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"Novices helped by tutors and teachers"

The traditional structures of initial teacher education have been under pressure for some time. Universities, eager to develop research capability and to economise during a downturn, have disinvested from ITE through reductions in teaching space, staff numbers and visits to schools, as well as rationalisation into larger humanities faculties and economies in the structures of courses.

And in staffrooms and populist columns in the national and educational press, those who work in ITE find their credibility challenged by a vociferous minority, despite many who speak enthusiastically about the quality of new entrants to the profession.

The underlying philosophy of both the universities' and the teaching community's attacks on ITE is the same: it is the belief that serving school teachers are the best advisers of students, and that those involved in ITE, who no longer teach in schools, merely duplicate what teachers do.

Key to this is "craft knowledge": the notion that those who do the job are best placed to teach the job. As Ian Menter puts it: "The argument for change is that it is those in school who are closest to the student, who best understand the context in which the students' professional learning is taking place and who can support them most economically." While this seems commonsensical, it is worth testing through research.

Richard Pring has expressed the attitude of the teaching profession as a "justified criticism of those charged with the training of teachers, but drawing on past experience only dimly remembered and never critiqued".

However, given their backgrounds in successful teaching, curricular development and change management in schools, as well as their ongoing engagement with schools through research, initial teacher education and continuing professional development, few who work in ITE would describe their craft knowledge as "dimly remembered". And far from being "never critiqued", their performance is constantly and generally highly positively evaluated by those with whom they work.

To test the hypotheses that ITE tutors' visits to students in schools duplicate the processes there, and that teachers are more adept at giving professional guidance to students, we began a small-scale investigation of students' perceptions of their development on placement.

We first analysed the existing anonymous evaluations of placements undertaken by the 2007-08 cohort studying for the secondary postgraduate diploma in education (PGDE) at a Scottish university, some 660 responses. Using a rating scale, students were asked to evaluate the support they received from regents, principal teachers, staff and university tutors.

The first encouraging aspect to note is that all those rated attained a positive mean score. The farther removed was the person from the process of providing feedback,

the less highly evaluated was their input. Regents were least positively evaluated, which is neither surprising nor a criticism, since many are depute heads with taxing whole-school remits who cannot devote much time to students.

Significantly, the analysis revealed that university tutor feedback consistently received the most positive rating. Many experienced teachers claim that, during their training, they learned “everything” in school, and that university was “a waste”, and we have no illusions that the 2007- 08 cohort will feel any differently in time. However, these evaluations indicate that the students valued a one-hour feedback from their tutors more positively than any other received in up to 10 weeks of practice in their placement schools.

To attempt to answer why this might be, we focused on the 2008-09 cohort of secondary students on the English PGDE course to ascertain their underlying perceptions of school experience. These questionnaires are still being analysed, but what is apparent so far is that feedback from schools is conceptually different from that of tutors. School input deemed helpful concentrates on the particularities of the lesson, the class and the school, such as advice on “the identification of practicalities and routines to which pupils were familiar” or “information regarding individual students”.

In contrast, university tutors’ feedback appears to facilitate professional discussion. Common comments were: “tutors are able to better assess my development as a professional movement”; “a continuous reminder (of) the big picture”; and “ensuring students know why we’re doing things”.

Much of the available literature suggests that schools feel ill-equipped to accept more responsibility for teacher training, and are reluctant to be diverted from what they see as the core activity of educating pupils. These results suggest that schools provide crucial contextual support, but generally do not engage in those discursive processes which aid the development of encompassing professional reflection.

And why should they? Given the pressures teachers find themselves under, is it not preferable that the overall expertise in, experience of and accountability for the training of student teachers lie elsewhere?

Clearly, university tutors do not merely duplicate the role of school staff, but fulfil an entirely different and essential role which student teachers seem to value exceptionally highly. In the light of this, and with the Donaldson review considering all aspects of teacher education, the way ahead for ITE must surely be in ensuring closer partnerships between universities and schools in the knowledge that each plays a vital, complementary role in the development of new teachers on placement.