PGCert Secondary Education

Primary School Experience
1. **The Aims of Primary School Observation**

(a) that you appreciate the role and ways of working of primary school teachers and ways in which these may differ from a secondary school

(b) that you gain a basic understanding of initiatives such as the literacy and numeracy hours

(c) that you observe some teaching, particularly in years 5 and 6, noting teaching methods and levels of pupil understanding

2. **How to Organise Your Primary School Observation**

   a) You should contact a primary school in the area where you are currently living by writing to the Headteacher. When you write to a school send them a brief CV with your letter of request and a stamped addressed envelope for their reply. When a school has agreed to you doing your observation practice with them take the letter of introduction included in this booklet with you on your first day.

   At the end of the observation, you should complete section A of the report form included in this booklet and you must ensure that the Headteacher or teacher responsible for students completes section B.

   b) When you arrive at the school you will need to arrange an observation schedule (showing the lessons, rooms and teachers to be observed) with the Head Teacher or the teacher responsible for students. Although your first interest at this stage will be your main subject, you should aim to spend some time observing other aspects of the curriculum such as Special Educational Needs or Literacy/Numeracy. If possible, observe teaching (in any subject area) which is thought to be particularly well-managed, or is innovatory.

   You should also try to read a selection of the official school documents, e.g. prospectus, policy statement on equal opportunities.

   c) This is a period of observation and you are not expected to prepare and teach lessons, although you may very well be asked to act as an assistant to the class teacher.

   d) You will have many opportunities to talk with pupils, as well as teachers, and this may be highly illuminating. However, pupils will view you as one of the teachers and will consequently expect a certain professional 'distance' and manner from you.

   When you are in school please remember:

   e) Teachers are very busy professionals and schools take their role in society very seriously. Ensure that you do not cause them problems. Be punctual and dress appropriately. Remember that parents place great trust in teachers and that by starting this course you also accept that trust.

   f) You are not in class to judge somebody else's practice, you are there to learn from it. You may not agree with how another teacher approaches a class or a subject, in fact you may think you would do it differently yourself. However, these are professional
opinions which you may discuss with others as part of your HEI course but which you keep to yourself while you are in the school.

g) Before you go into a class, ask the teacher if they mind you taking notes, moving around the classroom or assisting the pupils if the opportunity occurs. Be sensitive and tactful when carrying out the observation tasks. Remember, for example, that you are a visitor in class and have no automatic right to pupils' written work. Make notes about your observations while in school, but take care that you do not unwittingly alienate teachers. You are not “inspecting” their classes. Brief notes may be amplified outside the school in the privacy of your own home, but even in this context please ensure the anonymity of the staff and pupils by using fictitious names.

h) Make sure that you return any materials lent to you before you leave the school.

4. Observation Tasks

4.1 Observation in general

The number of variables affecting what happens in a classroom is large. You therefore need to be clear about what you are going to focus on in each observed lesson and to have clear ways of recording what happens. The tasks below should help to get you started.

You may need to modify these tasks in the light of advice from the school. You may develop systematic approaches to observing and recording of your own or the teacher may well suggest alternatives. The essential point is that you need to observe in a way that will develop your thinking about the teaching and learning in general.

Make sure that what you do is well recorded.

When planning your observation remember the following general advice:

a) An important part of your work in classrooms is to learn about children. Watch them, listen to them, talk to them, look at what they write and how they learn. Begin to discover what makes children value and enjoy their education. Start to discover what makes children 'tick'.

b) At the heart of teaching is the interaction between teacher and pupil(s). You will find it useful to focus sometimes upon the teacher's activity, sometimes upon the pupils' activity and sometimes on both.

c) Within a particular lesson or series of lessons, you may find it helpful to give particular attention to one aspect of the teacher's activity (eg: how they get the lesson started; how they round the lesson off; their language; their handling of awkward pupils; their attention to each individual pupil during a lesson) or you may wish to concentrate upon pupil response (eg: to different kinds of activity; to the teacher's tone of voice; to one another's contributions)
Discussion with the teacher before and after lessons will suggest many other points for observation, although bear in mind that teachers are very busy.

4.2 Observation Task 1 - Observation Diary

Each day make brief notes about your observations and experiences. These notes can be used as a basis for group discussion in seminars at the university. You may find it helpful to comment on some of the following:

a) Teaching:
- the different ways in which teachers teach (particularly)
- the different ways in which teachers manage practical activities in a primary school classroom
- the ability of teachers to create an "authoritative" presence
- health and safety issues related to practical teaching
- the necessary skills and qualities related to good teaching

b) Pupils:
- the contributions that pupils make to lessons
- the quantity and quality of work that they produce
- the activities and relationships of pupils outside the classroom

c) Activities:
- the variety of learning activities taking place
- the different ways in which pupils appear to learn
- how pupils are motivated to work
- what is "good work"? how is "good work" recognised?

d) School Organisation:
- what structures exist to organise the school as a community?
- what different responsibilities do teachers and pupils have?
- how does the environment affect the learning and the activities of the school?

4.3 Observation Task 2 - Pupil Learning

Make more detailed notes about how and what pupils learn. Again these will be used to inform the sessions at Brunel University.

In selected lessons consider the following:

a) Did the pupils learn?

This may seem an odd question, but it is quite possible for pupils to seem busy and absorbed in a task (e.g. copying or colouring in) without learning very much (beyond improving their colouring skills). On the other hand it is possible for pupils to be involved in something that appears to be purely social, such as talking to each other in groups, but they are actually learning a good deal from the activity.
how effectively do the classroom activities enable the pupils to learn something about the topic being studied? (can you think of alternative activities?)
how much have the pupils learned that was useful and relevant?

What evidence are you looking for here?

b) Did all of the pupils learn?

In most lessons some pupils learn more than others. The effective teacher tries to ensure that as many pupils as possible achieve the key learning points of the lesson.

To answer this question, you will first have to identify the key learning points of the lesson. In some lessons teachers will simply tell the class which points they intend to cover, however, in others you will have to decide for yourself what the key points are.

To decide whether pupils have learnt the key points, there are a number of pieces of information that you may need to collect:

- you need to see what they have written in their books
- you need to speak to them
- you need to see whether they are paying attention to the task
- you may need to take part in their practical tasks.

c) What is preventing some pupils from learning?

Try to work out why some pupils are learning more easily than others. Many things can stop people from learning effectively (eg: they may be too hot or cold; they may be hungry, tired or miserable; they may simply have other things on their mind).

Ask yourself:

- can all pupils hear or see the teacher?
- is the environment helpful? (eg: the layout of the desks, the position of the board, the amount of light, the room to work)
- are pupils distracting each other - if so, how?
- do some pupils in the group have special needs that make it difficult for the teacher to help them sufficiently? (eg: do they have poor basic literacy skills or are they at an early stage in learning English as a second language?)
- is the timing of this lesson conducive to productive learning? (eg: is it the last period on a Friday, just after PE or immediately following a break?)

d) How does the teacher help pupils learn?

Teachers have to cope with all kinds of less than perfect circumstances. Note the different strategies that teachers use to make their teaching effective and how they use their voice and their physical presence to get attention and maintain interest.

- where is the teacher positioned in the classroom at different parts of the lesson?
is the teacher's voice loud/soft, clear/unclear, varied in tone and pitch for different activities?

what sort of questions does the teacher ask? (eg: do they simply require a right or wrong answer / a "yes" or "no", or do they require pupils to think things out?)

are different kinds of questions asked at different times?

how can the teacher make certain that all of the pupils are involved in a question and answer session?

what materials does the teacher use to get the key learning points across? (eg: board; worksheets; textbooks; computers; OHP)

what activities has the teacher planned to get key learning points across? (eg: practical work; group discussion; written tasks)

e) How does the school help pupils learn?

Consider the organisation of the school as a whole:

- is there a pastoral system organised to support pupils?
- is there a recognised policy for rewards and sanctions throughout the whole school?
- how is the pupil helped to learn by the way the school is run, or built and designed?
- is movement in the corridors easy and smooth?

Consider the differences you observe between primary and secondary schools. What is the significance in relation to pupil learning?

4.4 Observation Task 5 - Summary of Observations

After you have completed your observation work you should take some time to reflect on what you have seen. It will help you to focus your ideas if you complete the following “Summary of Reflections”