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STUDENTS' PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTION OF THEORY  
TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE IN LEARNING TO TEACH

**'It's just a wait and see thing  
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Rupert Knight  
University of Derby  
R.Knight@Derby.ac.uk

**Abstract**

This paper reports on an exploration of the preconceptions held by Primary PGCE students about the relationship of theory to classroom practice in learning to teach. Preconceptions about learning to teach have been found in the past to be unsophisticated and unhelpful, yet durable. Linking theory and practice within teacher education is notoriously difficult and studies report scepticism about the value of research findings and theory in everyday classroom practice. Furthermore, the nature of teachers' professional knowledge is itself uncertain and highly complex. Unlike many previous investigations into student teacher thinking, this small-scale case study captures participants' views before the start of their training and explores the research question through three key issues: what constitutes teacher knowledge, where this knowledge is learned and how these different facets of knowledge relate to one another. While many of the complexities of teaching are yet to be understood fully in this pre-course phase, these participants prove to be far from naïve and begin the course open to a range of forms of learning, with a positive view of the potential contribution of theory to practice. The insight into this starting point leads to some potentially important implications for future course design. The research relates to an English university, but the debate is significant to teacher education more widely.

**Keywords**

Preconceptions; theory; practice; knowledge; PGCE.

**Introduction and rationale**

Re-examining the relationship between educational theory and classroom practice is particularly timely. As models of teacher education are called into question, important questions arise about the nature and necessity of a theoretical basis for teaching.

This pivotal political issue links to long-standing debates on what constitutes teacher knowledge, the division between educational theory and practice and the implications for the structure of teacher education.

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Within this context, this research, the first stage of a fifteen month longitudinal case study, aims to offer new insight. It builds upon previous investigations of student teachers' views on theory and practice by documenting students' initial preconceptions about these possible sources of teacher knowledge by collecting data from beginning students before the start of a teacher education course. The design of future training may be better informed by a greater understanding of students' starting points, their expectations and their readiness to engage with different forms of learning.

This study was conducted at a university in England with Primary Education students studying for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). At the time of data collection, basic course information had been communicated through a variety of channels, including a pre-induction event, but the course itself had not yet begun.

### **Literature review**

#### *Teacher knowledge*

Differentiating and characterising teachers' specialist knowledge from that of the educated layperson is at the heart of debates about teaching as a profession, but agreeing on a knowledge base has long been problematic. Shulman (2004) points to a theoretical understanding as an essential characteristic of any profession and there is a sense that identifying a unique body of knowledge is important.

Consensus on such a body of knowledge, however, has proved elusive. Schön (1983: 23) makes a distinction between 'major' professions, such as medicine, with stable knowledge bases and 'minor' professions, suffering from 'shifting ambiguous ends and unstable institutional contexts of practice'. Education, in this sense, is situated firmly in the latter group. Pring (2004) concurs, suggesting that education lacks the cumulative body of knowledge that would justify any claims to it being a research-based profession. It is not merely the absence of an agreed canon within education that is at issue, however, but also the very possibility of its existence. Schön (1983) himself rejects the 'technical rationality' model of applied theory with his alternative of the reflective practitioner within education and Hagger & McIntyre (2006) go as far as to suggest that teaching's inherent complexities and subtleties mean that it can only ever be understood in terms of the particular, rather than the general.

All of this is set against a backdrop in England, as well as elsewhere, of considerable standardisation of teacher education in line with official prescription, as noted by Alexander (2010). The consequent prevailing 'competence' discourse leads to a degree of uniformity, but based less on theory than on practicalities and compliance with centrally produced standards (Moore, 2004).

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*Theory for teaching*

A consideration of the contribution of theory to any form of teacher knowledge requires an exploration of the term itself. Thomas (2007) points out the inadequacy for education of the scientific view of empirically-based theory. Unlike the falsifiable model of theory within the natural sciences, it is 'resilient, plastic, ill-defined'(Thomas, 2007: 69). Thomas is among those (Pring, 2004, McIntyre, 2005) arguing for a broad conception of educational theory, encompassing not only generalisable research findings, but also assumptions about practice. The emerging view, therefore, is not one of dichotomy between theoretical and practical expertise, but rather a continuum of knowledge. If this broad definition, involving blurred boundaries is accepted, it is evident that theory is a complex and nebulous concept for students and teacher educators alike.

Nevertheless, a sense of separation is evident in the literature, Korthagen (2010) identifying a fundamental mismatch between 'practical' and 'formal' knowledge. The challenge for teacher education, as articulated by Loughran (2006), is to bridge these forms of knowledge in a meaningful way. McIntyre (2005) makes a strong case for a gap between research findings and practice and Pring too (2004) suggests that research has become far removed from the everyday practical considerations of the classroom.

A number of studies internationally attest to the perceived pre-eminence of school experience in the student teachers' minds and the much lower value accorded to theoretical aspects of their education (Hobson et al., 2008; Hascher et al., 2004; Hagger et al, 2008). As Shulman (2004) points out, however, this is a phenomenon common to professional learning more widely. The process of learning within school is a complex one. Hascher et al., (2004) remarked, for example, that practical teaching is not necessarily the same as learning. The need for students to orientate themselves towards the mentor and to survive on the placement can be prioritised above deeper forms of learning. The implication is that, understandably, the demands of the immediate, assessed school experience may detract from some opportunities for transferable learning. Furthermore, there are suggestions that schools are inherently conservative (Shulman, 2004) and that the realities of practice encourage students to 'close down on complexity' (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003:231) in order to become competent curriculum deliverers. An interest in broader forms of knowledge, from wherever they are derived, going beyond mere apprenticeship, experience or mimicry, would seem to be highly important.

A fundamental critique of this form of professional learning is provided by Korthagen (2010), who claims that the whole premise of teacher

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education is flawed. To focus on refining the transfer of theory into practice is, he argues, fruitless. Korthagen proposes beginning with teachers' experiences and working with them to develop schemata before introducing more formal theory as a final layer. The implication is that practice will be introduced early in the process and school and university experiences will be interwoven, making use of theory retrospectively. This idea links to the suggestion of Hobson et al., (2008:426) that theoretical aspects of ITE courses may be profitably used, at least in part, as 'explanatory frameworks for prior experiences'. Korthagen's vision, however, remains predicated on university-based ITE, in contrast to current moves towards school-centred provision.

*Student teacher preconceptions*

Several decades ago, Lortie (1975:61) coined the term 'the apprenticeship of observation' to describe the process, peculiar to teaching, whereby new students arrive with preconceptions based on their observations and impressions of teachers from their time as pupils. The central notion of the student teacher having the vantage point of the pupil and therefore seeing classroom practice in uncomplicated and superficial terms has also been noted by more recent researchers (Crowe & Berry, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2006). More specifically, Calderhead & Shorrock (1997) reported UK students' early emphasis on pupil engagement, having fun and a 'technicist' view of learning to teach as knowledge and skills acquisition. While these views risk underestimating the calibre of today's candidates, the likelihood of them holding relatively unsophisticated preconceptions remains.

In considering the significance of these naïve student preconceptions on future learning, Joram & Gabriele (1998) suggest that they act as filters for what is learned, so that new information is assimilated into existing structures. This is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the 'habitus' as a system of dispositions, through which new experiences are structured by past ones. Following this line of argument, dispositions shaped by, among other things, experiences as a pupil, are likely to be self-perpetuating to a certain extent if left unaddressed.

Hobson et al., (2008) in their comprehensive study of becoming a teacher particularly identify exploration of these preconceptions as meriting further study and there is a degree of consensus around the value of examining assumptions about perceptions of teaching and of knowledge more broadly (Hammerness et al., 2005; Fisher & Rush, 2008). Korthagen (2010) suggests that student teacher preconceptions are extremely durable and goes as far as to say that this one of the main causes of disjointed and ineffective teacher education. Applying this

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thinking to any form of intensive, one year training implies that a greater appreciation of students' pre-course views would be particularly valuable.

### **Aims**

The central aim of this phase of study was to explore the preconceptions about the relationship of theory and practice held by students immediately before commencing teacher education and was shaped around the following questions:

- What do beginning students believe teacher knowledge to be?
- What sources of teacher knowledge do these students expect to use and how?
- How do these students expect to link and make sense of these sources?
- What conceptions of theoretical and practical knowledge are held at this stage?

### **Research design**

#### *Approach taken*

This research took an interpretative case study approach. Though on a very small scale, this was guided by Simons' (1996: 231) contention that 'by studying the uniqueness of the particular, we come to understand the universal' and by Stake's (1995) vision of 'instrumental' case studies driven by an interest in the issues bound up with the case. The case group itself comprised five PGCE students selected purposively to reflect dimensions of difference, such as gender and prior experience, commonly encountered on a PGCE programme. As the main aim was insight into the preconceptions typically held by a PGCE cohort, rather than individual differences, the decision was taken to regard the group as a single case, but an attempt was made during analysis to identify any outlying views beyond the group consensus.

Qualitative data was essential for an understanding of this complex issue and this was secured through the use of semi-structured interviews carried out in the week before commencing the programme. This is in contrast to existing comparable studies such as that by Hobson et al., (2008) which typically begin to gauge student conceptions only once the programme is underway. A balance was needed between sufficient structure to enable the examination of common themes and avoiding the imposition of the researcher's a priori conceptions. The technique of 'hierarchical focusing' (Hobson, 2003; Tomlinson, 1989) was therefore adopted allowing for a small number of relatively open questions followed by two tiers of increasingly structured prompts only when required.

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Analysis of the interviews was carried out in a largely inductive manner in keeping with the desire to preserve participants' authentic voices and avoid 'forcing' the data (Smith et al., 2009). Transcripts were coded in order to discern the emerging themes and these themes then organised into a hierarchy. Constant comparison across the five participants' responses was undertaken and a rigorous record kept of the evidence from each substantiating any claim.

As a form of triangulation, a brief, ten item questionnaire based on a four point Likert scale was also completed by almost all of the wider cohort (n=87) before beginning the programme. Mindful of the pitfalls cited by Cohen et al (2011) such as bias, ambiguity and complexity, the items took the form of simple, single sentence statements. The responses were converted into frequencies and provided a basic quantitative indication of the extent to which the views of the case group were reflected more widely.

*Ensuring the quality of data*

As a broad and contested term, clarity over the use of 'theory' as a construct was important. I decided, following the example of Laursen (2007), to avoid introducing the word 'theory' myself and potentially creating a theory-practice dichotomy where none existed for the participants. Questions in both interview and questionnaire, therefore, were carefully grounded in definitions of theory from the literature but the word 'theory' was not used. Questioning referred, for example, to generalisable versus situated knowledge, research findings and the possible existence of universal principles in education.

Even at the pre-course stage, the dual role of researcher and tutor could compromise the validity of responses. As Smith & Hodson (2010) note, tutors may be seen by students as the guardians of theory, for example. In order to minimise this effect, assurances about confidentiality, anonymity and the separation of roles were given. Participation was entirely voluntary and members of the case group (represented here by pseudonyms) were identified in all stored data only by number.

As a lone researcher, objectivity was a further issue. Although a degree of subjectivity was accepted, I established a partnership with a colleague who questioned assumptions and checked the initial coding of a sample of data. While the potential for generalisation from the study is limited in many ways, Pring (2004:109) alerts us to the 'uniqueness fallacy', asserting that such studies can raise awareness of similar issues in comparable situations. The case for such 'fuzzy generalisation' (Bassey, 1999) was supported by early dissemination of findings to colleagues within my team and elsewhere who recognised the emerging themes in their own practice.

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### **Findings and discussion**

Provisionally analysed data from interviews and questionnaires was mapped under three headings using networks, as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) as a way of exploring connections and relationships between concepts.

#### *What constitutes teacher knowledge?*

The case group was clear that a body of professional knowledge for teachers exists, suggesting for example:

*'I do think it's distinctively different for a teacher' (Natasha).*

All saw teaching very much as a profession, not in terms of status, but the commitment and sense of vocation required as well as the influence on young people inherent in the role.

*'I don't view it really as different from the medical profession' (Bethany).*

Among the wider cohort too, this sense of a specialist knowledge based on generalisable, non context-specific principles was strongly felt, 99% agreeing with the existence of a specialist body of knowledge that all teachers need to be aware of and 100% agreeing that teachers need knowledge about principles of learning and teaching that go beyond any particular school and can be applied in a range of contexts.

These suggest that the participants seemed to have expectations of the kind of coherent professional body of knowledge that, arguably, may be lacking in education (Schön, 1983). This preconception may have been reinforced by their pre-course school experiences, as well as early course documentation received, which may have conveyed the sense of a highly codified and tightly defined set of knowledge and skills. Certainly, the professional knowledge to which they chiefly referred, in the form of subjects, curriculum and policy closely mirrors the prevailing 'competence' discourse put forward by Moore (2004).

There was less certainty, however, about the nature of this knowledge. There was an understandable preoccupation with engaging learners: maintaining attention through varied and fun activities and communicating ideas in a child-friendly manner. It was hoped that the course would provide these 'tricks of the trade', as well as key behaviour management strategies.

*'It's just all sorts of little methods of keeping discipline in the classroom, keeping children quiet and on task' (Nick).*

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*'If you label things as work, you're not as likely to enjoy it as much'  
(Tracey).*

The other form of expertise anticipated involved knowledge of subjects, curriculum and policy: the 'what' of teaching, the priority expressed by one being:

*'To make sure we're delivering what we're supposed to be delivering  
in the classroom' (Fay).*

Some appreciation of the interpersonal skills required by teachers was also evident in terms of, for example, teamwork and responsibility but there was limited overt acknowledgement of the many and varied roles of the teacher. These two areas of initial preoccupation closely resemble the early priorities identified in Calderhead's (1997) study and, perhaps understandably, there was little evidence at this stage of an integrated conception of teacher knowledge such as Pedagogical Content Knowledge, as defined by Shulman (1986) and others.

*What are the sources of knowledge when learning to teach?*

Predictably, school was expected to be a prime source of learning.

*'I've always been a great believer that you learn on the job and that  
you learn most in the setting you're going to be going into' (Nick).*

However, school did not entirely overshadow university and this was reinforced by data from the year group questionnaire. 90% agreed that university study would be important in becoming a teacher. It was clear that practice alone was not seen as sufficient, 40% disagreeing that 'the knowledge that teachers require is learned mainly in school' and 35% disagreeing that 'learning to teach is mainly a matter of practice and personal experience.'

The case group too was adamant that a key strength of the PGCE, compared to employment-based training, was the breadth of experiences in different settings and at university.

*'I actually feel like I needed to come to an academic setting to  
actually learn about teaching rather than me going in, straight into it'  
(Bethany).*

Although there was an expectation that school placements would play a central role in teacher education, compared to previous findings (Hascher et al., 2004, Hagger et al, 2008), this view seemed less extreme. While this could be attributed, to a certain extent, to being interviewed by me as

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a university tutor, there was a clear understanding of the need for a balance of experiences. Far from wanting to rush headlong into the workplace, there was a readiness to engage in university learning.

When asked about learning in school, the case group made relatively little mention of learning through personal experience at this stage and instead emphasised observation and mimicry: the emphasis was on watching others with a view to picking up good ideas.

*'I'm going to try and pinch things from other people, seeing what they do effectively and hopefully I can sort of recreate' (Bethany).*

This dominant view of school-based learning as a process of observation and reproduction of tried and tested techniques is strongly reminiscent of the uncomplicated view of teaching identified by Crowe & Berry (2007).

The value of university-based learning was seen to be primarily providing a grounding in basic skills and knowledge, or:

*'Some of the black and white things we need to learn from teaching' (Fay).*

Words like 'background', 'basics', 'core' and 'pointers' were also used to indicate these elements. The prevailing aim, therefore, was to develop sufficient skills to allow the student to function and survive on placement.

The research and learning involved in academic assignments was expected to be useful and there was cautious optimism, if a degree of ambivalence, towards Master's level study.

*'It might be something that maybe you can put into practice in your placements and you can reflect on and use maybe'(Natasha).*

*'I'm so focused on just getting in here, starting the course. It almost feels a bit premature for me to think about that side of things' (Bethany).*

This too was borne out in the cohort data, as 77% agreed that Master's level study would be useful for classroom practice, but with only 20% in strong agreement.

*How can these sources of knowledge be linked and utilised?*

Making links between university and school learning was not expected to be particularly problematic. Even at this pre-enrolment stage, the course structure was seen as useful, as university periods would provide time, space and peers for reflection on practice.

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*'I think the most important thing will be sharing ideas and listening to other people's experiences'(Tracey).*

*'I think it would be useful probably to come back and have time to reflect on each other's placements and to be able to talk about what happened at your school' (Fay).*

Research findings and wider theory were seen as potentially valuable for practice with some recognition of the need to interpret this and apply it to practice.

*'You need the knowledge to back up what you're saying and to know what you're talking about'(Tracey).*

*'Textbooks are obviously written by people who like to use very flowery language and it's very difficult to get that back into no nonsense, how would that apply in the classroom'(Nick).*

Without necessarily using the term, all valued theory, as defined in the broadest sense (Thomas, 2007). There were allusions to it in a variety of forms, for example as underpinning facts, the ideology of education and as academic knowledge to apply in practice. Theory and practice, however, were rarely referred to in separate terms spontaneously and there was relatively little sense of a distinction between two categories of learning.

Interestingly, only one participant openly questioned this form of knowledge, suggesting a rather uncritical acceptance of ideas from other sources. There was also an early recognition of the power of reflection with peers as a potential means of sense-making.

There was clear support for the role of research findings on the cohort questionnaire too, but this agreement was somewhat cautious, 88% agreeing that this would help improve classroom practice, but only 26% strongly agreeing.

A sense of excitement, but also trepidation, was felt by the participants about what was to follow. Anxiety centred almost exclusively on managing the workload, which was expected by all to be high.

#### *Individual differences*

Although the case study group was selected to reflect a diverse range of voices, the response was largely coherent and consistent across the participants. When the data were scrutinised for individual differences, slight variations in emphasis were attributable to participants'

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backgrounds immediately before the course. Fay, for example, had extensive experience of working with children but was the most anxious about returning to academic study after an interval of several years. The only notable outlier where the role of theory was concerned was Bethany. Coming from a scientific research background, she was the only participant who explicitly mentioned questioning theoretical ideas at this stage:

*'I would put quite a lot of emphasis on findings from research, but I wouldn't necessarily think that was then gospel truth' (Bethany).*

*Implications for practice*

The conception of teacher knowledge at this stage was a narrow one. As a response, it seems important to problematise teaching as a profession from the outset of training. Promoting a debate about what might constitute its essential knowledge base would seem to be an appropriate starting point. If, as Shulman (2004) suggests, schools can sometimes be conservative in this respect, this perhaps underlines the university's central role in preparing students to enter the workplace with a questioning and critical disposition, with a view to being the autonomous professionals of the future. At a time when school-based teacher education, such as School Direct, is being expanded (Gove, 2012), this is particularly pertinent.

Challenging a view of education centred very much on the teacher's expertise and performance would seem to be a priority. Though the degree of naivety suggested by Lortie (1975) would certainly be an overstatement in this case, his central point about beginning from a pupil's view has some limited resonance nevertheless, as the emphasis seemed to be on the teacher as the repository of knowledge and focal point for maintaining children's attention.

Notable by its absence in interviews was acknowledgement of the need to understand the child as a learner. Moving students towards an appreciation of pupils as diverse learners and age-appropriate pedagogies going beyond motivation and maintaining attention is possibly the greatest journey of the early period of training. Having early, carefully focused experiences in school on which to draw during university-based sessions would allow for these ideas to be examined before the demands of extensive teaching and its multitude of other priorities take over. Furthermore, if additional time is to be spent learning in school in future, it seems important to consider this not merely as extra teaching experience, but also to incorporate opportunities to pause and revisit assumptions frequently.

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The anticipated contribution of university aspects of the course was largely restricted to preparation for placement in terms of 'survival skills' or ideas to be applied. Given the positive disposition towards university learning that exists at the start of the course, the implication may be that a more convincing case could be made to beginning students about teacher education as long-term preparation to be a member of a profession, rather than as the means to be credible in the short term. With the current rhetoric of apprenticeship (Gove, 2012) somewhat at odds with that of teaching as a Master's level profession (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010), this is perhaps more important than ever.

Despite the scepticism about theory widely reported by Hascher et al (2004) and others, this group of students had a much more positive outlook as they embarked on their training. While omitting specific theory-practice terminology from the questioning was justified in order to preserve genuine preconceptions, the possible limitations, in terms of a shared understanding of the concept must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the picture emerging is of students who are highly open and receptive to ideas from a range of sources, but who do not necessarily start out with a particularly dichotomous view of theory and practice. The issue implicit for teacher educators, therefore, is to consider whether we unwittingly reinforce or even create this view ourselves. Although this tension is in some ways inherent in any form of professional learning split between the 'academy' and the workplace, actively promoting a more integrated conception of learning would seem to be important.

More specifically, this could relate to Korthagen's (2010) vision of freeing teacher education from a unidirectional focus on applying theory to practice and developing instead a process building on practice and geared to a great extent to developing links to theory retrospectively. Nurturing a view of teachers, not simply as critical consumers of others' theories, but also as theorists in their own right may be powerful. Punctuating long periods of practicum in school with brief but regular opportunities to reflect with peers and draw on other sources of knowledge to make sense of and justify practice would seem to be a way forward.

Consideration of the potential challenges ahead centred almost entirely on workload and there was little anticipation of the emotional and interpersonal challenges often characteristic of the student teacher's journey. An appreciation of the significance of an appropriate 'socio-emotional climate' (Hascher et al., 2004: 634) was not evident at this stage. Though perhaps appearing tangential to the main aims of this study, any consideration of student teacher learning must acknowledge this affective dimension. Moreover, an attempt to locate theory in

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everyday practice as much as at university has strong implications for the future role of the school-based mentor.

### **Conclusion**

This small-scale exploration of student teachers' preconceptions is of limited generalisability but it is hoped that there is some resonance with others' practice, not just in England but also more widely. A message emerging loud and clear is that, despite all the limitations of their pre-course perspectives on learning to teach, these postgraduate students are more sophisticated than the naïve debutants described by Lortie (1975). There is a readiness to learn and far less cynicism towards theory than might have been imagined. In adapting to changing models of teacher education, there is an opportunity to work with these highly capable students more fully as emerging professionals and to move towards a more fluid view of the role of theory. The next steps for this research project are to follow these students through their course and into their first teaching posts in order to chart the development of the preconceptions reported here. This paper, however, has attempted to capture that often unseen moment in time immediately before course commencement as students step into the unknown.

*'It's just a wait and see thing at the moment' (Fay).*

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