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The entry of 14-16 students into colleges: implications for Further Education initial teacher-training in England

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Abstract

The introduction of applied diplomas for 14-19 year-olds from September 2008 in England is leading to increased numbers of young people of current school age (14-16) attending Further Education (FE) colleges, where aspects of these new qualifications are taught. Although students aged 14 and 15 have previously attended FE, the numbers involved are now set to be larger. Traditionally, however, initial teacher-training (ITT) for FE has focused on adult learning, and prepared trainees to work with more mature students. This paper draws upon existing literature as well as empirical data from small-scale research into the circumstances and perceptions of staff and 14 and 15 year-old students at college. Deriving from this, it makes some tentative suggestions for how teacher-trainers can respond to younger students in FE and so better prepare their trainees. However, any such response, and the impact it may have, is constrained by the political and social context for FE in England and specifically by the tight control the government maintains over teacher-training in FE. This current strategy ignores the complexity of FE, so this paper argues for a more radical transformation of ITT, based upon the concept of learning cultures, to enable and encourage new teachers to make professional judgements relevant to the particular circumstances of their own students.

Introduction

The introduction of diplomas with strong vocational elements for 14 to 19-year-olds from September 2008 has drawn attention to young people of school-age (14 to 16 years old) attending Further Education (FE) colleges in England, where aspects of these new qualifications will be taught. FE in England has been described as what is not school and not university (Kennedy 1997, 1), but those boundaries are being re-defined by government policy as young people of current compulsory school age (under 16) increasingly attend colleges. 14 to 16-year-olds attending colleges is not a new phenomenon, and more generally there have been cautious moves to create a framework for a 14 to 19 phase in the past (Bailey 2003), but the numbers involved in the new diplomas are planned to be significantly greater than anything seen in the past. Notably, though, in the first year of the diplomas the government has failed to meet its own targets for recruitment (Lipsett 2009), and the whole project is prone to the problems of previous initiatives in this area, discussed below.

ITT in FE has hitherto centred on notions of adult learning, a tendency apparent in recommended course books. Reece and Walker's (2006) *Teaching Training and Learning: A Practical Guide* is amongst the most popular and includes only a two page section on teaching younger students (pp144-145) which blithely states:

The use of ILT is a strong contender when working with young students. They are happy when using ILT...

Similarly popular is Curzon (2004) *Teaching in Further Education* which has a chapter entitled *Teaching the Older Student*, but no such section for the now more common younger students. Furthermore, according to Noel (2006 citing Parsons and

Berry-Lound 2004) teacher trainers are older on average than the rest of the FE workforce, four in ten of whom are over fifty. Thus, it is likely that many teacher trainers have not themselves experienced the recent influx of 14-16 year-old students and so had their own practice formed before it. In recognition of this imbalance in FE teacher-training this paper uses empirical data as well as existing literature to consider some implications of this younger student cohort in England for initial teacher training (ITT) in the FE sector. However, Grace (1991: 26) warns against a narrow policy science approach to analysing policy, which ignores the:

wider structuring and constraining effects of the social and economic relations within which policy making is taking place.

From this perspective, ITT in FE in England is prescribed and scrutinised by the government as never before with overarching statutory standards and centrally created assessment criteria. Any alterations to ITT in FE are rigidly circumscribed by the government, as well as by the wider political and social context of FE. This paper first analyses that context before making some small and tentative recommendations for teacher-trainers to adapt their courses in recognition of younger students attending colleges. Beyond the specifics of 14-19, this paper also suggests that more radical change is required within ITT for FE.

The short, small-scale research project* that this article is partly based on investigated the perceptions of students aged 14-16 attending a college and of staff who work with them there. In the period prior to the introduction of 14-19 diplomas qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews at one FE institution with eight students aged 14 or 15; three teaching staff who work with 14-

16 year-old students in college; as well as the college manager in charge of school-links. A teacher at a different FE college was also interviewed. All identifiers, including the names of institutions have been anonymised.

Policy and historical context

The extensive collection of papers produced by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training exposes the contradictions and consequences of policy in this rapidly-evolving area. In seeking to promote “a wider public debate”, Pring (2006, 1), as part of this review has asked, “What counts as an educated 19 year-old in this day and age?” Such a general and important question has never been posed by policy-makers and so initiatives involving 14-19-year-old students have been introduced which have little coherence, little longevity and when they fade away little is learnt from them (Bailey 2003; Huddleston and Oh 2004). This fundamental failure to strategically set out a long-term policy for young people in further education causes insecurity for everyone in the sector. Related to this failure is the discrepancy between the position of academic and vocational education in Britain where vocational qualifications are perceived as being of lower educational status to academic qualifications. Certainly, the government has attempted to mitigate this by stressing the academic content of diplomas, and by naming them “applied” rather than vocational. However, their emphasis on employers, and “practical workplace experience” (Kelly 2005, 3) suggests a strong resemblance to previous vocational qualifications.

For the New Labour government attracting more 14 to 16-year-old students onto vocational courses in FE colleges through, for example, the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP), described below, derives from its two central tenets; reducing social exclusion through widening participation in education and enhancing the vocational skills of the workforce in order to better compete in a globalised economy. FE was identified as the vehicle to achieve these related visions. "Further Education is the engine room for skills and social justice in this country," claimed Bill Rammell in 2005, when he was British minister of state for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, "FE's moment has come," (LSC 2005, 1). Above all, as is explicit in the government Green Paper *14-19: Extending opportunities, raising standards* (DES 2002) the government wishes to reduce the number of young people "not in education, employment or training" or NEETs. However, Pring (2005, 72), argues that the aims of New Labour's policies are contested and open to interpretation (p82), and they have no clear statement of *educational* purpose.

The pity is that we have been here before and yet, having no educational memory, the Labour government seems unable to learn from the past.
(Pring 2005, 83)

Moreover, even the connections that New Labour asserts between social justice, high skills and global competitiveness are disputed (Avis 2007: Coffield 1999).

Stanton and Fletcher (2006, 3) have also exposed the link between social class, poor academic attainment and attendance at colleges within this age group. While courses for 14-16 students have been nominally open to all, they have attracted weaker students from poorer backgrounds. For most of the students interviewed for

this project, the initial suggestion to attend a college course had come from school teachers, which supports the findings of Harkin (2006, 323) who refers to this as “a process of benevolent herding”.

Lumby and Wilson (2003, 549) express this clearly:

...if government policy promotes equality while retaining the A level “gold standard” as the pre-18 pinnacle for getting into a “good” university, operating in an increasingly differentiated higher educational system at post-18, then both society in general, and young people in particular will continue to read the cultural and status runes correctly.

Unfortunately, however, only those with sufficient cultural capital can read the runes correctly so reproducing social exclusion. Diplomas may attract a broader range of students, and certainly that is the stated aim of the government and the laudable intention of many teachers and managers working on the new diplomas. However, the danger remains that weaker students from poorer backgrounds may continue to be directed towards vocational or ‘applied’ courses, while better-informed students may seek positional advantage in more traditional qualifications. Significantly, none of the students interviewed during this project had discussed attending college with their parents, though the shaping of such choices by parents may be implicit. Ball et al. (2001 cited in Lumby and Foskett 2005, 113) found that parental influence on their children’s educational choices is directly proportional to the parents’ own level of education.

All of this suggests that those attending FE colleges aged 14-16 before the introduction of diplomas were the same students who have always attended, only a

little earlier. Such a situation is unlikely to change with the introduction of diplomas, which undercuts the government's arguments on reducing social exclusion. This context needs to be acknowledged before discussion of ITT, because no matter how effective the initial training of teachers, policy, status and class impinge greatly on which students come to college, and how successful they are there. Whatever the benefits of bringing younger students into FE, college teachers are required to cope with a complicated situation that they have little agency or autonomy to influence while receiving poorer salaries than school-teachers working with these same students. Nevertheless, ITT for teachers in FE is currently not preparing them as well as it should to work with these younger students.

Initial Teacher Training in Further Education

As indicated above, FE plays an important role in the New Labour project of enhancing skills and increasing social justice, which explains why FE teaching and teacher-training have received so much attention from the policy-makers. In 1999 the government produced *Standards for Teaching and Supporting Learning in England and Wales* and from 2001 all teaching qualifications had to incorporate these standards. For the first time all new staff in FE had to gain a teaching qualification within a set period of taking up a post. These standards, which contained three hundred separate descriptors of knowledge and ability, were replaced in 2006 by the *New overarching standards for teachers, tutors and trainers in the lifelong learning sector* published by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK 2006), the government body that runs FE. The LLUK document is shorter but still states not just the values that are expected of teachers in FE, but also their practice. Assessment of students, for

example, must involve “using feedback as a tool for learning and progression”, (LLUK 2006: 12). Teachers must commit to “[u]sing a range of learning resources to support learners” (p. 5).

Such detail and even the length of the LLUK standards (190 statements) are in contrast to the equivalent single page of broad statements that cover Higher Education (HEA 2006), or even the much simpler General Teaching Council (GTC 2006) statement of standards relating to school-teachers. This denial of the autonomy that most definitions of professionalism include (Eraut 1994) imposes on FE teachers a diminished form of professionalism. This is also true of FE teacher-trainers who now must assess trainees against centrally produced criteria (LLUK 2007) which means the government has greater control over teacher-training than ever before. This may indicate a lack of confidence in teacher-trainers, but it certainly rests on the notion that:

It is possible to capture in written statements—codified knowledge—the richness and complexities involved in the process of teaching. (Nasta 2007,3)

The experience of young students in colleges demonstrates this not to be the case.

The experience of 14-16 year-old students in an FE college

The students and staff interviewed for this project were all involved with the IFP, which was introduced in 2002 to encourage partnerships between colleges and schools enabling students in year 10 and 11 (aged 14 to 16) to attend colleges for one or two days a week. For an evaluation of IFP see Golden *et al* (2005). Harkin

(2006, 320) states that IFP “may be seen as another episode in a long endeavour to engage and retain more learners” and cites a national figure of 80,000 students involved in 300 different partnerships in its first three years, mainly in hair and beauty, construction, engineering, leisure and tourism and health and social care courses.

North College, where the majority of interviews took place serves a region made up of industrial towns as well as rural areas in the north of England. The local borough where it is situated has considerably more than the national average of adults with no academic qualification and it contains areas of high deprivation. The college has had a school liaison team since 2004 and close links with local schools. In the academic year 2007-8, North College had around 600 students aged 14-16 who normally attended for two sessions each week and who are largely integrated within the rest of the college community.

The experience described by 14-16 year old students in North College concurs with research by Harkin (2006), McCrone *et al* (2007), Davies and Biesta (2007) and Attwood *et al* (2003) who have all emphasised that the 14-16 year-olds who attend college enjoy it. This enjoyment of college was usually expressed in contrast to their feelings about school. Indeed the majority had opted or agreed to come to college precisely to “get out of school”, though this may expose the short-term novelty of college. The extracts below are indicative of the contrasting attitudes to school and college described the participants in the research.

At school you just sit there and write things...here you've got a lot more responsibilities

you get treated better [than at school]

you get treated like adults

you don't get done for calling the teacher by her real name

There was appreciation of the greater freedom and independence in college.

You can be more yourself here.

You can mess about here, but still get the work done

Above all, as suggested in the extracts from interviews below, students appreciated their relationship with the teachers in college, and once again this was in contrast to their perceived relationship with teachers in school.

You can have a laugh with the teachers here.

If we say something bad they'll let us off, but at school...

We respect the teachers [in college] and they respect us.

Like, teachers at school, you have to treat them like teachers, whereas teachers here you can treat them like mates.

We work better here than we do when we are at school because our relationship with our teachers is better.

Teachers at school are there to teach us and that's it; they don't do anything else.

This last comment is particularly significant because it highlights an aspect of the relationship between college staff and students that both parties described and

valued, which was a concern for the student as an individual with anxieties and interests beyond the classroom setting. The students all valued their relationship with the college teachers, who they felt were fair, but who could also have fun.

All the students interviewed recognised that their behaviour was different in college to when they attended school, where they could sometimes be difficult. Emma, the Teaching Assistant (TA) that accompanies the students to college described how one girl was “a nightmare” at school, but who at college worked hard and was appreciated by the staff. When Emma had described this to colleagues back at the school, she had been met with incredulity. The students themselves attributed this difference in behaviour to the respect they were shown by college teachers, but when prompted agreed that the small group size was also contributory. At school they are normally taught in groups of thirty, while only seven or eight attend college classes.

When these year 10 and 11 students were asked if they should be taught differently to 16-19 year olds, they were adamant that they should be treated the same way.

...if they teach 14-16 year-olds like they teach 16-19 year olds, then we are ready for it.

By teaching us this way we have more respect than from the teachers at school.

This attitude reflected the opinion of most of the staff interviewed.

The experience of teachers working with 14-16 students in an FE college

In contrast to the survey carried out by the Institute of Education and the teachers' trade union, NATFHE in 2004 cited by Harkin (2005, 8) which found only 40 percent of staff were positive or very positive about teaching younger students, all the teachers interviewed for this project enjoyed working with the school links students and several had particular stories of those they had "*turned around*" or "*managed to reach*". This, however, was a very small, self-selecting group of teachers interested in taking part in this research and they recognised that these young people could be particularly challenging. Moreover, most were aware of colleagues who were reluctant to work with this age group, though this may be due to teaching students who had not chosen the course and who consequently lacked any motivation or commitment; "*just putting them in where there is a space available*" as described by one teacher. Lack of maturity *per se* was not thought to be the main complaint.

The college teachers interviewed said that they had not received special training for working with younger students, though one had been secondary school teacher-trained. However, those who had had the opportunity had benefited greatly from observing school sessions. Like the school links students themselves, most did not think that these younger students should be taught differently to older ones. This is in contrast to the view of one experienced teacher from Shire College, a similar local FE institution who said:

I, and many of my colleagues, felt that once we got [14-16-year-old students] in college we could treat them as college students and I personally rapidly discovered that you can't.

He described the need to treat these young students as if they were at school and had been surprised that his experience of disaffected 17 year-olds, for example, had not prepared him for these younger students.

They need the parameters that are set for them at school and if you don't provide that framework for behaviour and discipline and so forth they don't have the toolkit to work, and that's when you get discipline problems.

The contradictory views of these teachers anticipate the differing decisions made by colleges on how best to receive school-age students, and reflect diverse local situations. Nevertheless, all the staff interviewed described some alteration to their practice in order to meet the needs of younger students. Shorter attention spans, for instance, were acknowledged which necessitated variety, short activities, and regular breaks. Emma, the TA, recognised that the approach of college staff was quite different to that of the school identifying how more responsibility was given to the students and that there was more fun and more structure within sessions. Some of the teachers interviewed also referred to their experience of being a parent as having informed, and mellowed, their attitude to their teenage students.

However, the advice of the teacher from Shire College on receiving these students was more stark:

think very carefully about the structures you place around those students and if you are going to have a structure that loosens the ties compared to what the

regime is at the school, then you have to think very, very carefully about how you have to manage that.

Like the other staff interviewed Tim, the senior manager leading IFP in North College described how schools had initially selected for IFP the children that they could not handle. While the schools still had a large degree of control over the links with the college, much closer personal relationships had developed between school and college staff at all levels. When asked the question, who was in *loco parentis*, without hesitation Tim answered, the school, and he was aware of the complex legal requirements, as to some extent were the teachers at the college.

The numbers of 14-16 students are relatively high at North College, but the overall impact on the college appeared to have been small. At Shire College, however, the participant described how a smaller number, 450 14-16 year-olds, had had “*quite a lot of impact*” on the institution, particularly amongst those on Higher Education courses. He summed the problem up as:

adults wanting to get on and kids being kids.

In saying this he stressed that the younger students were behaving in a way that was “silly”, not malicious.

On the basis of these data, as well as that of other researchers, colleges are successfully including students who have been challenging or disaffected in schools,

and in so doing have demonstrated to these young people that education can be attainable and even enjoyable. Despite the absence of coherent or consistent national policy, the attitude of staff and managers interviewed for this research project indicates a strong desire to provide young people in college with a worthwhile education.

Reforming teacher-training

How should teacher-trainers alter their provision in response to younger students entering colleges? The circumstances of every college are different and so the five suggestions below are tentative and limited. More generally, though, where ITT courses have a high proportion of FE teacher-trainees the norm of reference needs to be younger since the FE teacher's experience is as likely to be of teenagers as mature adults. These recommendations attempt to deal with common perceptions about how younger students learn and behave, even if these perceptions are ill-founded, as well as developing what was identified through the small research project.

1. Developing the teacher-trainer

Many teacher-trainers will not have experienced the recent influx of younger students and so they should find opportunities to observe and participate in classes of 14-16 year-olds in order to acclimatise themselves and so be better able to advise and help trainees. Similarly, ITT providers should organise development events aimed at teacher-trainers to help them meet the evolving needs of their trainees in this context.

2. Challenge the notion that 14-16 year-olds learn in a fundamentally different manner.

FE ITT courses have traditionally placed considerable weight on learning theories such as Knowles's andragogy, as indicated by the recommended reading. These suggest that adults learn in a fundamentally different way to children, which is at least open to dispute. Teacher-trainers should provide opportunities to critically consider the learning of 14-16 year-olds to comprehend if and how maturity necessarily and essentially affects learning, and what this means for teachers.

3. Plan to prepare trainees for these younger students.

All the staff involved in this project described how teachers needed to adapt to these students in how they planned their lessons with, for example, short varied activities and acceptable behaviour frameworks. Teacher-trainers should consciously and deliberately plan how they will prepare their trainees in this regard, which relates directly to the fourth point below.

4. Meet the perceived need for training on classroom management.

Trainees on ITT courses often express the need for advice on how to cope with challenging behaviour, especially with teenage students. Although based upon a deficit model of younger students, which must be challenged, there is clearly a perceived need for techniques to deal with younger students. These should be introduced into ITT sessions while highlighting differences with

traditional schools' practice where appropriate. At the same time, trainees should be informed of the legal situation regarding responsibility for school-age children (LSC no date).

5. Organise opportunities for trainees to observe classes of 14-16 year-olds.

Ideally, as suggested by interviewees, this should be in schools in order to let trainees see what their students come from and, as a result, what they may expect from college.

These narrow practical steps may help to improve ITT in response to 14-16 year-olds in colleges, but ITT in FE requires much greater change. The interviews carried out for this project reveal the complex and contingent culture that staff and students participate in while at college, which in turn should inform ITT. That culture should not be understood as merely the background within which learning occurs; learning itself is integral as part of the social practice that reproduces the culture. For James & Biesta (2007, 23; original emphases) :

a learning culture should not be understood as the context or environment within which learning takes place. Rather, 'learning culture' stands for *the social practices through which people learn*. A cultural understanding of learning implies, in other words, that the learning is not simply occurring *in* a cultural context, but is itself to be understood *as* a cultural practice.

As Davies and Biesta (2007, 34) conclude:

It was the complex set of relationships that made up the practice through which the young people learned that was central to their positive learning experience.

To understand how 14-19 year-old students react and learn in college we need to understand their part in the culture, the “complex set of relationships”, and so how they are enculturated, all of which has implications for teacher-training. The government’s present strategy of close scrutiny and control of ITT based around the LLUK standards and centralised outcomes suggests that learning to teach is like learning a set of algorithms. Worse is that achievement of those outcomes becomes an end in itself. In contrast, teachers in FE need the knowledge and confidence to make their own independent professional judgments precisely because they face complicated, unpredictable situations. In other words, they will have to make decisions that cannot be captured in a set of written statements. Currently, for example, a trainee must demonstrate that she can “[u]nderstand the range of contexts in which education and training are offered in the lifelong learning sector”.

To do this she must be able to:

Analyse ways in which the curriculum offer might differ according to the educational/ training context [and]

Analyse ways in which delivery of curriculum might vary according to purpose and context, with reference to examples from own practice

(LLUK 2007, 24)

Such a technical approach to managing diversity again demonstrates the mistaken notion cited previously (Nasta 2007, 3) that “the richness and complexities involved in the process of teaching” can be codified.

The influx of 14-16 year-olds into colleges constitutes only one small part of the complexity of FE, but illustrates the constantly changing responsibilities of teachers

in the sector. A teacher-training course focused on the analysis and promotion of learning cultures would be a better preparation for the myriad diversity of FE than the current focus on standardised criteria. This would entail teacher-trainees having the time and space to experiment, reflect and discuss in close collaboration with their colleagues and teacher-trainers. Moreover, policymakers would have to give teachers in FE the same level of professional autonomy that they give teachers in schools and HE. That would take both a different conception of the professional autonomy of FE teachers, and a major policy shift in how they are trained.

Conclusion

The proposed increase in the number of school-age students in colleges in England calls for a considered response from FE teachers, and so from those who train them. In that spirit, the five tentative recommendations above are proposed for teacher-trainers to develop their provision, in so far as they can. However, ITT in FE is now tightly mediated by the government which specifies outcomes and so restricts the opportunities for trainees to consider the learning cultures that they themselves participate in. Given the diverse and uncertain situations that FE teachers may have to cope with in their career, this approach to ITT based on narrow standardised criteria, may be a poor grounding. The rising number of school-age students attending colleges exemplifies the complexity of English FE and illustrates how social class and the related status of vocational courses remain very powerful influences on who attends colleges and how successful they are there. It also exemplifies how government policy for the sector fluctuates. Within this context, reforming ITT to promote the knowledge and confidence of new teachers, so they

are better able to manage unpredictable circumstances, rather than attempting to rigidly stipulate their practice, would seem a better preparation for a career in FE.

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