceptable answer) before later revealing the real reasons, i.e.; because of her bad relationship with the HM and some NELTs. More in-depth interviews might have provided further insights. However, I faced time constraints.

Despite these limitations, I learned a great deal from the study. I came much closer to seeing how newcomers experience learning in their first year of teaching and could reflect on my own past experience of once being a BT. I also learned ideas for immediate personal action. As an English language supervisor, I can do the following to facilitate BTs' relationships and access; listen to their concerns and

interests, give advice on how to approach different school personnel in case they are in need of them, ask them to form pairs and work collaboratively to discuss and solve problems, encourage them to share experiences of daily teaching and learning, help create awareness of observation and noticing skills, encourage them to take risks by mingling with other teachers and learning from them and encourage them to talk to their SETs.

Regarding SETs, I can emphasize the importance of their role in supporting BTs' teaching and learning, the need to listen and respond to BTs' concerns and interests. I will also advise they open their own classes so BTs can observe them, and can ask them to ensure BTs have a reduced workload. With HMs, I will highlight the importance of talking to BTs, making them feel welcome and trusted. I will also demonstrate concern for BTs' personal and professional development.

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