

>> EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF THE 'RECENT RELEVANT EXPERIENCE' OF TEACHER EDUCATION STAFF IN TWO SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES

Living in the Real World or Airy-Fairyland?

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Introduction

The balance between theory and practice has become a traditional theme in the ongoing discourse on how new teachers should be best prepared - and never far from that theme are questions about lecturing staff and how much school-based experience should be required of them to plan and oversee ITE programmes. Examination of such issues raises fundamental questions relating to how teacher education is conceptualised and to what extent policy formation in teacher education is politically driven. Ginsburgh and Lindsay (1995) propose seven questions to help focus attention on the political dimension of teacher education policy formation; among these questions (centring on location and curricular content of ITE programmes) are considerations of teacher education staff, including their selection and employment.

In recent years teacher education in the UK has seen a period of unparalleled levels of development and this changing face of teacher education, with the political, power and resourcing imperatives which underpin it, has clearly brought questions such as those Ginsburgh and Lindsay highlight to the surface. When considering the issues of theory, practice and the experience of lecturing staff it can be seen that there is a close correlation of these matters with a number of their axiomatic questions.

It is against this background of continuing discussion on teacher education that this study arose, with a recent re-emergence of the topic regarding the fitness of lecturing staff for the purpose of initial teacher education. This came about as a result of the publication of the McCrone Report (2000) when, during the process of the enquiry, *some* teachers criticised aspects of their initial training. Their concern was that '...insufficient numbers of lecturing staff in the TEIs had had recent experience of working in a school, and were therefore sometimes out of touch with recent curriculum developments and the problems and requirements of the job as it is now' (2000, 63). In order to address these concerns the report

recommended that lecturing staff should have recent relevant experience (RRE) in the classroom and that they should '...be required to update their experience with periodic spells in a school environment as appropriate' (2000, 63).

Subsequently, the First Stage Review of ITE, carried out for the Scottish Executive by Deloitte and Touche (2001), suggested that amongst the various stakeholders there was '...universal agreement on the desirability in principle of RRE' (2001, 38). However, there does not appear to be a shared understanding of what it is, what it should constitute, how it is imported into ITE programmes and what impact it has on the quality of ITE programmes. It is therefore the intention of this study to explore the importance of RRE in contemporary ITE in Scotland.

Background to the study: Concepts and contexts

RRE in England - origins and assumptions

The early 1980s saw a raft of changes in teacher education in England which included a radical shift to an increased emphasis on a more practical form of training for teachers (Furlong et al., 2000). In response to the English White Paper 'Teaching Quality' of March 1983, the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) advised the government on how teacher education could be more closely aligned with work in schools. It is within this context, through the issuing of Circular 3/84, that the term 'Recent Relevant Experience' officially entered the professional discourse (DES 1984). This circular laid down the requirement that candidates applying for posts in initial teacher education should have 'substantial and successful recent, relevant experience in schools' and had a significant impact on recruitment policies, with RRE assuming a far greater importance than hitherto as a criterion for employment.

While it has been pointed out by commentators that CATE perceived their own role as a benign one of re-shaping the content of courses to promote a more effective model of teacher education (Furlong et al. 2000), there was a widespread belief that changes such as the introduction of RRE had more threatening undertones and were rooted in the New Right political agenda (Gilroy 1992, Furlong et al. 2000, Davies and Ferguson 1997, Beattie 1991). This political ideology was seen to present a fundamental challenge to those in control of teacher education and hinged on what were perceived as progressive and inappropriate teaching methods and out-of-touch theories.

This politically dominant view pivoted around the idea that teaching is a vocational pursuit and that the purpose of teacher education should be to *train*, rather than *educate*, teachers – and that this training would best be achieved within the context of the school ‘...where the trainee is shown and told the right way to do it’ (Tomlinson 1995, 12). This concept of teacher education was perceived by teacher educators themselves to be narrowly conceived and lacking in the academic and intellectual rigour which, they believed, would assist in the development of autonomous professionals able to interpret and criticise their observations and experiences (Eraut 1989, Holligan 1997, Boxall and Burrage 1981, McPhee and Humes 1998, Carr 1993, Adams and Tulasiewicz 1995, Tomlinson 1995).

RRE within the Scottish context

Although the developments outlined above took place, largely, in England and Wales they provide important insights that help focus attention on RRE within the Scottish context. While there was no equivalence of the CATE circular in Scotland, the RRE principle became enshrined in employment conditions for teacher educator staff in Scotland during the 1980’s. The markedly different culture and political situation north of the border, however, enabled the Scottish education system to withstand what were regarded as the more damaging, market-led features of educational reform, as witnessed in England and Wales in the 1980s and 90s (Kirk 1994). The vision of teacher education in Scotland is in line with the reflective practitioner, or of ‘... how principled understanding can be brought to bear on educational practice’, in defence of the so-called gap between theory and practice (Carr 1993, 253).

The McCrone report in Scotland and the re-emergence of RRE

Close inspection of the report, and its process of enquiry, reveals certain echoes with the issues outlined in the English debate which appear to relate to conceptualisations about teacher education and standards of teacher educators. It is notable that throughout the report the preparation of new teachers is described in terms of teacher *training*, a discourse that many feel to be synonymous with a narrow, vocationalised view of teacher education (Furlong et al. 2000, McPhee and Humes 1998, Carr 1993). In contrast to the report’s criticism of TEs on the grounds of ‘...insufficient numbers of lecturing staff with RRE’, it is stated that, ‘... on the other hand, periods of school placement were seen as extremely valuable’ (6). The implicit assumption here seems to be that school is the most valuable source of training and so appears to be antithetical to Powney’s research findings on the Mentoring scheme pilot and with research studies which show that students do value the distinctive, complimentary contributions of HE and school experience (Holligan 1997, Furlong et al. 2000).

The first stage review of initial teacher training in Scotland (2001)

The first stage review acknowledges the debate on ‘...whether there is real evidence that such perceptions (on RRE) are actually widespread’ and whether they ‘are justified’ (2001, 37). The review states that there is ‘universal agreement on the desirability of RRE’ but, given the lack of definition of RRE and a shared understanding of what effective RRE should comprise, questions on how RRE can best be achieved remain unexamined.

The study: Scope and methodology

The study aimed to find out :

- what concepts of RRE are held and how it is defined by a range of people involved in the partnership of initial teacher education
- how RRE is imported in to ITE and how this is perceived to add value to ITE programmes
- how the role of the teacher educator is perceived by a range of ITE stakeholders

The approach selected for the study is exclusively qualitative and uses focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In order to cover a range of views focus groups were formed from the following personnel:

- staff working in ITE (ranging from newly appointed lecturing staff to key managerial staff)
- school senior management staff
- students (BED 4, PGCE) and probationary teachers

Identifying the participants for the interviews was based on the research questions and the critical factor of *who* could provide these insights. Therefore the participants covered the same categories as had been used for the focus groups but, in addition to the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS), it was decided to interview staff from the associated bodies of Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). This was to give broader perspectives from key national bodies who are either involved in, or have an interest in the ITE process.

Findings

Concepts of RRE: Definitions

Many participants expressed similar views on definitions of RRE, principally that the term itself was under-considered and loosely used but generally related to being in touch with the real world of the classroom. One strategic manager summarised these views thus stating ‘*recent relevant experience is a shorthand term connected to a whole variety of other issues.*’ Firm views were voiced by these participants on the popular perception of RRE equating with a return to the classroom; such a definition, focusing primarily on face-to-face teaching contact with pupils in the classroom, was viewed as too narrow in conception. As one participant put it, ‘*We need to get away from this notion that RRE is only that which is in-situ (the classroom), where being in school is the only kind of relevant experience. It’s about having a wider view, wider than Scotland - it’s about different perspectives and learning from the experience of others.*’

Opposing views were expressed by a seconded lecturer, a probationary teacher and a primary headteacher who felt that the idea of, ‘*...some practical teaching done in a class and being active in a class*’ was intrinsic to the definition of RRE. Interestingly, the primary headteacher and seconded lecturer

both appeared to shift their perspectives during the interviews and both moved to reconceptualise their earlier statements on definitions. The seconded lecturer shifted to a position of being 'unconvinced' after all, that lecturers must go back to the class to gain RRE and the headteacher felt that their previously stated focus on practice might be a 'fairly blinkered' way to define RRE.

One course leader seemed to sum up some of the apparent complexities around the definition in the following statement, 'I think recent relevant experience is an odd term. How recent is recent? What is relevant? Is it that you have been teaching your subject the same way for twenty years? Or is it that you are open to innovation and apply research and theory to your practice?' The apparent conundrum over definition is further exemplified through the view of another participant at the end of an interview: 'I was so confident that I knew what it meant until I started thinking about it, I'm kind of chasing my tail and going round in circles thinking that 'recent' is the important thing, but actually I come down on the side of 'relevant' being the priority – but then I have to examine what the relevance is.'

Two further themes emerged in the analysis of the responses to the question on concepts of RRE - the issue of theory and practice and the issue of credibility.

Concepts of RRE: Theory and practice

The responsibility of the ITE lecturer to promote theory-practice links was stressed by a number of participants as critical in fostering a philosophy of teaching and learning in students which seeks to widen their ideas on teaching and equip them with the knowledge to confidently analyse teaching and learning situations. For these participants, largely comprising of those directly involved in ITE or those who had knowledge of the courses, theory-practice equilibrium was not a worrying issue. A tension was highlighted, however, by a BEd 4 student who stated that, 'Sometimes we're told things and then when we've gone into school you get told that it's airy-fairy land – so you're going in with all these ideas and the teacher just tells you that's not happening, so I don't know where that leaves you.'

Alternative perspectives were forwarded by one strategic manager, a course leader and an experienced lecturer. They felt there were many practising teachers who, as one said, '...had stopped developing years ago,' and questioned whether, in these cases, teachers' own practice and experience was relevant and up-to-date. This was echoed in a comment from a BEd 4 student who stated that many teachers did not 'deal' with students effectively and sometimes appeared to lack confidence about the research-led approaches which students hoped to put into practice. There was a convergence of views among many participants that teachers' ideas about ITE were shaped by their own experiences of 'training' and that this historical perspective was often unrepresentative of contemporary ITE.

Concepts of RRE: Credibility, myth and reality

While there was general consensus across the participants that the concept of RRE related to perceived concerns about ITE lecturers' credibility and awareness of classroom realities there were different views about the substance of this. Statements such as, '...there's a view out there that it's an easy option' and '...lecturers are sheltered in academia' tended to come from those who were either currently teaching or who had recently left school teaching. The headteachers felt that these notions often emanated from teacher stress and their expectations of the ITE role to produce teachers who can deliver, '... all the goods.'

A seconded lecturer felt that it was essential to retain class contact with children if credibility was to be maintained and a PGCE-route probationary teacher had more faith in lecturers

who had recently been in the classroom as they 'knew what it was like.' One probationary lecturer said that it was their intention to return to a school post before five years had elapsed in the belief that credibility would otherwise be lost. Interestingly, there was contrasting evidence from another probationary lecturer whose credibility as a lecturer was challenged when they had failed a student's assignment, '...I've experienced the downside through a student who disregarded my views because I was "only" a teacher - so you have a double-edged sword depending on what people want to take.'

The seconded lecturer and probationary lecturers all mentioned that they made use of anecdotes from the classroom to prove their own credibility to students, such as, 'When I tell little anecdotes about a certain writing programme or a certain reading scheme I feel validated. I feel the students take me more seriously when I use these illustrations.' However, the local authority adviser had a different perspective on anecdotes stating that, 'The lecturer who has got a number of papers under their belt, who has written for educational journals, is much more useful to me than someone who has RRE of the class - I don't want that. It becomes too anecdotal and I'm not looking for that at all. I want someone who can push me in the right direction.'

Some participants took a different view of credibility, stating that if this is perceived to come predominantly from face-to-face classroom contact then it would be possible to claim that other staff - such as HMI, Advisers, Headteachers and LTS personnel - were similarly out of touch and also lacking in credibility. The strategic managers, GTC, EIS, LTS representatives, and lecturers all gave similar accounts of how they felt that lecturers' credibility was established throughout their careers and how this 'credible,' valued expertise was actively sought for partnership and national development work. On the issue of lecturers going back to the classroom there was broad consensus amongst the national bodies, course leaders, experienced lecturers and headteachers who all felt this was both unnecessary and impractical.

Importation of 'RRE' and perceived value to programmes

There was universal agreement that it was essential that all ITE programmes were kept relevant and in harmony with current policy and practice and some areas of provision, such as inclusion, behaviour management, classroom organisation, and health education were repeatedly highlighted by headteachers, students and probationers as pressing aspects. Participants from the ITE field detailed specific strategies to ensure relevance and currency on courses, such as the secondment system and associate tutors. Interestingly, probationary lecturers, students and those working outwith the faculties expressed degrees of uncertainty about such measures and how these related to the notion of RRE and were unable to list ways in which planned importation of RRE is achieved in ITE.

Role awareness

There was a substantial body of opinion from all of the participants that there was a general lack of awareness amongst teachers on the role and remit of the teacher educator; this was exemplified in the evidence from a course leader who told of a student's surprise on seeing her name on an academic text saying, 'I didn't know you did writing! One strategic manager summed up the views in the statement, 'The overall remit is invisible to many students and teachers.'

Strategic managers, course leaders and experienced lecturers all pointed out the breadth of the role – research, consultancy, collaborative work with national bodies such as LTS, SQA, HMI and CPD work. They stressed, also, the regular teaching commitment and maintenance, therefore, of core teaching skills. Experienced lecturers in the focus group and the lecturers interviewed agreed that it was necessary to have

a balance of staff - that is, people fresh from class and people who had knowledge of, and experience in teacher education. Many participants believed it was important to promote awareness of the role. A GTC representative went further stating that, *'It's extremely important that all the stakeholders recognise that the contributions of school and faculty-based staff are not the same but that they are complementary - and it's a partnership approach.'*

Discussion

Stakeholders' discourses around the notion of RRE generally formed into two distinct, but often discordant, groups - those directly involved with ITE (or who were informed about the content of courses) and those who were either practising teachers or who had recently left the class. School managers, some students and new lecturers straddled both of these groups, perhaps through their understanding of the duties of, and empathy for the predicaments of both teachers and ITE staff. The transformation of some participants' views during the interviews, as they distilled their own conceptualisation of teacher education, was interesting, but perhaps not surprising since the professional community is rarely afforded opportunities to refine understandings of those parts of the education service outwith their own area of specialism. What is cause for concern, though, is that these discordant discourses suggest that the aims of the ITE partnership, in relation to role clarification and course communication, have not been fully realised.

Tensions between the stakeholder groups on definitions and concepts around the notion of RRE again, reveal exigent communication issues for the ITE partnership. The need teachers have to be valued and for others to understand the challenges and pressures associated with their jobs, as attested in this study by headteachers and emphasised in McCrone (2000), appears to be central to their issues with RRE. Certainly, the matter of teacher stress is coming to the fore and serious consideration is now being given to this area with an acknowledged need for more research to inform policy formulation (Wilson 2002). It is perhaps ironic, then, that the views of some stakeholders (on definitions, theory-practice and the issue of face-to-face class contact) should devalue the teacher educator role, particularly as the findings of this study and cognate studies (Brisard et al. 2004, Bullough and Kauchak 1997a) suggest a need to distinguish between the myth and the substance about the credibility of ITE lecturers and their role.

The limited awareness of the teacher educator role amongst some school partners and students suggests a real need to publicise the role and elevate understanding amongst the stakeholder group to dispel any prevailing misconceptions. This accords with a study by Weir and McGettrick (2001) and the recommendation of the Sutherland Report on teacher education and training (1997); both bemoaned a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities and called for a clearer understanding in the partnership. This is currently being stressed again as an aspiration in the Review of Initial Teacher Education Stage 2 (2005) but the review's recommendation that, *'... local authorities and universities engage in more interchange of teachers and lecturers'* (12) may expedite matters and, if achieved, help partners to have clear expectations of the distinctive, but complementary roles within the partnership as promoted by writers such as Furlong (2000).

The consensus on 'relevant experience' as the key component in the prevailing term 'recent relevant experience' offers a more positive focus for teacher formation. However, the issue of validity in classroom practice is a concern for *all* involved in

the ITE partnership. With increased emphasis in the profession on research-led practice, there is a greater imperative for all teachers to remain research informed. The evidence from this study suggests that some teachers may have apprehensions about supporting student teachers in the delivery of research-led practice and, whilst the evidence on why this was the case is inconclusive, it is possible that this insecurity can be attributed to the lack of opportunity - or the lack of desire - for teachers to participate in ongoing professional development. Paradoxically, this connotes that some teachers may lack aspects of the 'relevant' professional knowledge necessary for effective practice, and reinforces the notion that 'relevance' in teaching exceeds face-to-face contact.

But perhaps of greater concern, if we are to ensure that classroom practice is based on insights from research and successful initiatives, is the need for the profession to acknowledge collective responsibility in achieving 'relevance.' The Review of ITE Stage 2 (SEED 2005) stresses the importance on newly qualified teachers to, *'...continue to learn beyond their initial academic and professional qualifications,'* (p8) but it can be argued that this applies in equal measure to experienced teachers. It is to be hoped that the advent of increased CPD opportunities and the move towards a continuum of professional development will enhance teachers' confidence in applying research. Initial teacher education has a clear responsibility, within the university as a 'centre of critical thought' (Brisard et al. 2004), to develop theory-practice knowledge within this complementary partnership and to produce *'...a teaching profession that is critically reflective... who both demonstrate their own commitment to lifelong learning and draw upon research and other evidence to inform their teaching,'* as accentuated in the Review of Initial Teacher Education Stage 2 (SEED 2005, 7).

The communication and partnership theme surfaced again through the evidence on measures taken in initial teacher education to ensure currency in course content. While there was universal agreement that all areas of ITE provision must be kept up-to-date, students and school partners were unable to highlight measures through which this is achieved (such as secondments and associate tutor schemes). Variations amongst the stakeholders in their awareness of specific strategies may indicate a need to re-examine the way in which these planned aspects of ITE provision are made transparent and conveyed to students and school partners.

Problems with communication, however, are not just located at the school-faculty interface but also reside within the teacher education faculties themselves, as revealed in the evidence from the seconded and probationary lecturers who were also unaware of the range of key 'RRE' strategies. The evidence indicated their lack of knowledge may relate to the challenges involved in making the transition from teacher to teacher educator (Furlong 2000) and their own priorities being focused on the survival aspects of course teaching, school supervision and becoming research-active. This creates a tension for new lecturers between the requirement for them to undertake generic induction programmes (which *all* new university lecturers are required to undertake and are designed largely to support lecturers across the university from non-teaching backgrounds) and a more tailored induction programme - which the new ITE lecturers in this study expressed a desire for. Corresponding evidence is pointed up in a study undertaken at the University of Brunel (Murray 2005), where it was found that current structures and procedures do not meet tutors needs in the process of becoming a teacher educator, suggesting that this may be a common issue for the teacher education universities.

Effective support for new lecturers, which will help them to take on the full mantle of the teacher educator role and

confidently engage in partnership activities, is a clear need. However, for those universities which have recently acquired teacher education provision, the institutional challenges in moving away from a one-size-fits-all in to a more appropriate induction for new ITE lecturers appear to be unresolved at present. Moreover, if more suitable induction arrangements can be achieved, formal mechanisms for maximising the benefits of the recent relevant classroom experience brought into the university through individual new staff might form part of the programme; the evidence from this study suggests that this is often accomplished on an informal basis and, given the pressure on ITE staff and departments, key aspects of recent class experience therefore risk either being overlooked or informing a limited number of courses only.

Conclusion

Like much of the terminology in education that has become cemented in the professional discourse, the phrase 'recent relevant experience' has been assumed to carry a universal meaning and truth for all educationalists. The findings from this study suggest this is not the case. The concept of RRE, as disclosed in the discourse, is somewhat amorphous and masks deeper concerns relating to teacher formation and may indicate a need for re-examination of the kind of questions Ginsburgh and Lindsay (1995) pose if a shared concept of the model of teacher education is to be genuinely achieved by all those involved in the partnership.

The evidence from this study shows agreement amongst all stakeholders on the importance of the promotion of up-to-date classroom practice in initial teacher education, but the emphasis on the experience of individual lecturers is unhelpful. Perhaps a more constructive view of experience is the notion of *aggregate* experience, where the cumulative, 'big picture' experience of individuals contributes to the collective experience of the partnership community and thereby supports and informs course content and development.

It would seem advantageous to review how the recent classroom experience of individuals is actively engaged in a planned way across ITE programmes - and how this compliments systemic approaches such as secondments. Induction arrangements for new lecturers would also benefit from review to examine whether their needs are being met as they make the transition from teacher to teacher educator.

The findings of this study indicate there is a clear need to strengthen communication and partnership in the teacher education enterprise. Time spent by student teachers at university is now understood to be part of the continuum of their preparation as teachers with continuation of this, in the school and local authority, through a more structured and supported induction period. This re-conceptualisation of initial teacher education demands that partners are clearly aware of their own and others' responsibilities in this process. Furthermore, enhanced communication amongst ITE stakeholders can serve to strengthen strategies for injecting 'best practice' insights from local authorities, schools and classes into ITE courses. Wider information sharing on such strategies within the partnership community is needed to alleviate the kind of concerns expressed by the teachers interviewed during the McCrone process. Moreover, better communication may help to bring about convergence in stakeholders' discourses and concepts of teacher education and promote greater confidence amongst all those involved in supporting a new generation of teachers in Scotland.

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