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Confidence, risk, and the journey into praxis: work-based learning and teacher development

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This article examines the relationship between confidence and risk in relation to the initial education and continuing professional development of teachers. The context for this examination is the Lifelong Learning sector in England, which sits between secondary schools and universities, and the discussion is illustrated with data gathered from trainee teachers in this sector. Understandings of confidence are considered and it is argued that the inculcation of confidence through risk-taking is important for new teachers in their journey to praxis. Confidence, whether seen as imbued in the self or as inculcated through professional training and development, correlates with both the new teacher's vulnerability and their capacity to take risks. Central to the inculcation of confidence are the opportunities available to teachers as they develop, which are circumscribed by the conditions and expectations of their teacher education course and their workplace. The article concludes by arguing that the transformative potential of critical engagement with professional knowledge on teacher education courses and through work-based learning should be balanced with the need for the good and appropriate time necessary for the risky political act of reflection, not merely the immediate technical evaluation of practice. (ref A-1)

Key words: Confidence; Risk; Eukairia; Praxis; Higher Education (HE) Work based learning (WBL); teacher development; Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS)

Introduction

The context for this examination of confidence and risk in relation to teachers' professional development is England's Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS), which has been characterised as the 'Cinderella service' (Randle & Brady, 1997 p.121) in comparison to schools and Higher Education. It broadly sits between schools and universities and the sector is distinctive from an international perspective. It is both diverse on the one hand, serving young people, adults and professionals mainly but not exclusively on vocational courses, and it is highly regulated on the other hand, subject to a plethora of state mediated controls. Names for the sector mirror this diversity, leaking into each other like a colour-washed landscape painting across a range of conventions, such as vocational education and training, further and adult education, the further education system and the Learning and Skills sector (LLS) to offer just a prominent few. The last

of these is adopted for the purpose of this article. Teacher education for this sector has experienced seismic shifts in the way it is regulated, from being entirely untouched by statutory intervention until 2001, subject to further statutory control in 2007, and more recently recommended for deregulation (see Holloway 2009 for a detailed account of reforms in this area). Against this context of policy change that aimed to professionalise the sector's teachers, this conceptual paper considers notions of confidence and risk for trainee teachers in the LLS. (REF A para 3)

The purpose of the paper is exploratory, drawing upon key theoretical perspectives and literature. It also draws upon data extracted from interpretive, practitioner-based research that has explored the nature of trainee teacher participation during a two-year part-time in-service LLS teacher education course. Several of the broad themes emerging in the article draw upon accounts from student artefacts related to participation on this course (reflective journal entries and responses to assignments), which represent the shared spaces and discourses between initial teacher education and trainee teachers' professional practice. Forty trainee teachers provide the data drawn upon in this paper, and three anonymised participants' extracts from synoptic tasks are used here. In one sense the inclusion of a small sample of the data is merely illustrative of the premise and argument, but its location in this paper assists in revealing situatedness in the lived experiences of trainee teachers. All the participants have given informed consent to the use of their course material in the research. These three participants, given the names Jenny, Wyn and Carol, are not a representative sample, but they support the premise of confidence as unfolding, embodied and temporal (see Gibbs 2010:103). (Ref A-2)

As an aside, the nomenclature of the actors involved in teacher development exposes

the subtext of a techno-rationalist rationale, played out in the taken-for-granted representation of training, trainees and trainers, rather than education, teachers and students. Whilst appreciating the danger of conflation, the paper will use the terms trainee to refer to the developing teachers, and teacher educators to refer to those responsible for their development during an initial teacher education course. (REF A-4)

The first section considers the context for the paper, that of the workplace as a base for learning for trainee teachers. The second section focuses the discussion towards issues of professional knowledge and practice, and the last section draws together the context, and issues to explore the literature surrounding confidence, risk and praxis. The term praxis is used in this article both in its Aristotelian sense as the coupling of reason and praxis, and in the Bourdieusian sense of theory based upon practice (Bourdieu 1977) (REF A para 1) to argue for what is termed ‘the good and appropriate time’. The conclusion argues that despite the best efforts of teacher educators to inculcate (to actively bring about) confidence through careful teaching, integration of theory and practice, and modelling of good practice, inculcation of confidence through risk-taking should extend beyond and between Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Work Based Learning (WBL) and teacher development

WBL can be briefly and broadly defined as learning that takes place in a workplace whether as part of a course, while on placement, or independently while an employed worker. For teaching staff in the lifelong learning sector in England (LLS) it is characterised by two distinct groupings. The first group consists of teachers and trainers engaged in ITT, whether full time whilst on placement, or more commonly for this sector part time and whilst in paid employment. The second group consists of teachers engaged in continuous professional development, and it is only since 2007 that this

aspect of a teachers' professional updating has become necessary to maintain their status as qualified teachers in the learning and skills sector (QTLS) (see Orr 2009). Within this paper the discussion is restricted to the first group where the workplace is a context for ITT (Huddleston and Oh 2004: 85). All trainee teachers in the LLS, in contrast to the regulations for school teacher training in England, are required to demonstrate 150 hours of contact time with their students as part of their course and the ninety percent (UCET 2009) of teachers who train 'in service', that is whilst employed as teachers, will already be working as teachers while training. This group, which includes the sample for this study, is characterised by their 'dual identities' as trainees and as teachers (Orr and Simmons 2010), their isolation from their colleagues (Orr 2012: 53) and their "ability to speak fluently the language of performativity" (Orr 2012: 58).

In addition to qualifications offered by Higher Education institutions in England several national awarding bodies offer similar awards that have the same requirement for 150 hours of teaching. Hence, WBL is a significant but neglected aspect of teacher training in the sector (Maxwell 2011). Though some describe WBL as informal (see Eraut 2004), Billett (2002:457) disagrees:

Workplace experiences are not informal. They are the product of the historical-cultural practices and situational factors that constitute the particular work practice, which in turn distributes opportunities for participation to individuals or cohorts of individuals.

LLS institutions such as colleges may at first sight appear relaxed and free-flowing in comparison to the rigidity of schools but they can be just as highly structured, even if the structure is not so visible, which becomes salient for what trainees learn at work. Billett here identifies the importance of the availability of opportunities to participate. Billett (2001: 209) finds that:

learners afforded the richest opportunities for participation reported the strongest development, and that workplace readiness was central to the quality of experiences.

In further findings relevant to developing teachers Billet argued that the key contributors to successful learning for the trainee were ‘engagement in everyday tasks’; ‘direct or close guidance of co-workers’ and ‘indirect guidance provided by the workplace itself and others in the workplace’. Reporting on research into in-service teacher training in this sector Orr and Simmons (2010) found that the availability of ‘affordances’ and how the workplace accepted or welcomed the developing teacher was contingent upon the structure of the college at institutional and sectional levels. Lucas and Unwin (2009) also examined the work-based experience of in-service developing teachers (trainees) and found little organisational support for the developing teachers and a lack of recognition of their dual role as teacher *and* trainee. Indeed, excessively heavy workloads and highly pressured circumstances were found to be the norm for many. Learning to navigate this challenging workplace situation effectively, that is learning to ‘fit in’, is not, however, the same as learning to teach well, though learning, meaningful or otherwise, is taking place.

Though difficult to discern, the importance of what developing teachers carry with them biographically and how this affects their individual agency in the workplace is significant. As Billett (2002a: 463) argues, ‘Beyond the affordances of the social practice is the agency of individuals, which determines how they engage in work practices, with its consequences for their learning.’ This relationship between the individual trainee and her environment is at the centre of understanding the WBL of developing teachers. As Marx & Engels (1968: 96) express it:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

Michael Eraut identifies the first two or three years after qualifying as being the most influential to gain what he calls ‘the particular personalised pattern of practice that every professional requires’ (Eraut 1994: 11). This may be the ‘good and appropriate time’ that is argued for in this paper, in which case teachers in the lifelong learning sector in England, should be allowed more opportunities to journey out of the ‘overcrowded’ (Eraut 1994: 11) teacher training curriculum and into praxis. Where concepts, principles and strategies are constructed from a formal, standards-based curriculum, there are also many informal opportunities for professional development situated in the workplace, depending on the cultural norms and institutional affordances. It is important, however, to caution against a pluralist notion of ITT – where training is seen as being concerned with theories and principles at course level, and practical learning is confined to the workplace – as the distinctions can often be blurred. In a wider sense Humphries and Hyland (2001 in Avis 2009: 213) point to the knowledge economy as a driver for the growth of WBL, invoking the word *phronesis* to encapsulate the sorts of critical scrutiny of theory made possible by higher level learning in the workplace.

Research interest in WBL in England’s lifelong learning sector has increased as a result of recent attempts to professionalise the teaching workforce, moving towards seeing the workforce as transdisciplinary, negotiated both for and with all parties concerned. The tension for institutions that wrap up their formal learning into commodities (qualifications) as a measure of disciplinary and procedural knowledge is that teaching is more and more seen to be embedded in practitioner research enquiry, rather than as a vehicle for the acquisition of reified knowledge. Teacher knowledge is distributed, sometimes viral, open to all and therefore resistant to commodification. The developing teacher finds or seeks out colleagues as expert resources acting alongside other

resources based upon teacher networks, mentors, coaches and workplace mores. This collaborative, quasi-democratic conceptualisation of WBL may be idealised yet it is grounded philosophically in Dewey, pedagogically within constructivist and socially situated theory, and methodologically with reflexivity (see Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). If this is problematic for Higher Education as a setting for teacher education, then a greater tension exists in the workplace itself, where, according to Illeris (2011) learning is dependent on an environment that is ‘experienced as essentially confident and safe’. This is pertinent to our argument in that both settings (HE and the workplace) provide opportunities for the inculcation of confidence through the processes and products teacher training provides as well as other professional development activities. Illeris (2011:133) acknowledges that these workplaces may have better economic outcomes over time, but that the consequences for employees are generally negative. Indeed, drawing upon Beck (1992) Orr (2012) points to the trend for LLS UK workplaces to be characterised by neo-liberal notions of flexibility and insecure labour market conditions. Nonetheless, many teacher educators endeavour to promote transformative learning and this carries with it a recognition that developing teachers need to take risks. A confident, safe, collaborative, democratic, and supportive environment provides the conditions conducive to risk taking; yet the current workplace environment for some developing teachers is more likely to foster a pragmatist stance based upon adequacy and compliance. To illustrate this dichotomy, in one account, Wyn, a developing teacher involved in the research, appears to welcome the surveillance operating from within both the teacher education course and in the workplace, rather than an ‘inquiry of doubt, of tentative suggestion, of experimentation’ (Dewey 1910:112). When writing as part of a reflective synoptic assignment she responds to the discourses of audit and regulation with ease. ‘I have found that constant

monitoring of my own teaching...has helped my teaching to be of better quality'. For her it is the 'constant monitoring' that promotes her improvement in classroom practice (see Iredale 2011) and this reinforces the challenge for teacher educators not just to challenge workplace expectations, but also to reinforce good practice through regular observation.

Professional Knowledge and Practice

Donald Schön spoke of a crisis of confidence in professional knowledge; of practitioners 'locked into a view of themselves as technical experts'. (Schön 1983:69).

Nevertheless, because professionalism is still mainly identified with technical expertise, reflection-in-action is not generally accepted - even by those who do it - as a legitimate form of professional knowing, cannot increase its scope or depth or quality, and cannot with confidence help others to learn it.

In the same book Schön linked confidence and risk with the display of artistry (1983:18), claiming their legitimacy as a constituent of professional knowledge and its potential to be learnable by some individuals. For teachers, however, the level and depth of subject knowledge, and the confidence that ensues, often anchor their claim to legitimate professional knowledge (see Robson 1998). Hashweh (2005: 273) finds that more knowledgeable teachers were prepared to choose novel activities and to respond more positively to critical incidents in the classroom. The finding that subject knowledge that is regularly taught, 'preserves the planning and wisdom of practice that the teacher acquires when repeatedly teaching a certain topic' (Hashweh 2005:273) bolsters the need for teacher educators to actively seek to bring about (to inculcate) confidence through the provision and supervision of repeated classroom practice.

It could be argued here that the assessment of developing teachers' subject knowledge is already integral to the development of teachers through regulatory frameworks yet the

difficulties faced by teachers in describing subject specific pedagogy appear to confound the often arbitrary distinction found in standards-based discourse between what constitutes professional knowledge and professional practice. Avis and Fisher (2009:17) reflect the preference for interdisciplinary, or mode-2 knowledge (Gibbons et al. 1994) and it is in the active participation in teacher education classes, repeated classroom teaching experiences and through interactions with other teachers that more subtle inculcation of confidence takes place. For one developing teacher (Jenny) the preference for mode-2 knowledge is seen here:

..and the professional knowledge demonstrated very much through reflection-in-action I have continually had to think on my feet, being spontaneous in a variety of situations. I feel it is a part of me as a person not as a professional, however it's a style that works well in an educational setting.

She seems to privilege her personal identity and biography (outside her teaching role) over her professional identity when applying her professional knowledge in her classroom practice recognising that reflecting on one's practice 'can create vulnerability and can take you off course during a session'. She appears to find legitimacy in the location of her professional knowledge as imbued in the self rather than in her subject knowledge. Iredale (2011) further reveals that whereas both teachers and developing teachers use the word confidence when discussing the development of professional practice, little or no sign of the word can be found in policy, procedural or curriculum documents at institutional, national or governmental level in England.

According to Kim and Hannafin (2008:1837) developing teachers participate in classroom practice by developing firstly a situated understanding of the concepts and principles surrounding teacher knowledge, secondly strategies for using these in a future situation and thirdly assimilating, accommodating and negotiating their shared beliefs, identities and values from the practices of a situated community (Iredale 2011:). All of

this militates against any suggestion that ITT alone is a sufficient grounding for a novice teacher. The discussion about confidence and risk in relation to professional knowledge and practice in ITT and CPD exposes the tensions between all parties and suggests that a more nuanced debate is needed around the inculcation of confidence in time and space. For another developing teacher (Carol) her journey into praxis (in a contingent sense) combines several features of the development of professional knowledge and practice and she is unsure about the reasons for her success:

I do think that this was the best observation I have had to date and I am not sure whether it is my increasing knowledge regarding teaching and learning or increased confidence/classroom experience. I think that my classroom management has improved significantly and my presence in the classroom has also, again I think this is because my relationship with the learners and the rapport that I have developed with the students has become much better.

She acknowledges the combined engagement with the teacher education curriculum (knowledge about teaching and learning), work place practices (classroom experience), technical skill (classroom management) and the self (my relationship with the learners and the rapport). If these two illustrations are examples of developing teachers journeying into practice then the context of their professional practice merits an overview, to enable a broader understanding of the discussion.

Some writers in the field conflate the phenomenon of continual surveillance by government and policy makers with the growth of credentialism, commodification, instrumentalism and privatisation (see for example Gleeson et al. 2005: 446). The developing teacher experiences the teacher education curriculum as a relation of power (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:290) when they engage with professional development. It matters little whether or how much the teacher educator contextualises, embeds and offers practical applications of theory or how much they seek to make the process more democratic through discussion and debate. The theory is necessarily owned by the

curriculum - in the sense that it has been predetermined and codified within institutionalised conceptions of what constitutes a proper syllabus - not by the developing teacher. It should not be a surprise that some object therefore to its very 'materiality as an instrument and vector of power' (Foucault 1977: 30) whether or not they accept that the theory may inform them as practitioners. What is interesting is why some object and some simply acquiesce, comply or are even transformed by the process of engagement with theory. Foucault would argue that this depends on the nature of the power relations, the levels of discourse, and how close to the discourse the developing teacher is. A confident teacher working in a safe and open environment may feel able to consider theories in the light of practice and to engage in reciprocal elucidation (Foucault 1984: 381 in Gowan 1991:136 and see Bourdieu 1977) with the curriculum. However one lacking in confidence and working within insecure labour conditions where routinised practices prevail (see Iredale 2011) may never develop a full repertoire of theory in use. They may therefore be separated from the dialogic framed discourse in the teacher education classroom.

So far we have argued that professional knowledge is related to levels of subject knowledge, is interdisciplinary, dependent on a workplace that values more than technical expertise, and is characterised by relations of power both in the teacher education classroom and in the workplace. Many professionals find it difficult to explain their practice, to define it and locate it amongst the theories and principles that are taught during their initial training. Nevertheless, they are expected to develop technical expertise, which must be made visible through inspection of their practice. The assumption is that ITT and the workplace provide for this, and that following a curriculum, getting to the end of an ITT course forms and legitimates their professional knowledge. As Schön, suggests, it involves more than that: it is a journey based around

the development of artistry and confidence.

Having considered the nature and relations of WBL and professional knowledge and practice, the following section will focus on notions of confidence, risk and the journey into praxis.

Confidence, risk and praxis

This section discusses the nature of confidence and its relationship to risk. It explores confidence in relation to institutional contexts, teacher disposition, and structural aspects of teacher education and development such as assessment practices. To define confidence (if this is possible) is to set it within a relational framework where several interlinking factors, including power relations, serve to imbue or to inculcate confidence, or indeed to undermine it. Indeed Wain speaks of the self-directed lifelong learner free of hubris or arrogance and “related to a proper courage that is sensitive to the fluctuations of fortune and operates with the spirit of *amor fati*” (Wain, 2006: 41). This suggests the oscillating nature of confidence as Wain identifies the learner’s need for reassurance at one moment and challenge and adventure at another (2006: 41). Previous research has often taken confidence as a taken-for-granted, unproblematic term (and thus left undefined), central to the development of teachers, but somehow susceptible to manipulation through scoring, self-testing and classroom practice and management indicators (see Griffin 1983). Griffin does not explain how confidence can be measured if it is not defined for the purposes of research. Consequently, his suggestion that confidence levels can be measured over time misses the point that while confidence may be subject to a commonsense understanding, it is not a functional object (see Churchland 1993:213). Other writers approach confidence as an unassailable virtue (see James and Nightingale 2005, Norman & Hyland 2003, Rogers 2007). For

Orr (2012), confidence is about perception of the self, which is not necessarily related to enhanced practice, and so it is more problematic. (REF A para 2) “If it is arguable that good teachers are confident, it does not follow that all confident teachers are good.” (Orr 2012: 59). This more sceptical attitude to the discourse of confidence is adopted here, but the emphasis is placed on confidence from the perspective of the developing teacher. It is, however, worth noting in a wider sense that for educational institutions, confidence is also relative to the culture and dominant discourses of a changing world. Wain (2006: 37) argues that even institutions, fearing uncertainty and risk, are far from confident in their ‘knowingness’ but are constantly seeking reassurance through ‘the language of skills and competencies, of measurable outcomes and transparent transactions in their decisions’ (Wain 2006:39). The relationship between reassurance, safety and confidence is nicely demonstrated here. This runs counter to the notion of confidence as hubris: a ‘ruinous tendency to rationalise, to rely on reason over-much and in contexts where reason has little place’ (Smith 2006:3).

For developing teachers, time and space are fundamental for the journey into praxis. Confidence is reinforced through the discovery and development of new teaching strategies. Encouraging a certain amount of realism on the part of the developing teacher also helps to instil confidence, as it is very important for them to accept that they are not expected to know everything and that this is in fact entirely natural and acceptable (Norman and Hyland, 2003). Despite the best efforts of teacher educators to inculcate confidence through careful teaching, integration of theory and practice, and modelling of good practice the affordances of temporality and space (the good and appropriate time argued for in this paper) are crucial determining factors. Flint and Johnson (2010: 32), for example, relate confidence with maturity and being a high-achiever. Lack of confidence is cited by students (generally full time undergraduate) in

their research as one of the factors that inhibits them from approaching their teachers in respect of a perceived unfair assessment result. Moreover, the attitude of the teacher – whether they have an open door policy, for example — is cited as a factor that encourages students to feel confident to challenge an assessment result. This is significant because much of the teacher education curriculum in the English LLS is weighted towards assessment and judgement of progress and development, and even where this process is ipsative the relationship between developing teacher and teacher educator is pivotal for the inculcation of confidence through assessment. Norman and Hyland (2003) outline several processes that could inculcate confidence for student teachers. So, for instance, feeling secure, being treated well and being given positive feedback are all highlighted as factors. They emphasise the importance of developing teachers gaining appropriate skills and knowledge, but also suggest that this needs to be supplemented by being given appropriate amounts of support, encouragement and reassurance from their tutors (Harkin et al. 2001; Eldred et al. 2004). This is echoed by James and Nightingale (2005) who when researching adult learners posit that in order to build confidence tutors must adopt a learner-centred approach, respecting and valuing learners and providing them with support. Having tutors who are open-minded and who show interest in their learners aids this process, as does having tutors who are generous with their time, patient and knowledgeable. Discussion about confidence thus becomes Janus faced. It is both visible and obscure within policy and curriculum discourse; and it has the capacity to be both experienced as unfolding in time and space and marshalled functionally for the benefit of the developing teacher. In any manifestation, however, the relation between confidence and risk is worth pursuing.

Allen and Henry (1997) identify how perceived flexibility in the labour market translates into risk for those employees faced with a relationship based on

contractualisation (Allen and Henry 1997:185). While their research is about the contract service industry it is their assessment of Beck's characterisation of employment risk that resonates with the experience of developing teachers as they face 'precarious forms of employment' (see Allen and Henry 1997:181). Both employer and employee can view their contracted labour as flexible on the one hand, and as risky and uncertain on the other, but when people work in what Beck calls 'a risk-fraught system' (Beck 1992:143) the very constraints caused by insecurity can lead to a resourcefulness derived from individual biographies rather than collective identities. Avis (2009) invokes Giddens (1998) framing the teaching workplace as a process of reflexive modernization 'where restructuring has become commonplace' and more alarmingly still where professionalism based on the legitimacy of pedagogical and curricular expertise has been rendered untenable and replaced with a conditional trust. (Avis 2009: 245). There is hopefulness in this scenario however, as Avis points to the possibility of professionalism formed from dialogue and democracy to replace the flawed realities of performativity.

So far this discussion has encompassed notions of professional knowledge and practice, its location within WBL, confidence, and opportunities for the inculcation of confidence and risk. We conclude by attempting to bring these diverse themes together through a discussion of the good and appropriate time (Eukairia). There is not the space in this paper for a lesson in Greek, and nor are the authors up to the task, but it is worth a small detour into the derivation of the word, as the premise may hang on its definition. In this word there is held not just the chronological dimension of time (chronos), but also its temporality (kairos) – 'the associations of chance, opportunity, lived experience and relationality to time' (Papastephanou forthcoming). What Eukairia brings to the discussion in addition to these two corresponding ideas is the pause, the delay, and the

reflexivity of the practitioner as she considers her future practice in the light of recent experience. It may seem to be akin to Schön's slow-down phenomena and Dewey's reflective deliberation. It involves the developing teacher in a broader, more risky political act of reflection, not merely the 'here and now' technical evaluation of practice. So much of the theoretical principles in a typical teacher education curriculum are front-loaded, and distanced from practice, and too much practice is routinised (Iredale forthcoming), funnelled by evidence based teaching approaches and competency frameworks.

Beyond a narrow treatment of the pressures of production, performance, problem-solving and decision-making as well as beyond the space of distant study viewed as protected and sanitized, there always lies *eukairia* (good, appropriate time) for the learning that corresponds to the desire for various ways of knowing and to a reconciled theory and practice. (Papastephanou forthcoming).

At present, there is at institution and policy level an arbitrary break between initial teacher training and CPD in the lifelong learning sector. Both are necessary to develop confident, critical and professional practitioners, but the good and appropriate time extends across both aspects of a developing teacher's journey into praxis. As Jenny puts it succinctly when asked why she wanted to train as a teacher when she had already been teaching young people for some time without a qualification:

My manager doesn't understand fully what is involved in curriculum – just looking after young people in a room and it doesn't matter what they learn, but obviously we want more for our young people. I think the bottom line is I'll do anything for the young learner to experience something new, to give them an opportunity to make their life better, 'cos I feel I have proved it can be done.

From the discussion above, there are risks on both sides of the ITT curriculum based as it currently is either in the HE institution, or franchised through consortia to further education providers and the workplace during or just after a period of ITT. The transformative potential of a critical engagement with professional knowledge needs to

be balanced with the need to journey into praxis. While teacher education in LLS is currently steeped in a standards-driven and competency-based culture and while LLS workplaces prefer the neo-liberal, outcomes driven advantages of an insecure labour market, then developing teachers will struggle to accommodate risk in their professional journey. Changes to teacher development provision should include a shared space between the teacher education curriculum and the teaching workplace where a greater emphasis on the inculcation of confidence and risk-taking can be found.

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