

Breaking the theory-practice relationship

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Breaking the theory-practice relationship: why decoupling universities from ITE is illogical

A think piece working paper by Dr Emma Rawlings Smith

Introduction

This think piece gives a personal perspective on why it would be illogical to decouple universities from initial teacher education (ITE) at a time when we should be celebrating the quality and diversity of current routes into teaching and the expertise of teacher educators. I will begin this short paper by reflecting on the current ITE landscape in England and my own professional identity, before moving on to consider the professional capital of teacher educators and why their loss, if universities step away from ITE, would negatively impact the sector and the next generation of teachers.

Teacher recruitment, retention and student numbers

Approximately 37,000 teachers began their route into teaching through Initial Teacher Education (ITE) partnerships in 2021-22, down 8 per cent from the year before when more prospective students applied than usual, likely as a result of economic uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic (Department for Education; DfE, 2021a). In June 2021, the School Workforce Census recorded 461,088 full-time equivalent teachers in England of which around 5 per cent were newly qualified (DfE, 2021b). This level of recruitment would satisfy teacher supply if it were not for rising levels of teacher attrition. These data reflect the bigger picture that both teacher retention and teacher recruitment are challenges that need to be taken seriously. On quality; of the 240 ITE partnerships inspected by Ofsted by June 2019, all were judged to be good or outstanding and 80 per cent of newly qualified teachers positive about the quality of their ITE programmes (Ginnis et al., 2018). It is against this backdrop that the DfE ran a brief Initial Teacher Training Market Review with a short 7-week public consultation. Although muted via the consultation process, ITE providers co-ordinated action and with the use of social media raised serious concerns (Murtagh and Rushton, 2021). Since May 2021 - and following the introduction of the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019a), Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019b) and Ofsted's (2021) new ITE inspection framework - half of ITE providers inspected have been downgraded. Speaking in Schools Week, James Noble-Rogers, Executive Director of Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, suggested that the watchdog 'appear to be aimed at discrediting ITE provision whenever possible, rather than arrive at a balanced and informed judgement of quality' (Booth, 2021). With an ITE

reaccreditation process underway, some providers may choose not to apply for reaccreditation and others, going by recent Ofsted inspections, may not 'meet the exacting Quality Requirements' (DfE, 2021c, p.4). By muting university ITE providers, making all providers apply for accreditation against new quality criteria and persisting with damaging proposals, it appears that the government continues to put at risk the future supply of high-quality teachers as 35 out of 40 university providers would potentially withdraw from the sector (UCET, 2021). A consequence of the inevitable teacher educator redundancies would be the loss of a huge wealth of professional capital - the specialised knowledge, expertise and skill which have developed over time through collaborative and effective school-university partnerships.

Teacher educator identity and theory-practice relationship

If universities decided to pull out of the ITE sector, teacher educators, like me, would be put at risk. Lecturers work with students, teachers and leaders, teach across programmes and draw on various specialist disciplinary knowledge. Most university-based teacher educators move from teaching children and young people in schools to teaching and supporting the professional learning of beginning and experienced teachers across subjects and phases (Boyd and White, 2017). This change in context also influences professional identity. Some parts of my identity disappeared when I stopped teaching in school, others have blossomed and have been joined by new elements related to the professional development of adults, educational scholarship and research. My multiple identity includes being a researcher, scholar, educator, project manager and so much more. A key aspect of my role is to help teachers develop their professional identity, as new members of the teaching community. I influence the students I teach, but my reach through learned societies, conferences, publications and networks is much broader. In the last 18 months, for example, I have published articles on Birmingham's Clean Air Zone for A level students, reflective practice for school mentors, and assemblage theory of place for academics. If I lose my job, the impacts would be felt far beyond those I teach.

Zippering together the theory-practice relationship as praxis

At the 2020 International Professional Development Association Conference, I listened to Dr Vince Clarke explain how he conceptualised theory and practice, and I could see how his model of Paramedic Praxis, with students and educators centrally placed, is transferable to teacher

education. Clarke (2018) dismisses a theory-practice divide model in favour of a theory-practice relationship where theoretical and practical knowledge inform each other and are intertwined to a greater or lesser degree within a fluid model of praxis. Clarke’s use of a zip analogy with the zip pull representing the role of an educator, drawing on taught theory and situated practice to support student learning, spoke volumes. My expertise directly influences how students perceive the theory-practice relationship. As Table 1 illustrates, when teacher educators and students learn together, they both develop personal professional knowledge. Teachers use three aspects of this professional knowledge when deciding how to act in a classroom situation; situated understanding, technical know-how and critical reflection (Winch et al., 2015, p.204). Situated understanding or *phronesis* is the practical wisdom developed through classroom experience or indirectly via educational research (Biesta, 2012), technical know-how is the mastery of procedural knowledge which enables teachers to select the most appropriate classroom intervention for effective teaching and learning, and critical reflection is the sustained and intentional process of reflection in order to improve future practice (Brookfield, 2017). When applying the zip analogy, it is easy to see how the stimulus for reflection can come from situated practice, theory or a combination of the two. Teacher educators draw on their wealth of knowledge, while the student is required to link theory with practice. Both learn via reflection in-action and on-action (Schön, 1983) and this can be transformational.

Table 1 The elements of the zip analogy (after Clark, 2018, p.269)

Zip component	Representation	Detail
Teeth	Elements of <i>Taught Theory</i> and <i>Situated Practice</i>	The teeth are representative of elements of both <i>Taught Theory</i> on one side of the zip, and <i>Situated Practice</i> on the other.
Slider	Student	The student is required to make appropriate links between theory and practice in order to develop their <i>Personal Professional Knowledge</i> .
Pull-tab	Teacher Educator	The Teacher Educator is seen to support the development of the student’s <i>Personal Professional Knowledge</i> by facilitating their learning in practice.

On PGCE programmes, reflective practice is intertwined in everything; it is explored in university sessions and weekly mentor meetings, is the focus of professional journals and

often included as an element of assessment. By embedding reflective practice in this way, teacher educators are able to integrate theory with practice, in the same way that the teeth of a zip interconnect as it is pulled up.

Conclusion

Teacher educators in universities are encouraged to be research-active with time, support and opportunities given for scholarship and research. This sustained level of scholarship and research is much harder to achieve in the school context due to constraints such as time and workload and barriers such as access to fellow researchers, literature and academic support. It is clear that universities and schools serve different purposes, yet both are important partners in ITE. If universities pull out of the ITE market and university-based teacher educators leave the sector, it is likely that our future teachers will be exposed to less educational theory and become competent craftspeople rather than scholarly reflective practitioners (Moore, 2004). Returning to Clark's zip analogy, it would be equivalent to the zip breaking, as the pull snaps off. Such irreparable damage to our high-quality ITE sector seems short-sighted and feels to be a personal attack on both my role and identity, especially when the reason for change seems to be ideological rather than educational.

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