

CONSTRUCTING THE CURRICULUM OF (INITIAL) TEACHER EDUCATION: WHEN SHOULD NEW TEACHERS BE ENCOURAGED TO ASK CRITICAL QUESTIONS?

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“As teacher training in the UK becomes increasingly school-based, largely as a result of government requirements, the question of whether and in what sense there is a useful place for ‘theory’

in initial teacher education remains a source of tension and confusion.”

Although this observation could have been made in response to the introduction and rapid expansion of School Direct under the Coalition government (a programme in which training places are allocated directly to schools who then choose whether or not to include universities in their partnerships), it was actually written more than twenty years ago (McIntyre, 1995). At that point, the dominant role of universities in initial teacher education was first challenged by government requirements that two-thirds of the time on any secondary-level PGCE programme should be spent in school. Donald McIntyre, an ardent advocate of school-based teacher education, approved that change: indeed he had persuaded the University of Oxford to adopt such a balance within its partnership programme some five years before the government mandated it. But even as he insisted on the importance of practice and the need to learn from expert practitioners, McIntyre expressed no doubts about the place of theory: the two were bound together in the process of ‘practical theorising’. This was an *active* process that necessitated critical testing of ideas from different sources; as opposed to the simple importation either of an accepted body of knowledge or of a repertoire of prescribed practices. It was a process in which beginning teachers needed to learn to engage during the course of their training.

The notion of ‘practical theorising’ has strong echoes in current models of experienced teachers’ decision-making, such as Kriewaldt and Turnidge’s notion of ‘clinical reasoning’: ‘the analytical and intuitive cognitive processes that professionals use to arrive at a best judged ethical response in a specific practice-based context’ (Kriewaldt and Turnidge, 2013). This dense descriptive phrase perfectly encapsulates the nature of teachers’ decision-making and the different kinds of knowledge on which it depends. Teachers’ decisions are always related to practice in a particular context – planning for and responding to the needs of particular pupils studying a particular topic. As teachers become more familiar with each of these elements, so their decision-making can become more intuitive, based on accumulated experience and regular practice of what were initially complex routines. But familiarity with the materials with which they work (students, curriculum and context) and the routinization of technical skills, are not in themselves sufficient. Learning to teach requires the development not merely of efficiency but also of ‘adaptive expertise’ (Berliner, 2001): the capacity to ‘move beyond existing routines ... to rethink key ideas, practices and even values in order to respond to novel situations’ (Hammerness et al., 2005). Young people, as individuals and in groups, are often surprising and unpredictable – even those we know well. Over time, school populations change, as do the communities from which they are drawn. The curriculum and associated assessment regimes change too, as secondary teachers are currently well aware. Teachers move to new settings. That is why efficiency alone is not enough: teachers need to be able to review and question what they are doing, especially if it is not working in response to a new situation.

Teacher professionalism

It is because teachers need to know how to seek and test alternatives that Kriewaldt and Turnidge also acknowledge the ‘analytical’ dimension of teachers’ cognitive processes and point to the need for ‘judgement’. The same principle explains why Winch et al. (Winch et al., 2013), in their submission to the BERA-RSA Inquiry into the role of research in teacher

education, rejected two commonly held conceptions of teachers – as craft worker or executive technician – as inadequate. Both practical wisdom and technical expertise are essential but they are not sufficient. As *professionals*, teachers also require an informed understanding of the theoretical or research-based principles that underpin their current practices and that might offer explanations when those practices fail, stimulating the generation of alternative ways forward. Teachers need to be effectively equipped so that they can interrogate their own practice to identify why it is or is not working, learn from new ideas and adapt them to particular situations. That is why ‘research literacy’ features in the Inquiry’s final report (BERA and RSA, 2014) as the third element of teacher professionalism, on a par with practical experience and knowledge of subject and pedagogy.

Establishing the need for adaptive expertise does not, however, resolve the question of how the teacher education curriculum should be structured to support its development or at what point beginning teachers should be invited to think critically about the practices they encounter. McIntyre believed that ‘practical theorising’ should lie at the heart of *initial* teacher education. The process of seeking ideas from diverse sources (from research and theory as well as the practice of experienced teachers) and subjecting them all to critical examination was therefore established as a core principle of the partnership scheme that he pioneered and remains highly influential within it.

Others have, however, taken a rather different view of how the teacher education curriculum should be constructed. To illustrate and explore the merits of a very different curriculum model, we turn to the findings of a detailed case-study of two initial teacher education programmes operating within the same school (Mutton et al., 2018): one, a university-school partnership scheme based on McIntyre’s principles; the other operated by the school as lead member of a recently established School Based Initial Teacher Training scheme (SCITT). While the former continues to interweave theory and practice, explicitly emphasising the need to ask critical questions about ideas from both sources, the other has consciously opted to delay engagement in practical theorising until after the trainees have qualified, in order to provide a more straightforward induction into the profession and boost their confidence and wellbeing.

Recognising the complexity of teaching and the challenges that beginners encounter, the school has deliberately chosen to reduce the demands of ‘a very difficult year’ by emphasising the value of ‘well-learned schemas and routines’ (Hammerness et al., 2005). Mentors within the scheme value ‘being told what to do here, here and here’ and, in turn, seek to offer their trainees clear and unambiguous advice about what to do, boosting their confidence as they master its implementation. Deep immersion in one particular context allows the beginning teachers to build relationships with students from the start which is regarded as ‘extremely helpful to them’ as is provision of a ‘lovely layer of pastoral support’, particularly for those who are experiencing challenges. Although it is impossible to do justice to the strengths of the scheme in a single paragraph, its most valued features can perhaps be summed up by overwhelming praise for its tightly planned programme (with close cohesion between the subject-specific elements and a strong, centralised model of content delivery) and in a typical reflection on its outcomes: ‘You’ve nurtured them and fostered them and they fit into the school, which is really, really nice.’ Practical theorising is neither required nor expected within this model, but Berliner’s argument that ‘(e)xpert, domain-specific contextualized knowledge can often be a limited kind of knowledge’ (Berliner, 2001) alerts us to the potential limitations of such an approach.

The place for practical theorising

At *some* point all teachers will need to engage with knowledge beyond the ‘domain-specific’ and must be equipped to ask critical questions of their existing practice and of new ideas offered to them. ‘Research literacy’ (BERA and RSA, 2014) has a vital role to play in this process. The BERA-RSA report calls for teachers who are both ‘discerning consumers of research’ and able to ‘conduct their own research, individually and collectively, to investigate the impact of particular interventions or to explore the positive and negative effects of educational practice’ (BERA and RSA, 2014). This call has been supported by several recent developments – including the establishment of the Research Schools Network; introduction of the NFER Research Mark; and publication of a journal such as *Impact* – some of which are intended to connect research findings to classroom practice, others focusing on the development of teachers as researchers.

Should the introduction to this kind of practical theorising be delayed until after new teachers have developed confidence in their established routines? From one perspective, the argument for reducing the demands that beginning teachers face by simplifying the process as much as possible has much to support it. Although the Carter Review (Carter, 2015) argued that beginning teachers should be taught ‘how to evaluate and challenge research findings’ and to ‘interpret educational theory and research in a critical way’ it seemed, in its final recommendations, to retreat from the demands that these expectations might present. Its call for the development of a centralised portal of synthesised executive summaries suggests an emphasis on providing access to research findings rather than subjecting them to critical questioning.

McIntyre (McIntyre, 1990) himself recognised the need for a two-stage process of teacher preparation in which acquiring basic competence (as defined by others) would precede beginners’ assumption of responsibility for their own developmental priorities, including the identification of the kinds of evidence that would help them to examine and evaluate the impact of their decisions. Nevertheless, he rejected a practice-first, theory-later model, arguing that both needed to be developed within the initial teacher education programme. While Orchard and Winch (Orchard and Winch, 2015) have been prepared to suggest a two-phase approach (including an ‘apprenticeship’ phase), they advocate university involvement in both phases, and suggest that it should be most extensive in the first, since universities provide a context ‘more conducive to the kind of theoretical learning needed by new teachers’, involving ‘sustained discussion and the sharing of ideas away from the immediate pressures of the workplace’ (Orchard and Winch, 2015).

Ultimately, of course, school is where beginning teachers’ own practical theorising has to happen. Indeed, unless they encounter it in the established practices of experienced teachers, they are unlikely ever to embrace it seriously. If practical theorising is a process *only* required of them as learners, and if learning is seen as a requirement of beginners and not of experts, new teachers will be quick to shed the former identity. Therefore, unless practical theorising is routinely happening in schools, there is perhaps little point introducing it in initial teacher education and expecting it to be sustained. Although the promotion and genuine development of research-engaged schools undoubtedly offers exciting possibilities, the question remains as to whether the development of practical theorising could be achieved by schools alone. Our argument is that it is only by working together in partnership that universities and schools can each make a distinctive and essential contribution to the process of *developing* (not merely *sustaining*) teachers’ engagement in the process of practical theorising, both through

programmes of initial teacher education and through subsequent learning opportunities which deepen and enrich the professional knowledge and research-engagement of experienced teachers.

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