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**'Evidence based teaching' (EBT) in the Carter Review on Initial Teacher Education (2015): Rhetorical devise or something more?**

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**Abstract**

In May 2014 Michael Gove Secretary of State for Education announced that there would be a review into Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in the UK. The report was led by Andrew Carter OBE, the Headteacher of a school-centred ITT provider and ITT lead on the Teaching Schools Council. The report was published in January 2015 and one of the principle recommendations in the report was a call for evidence based teaching (EBT).

In this paper it is proposed that in broad terms the call for EBT is not well defined. On the one hand it can be seen as a positive recommendation especially if this heralds a sustained engagement with scholarship. However, EBT should not be viewed as an unquestioned good because it can also be seen as the search for 'perfect practice'. Given that education is a concern with human relationships and recognising the heterogeneity of educational contexts, the reduction of teaching to a sharply defined set of behaviours is problematic. This reduction is especially difficult given that this places teacher preparation within the purview of the more restrictive 'technical rationalist' model of professionalism.

**Keywords**

Teacher Education; Evidence based Teaching; Educational Policy; Technical Rationalism; Professional Artistry; Scholarship.

**Introduction**

Up until the 1990s teacher education in England had been mainly based in higher education (HE) but in response to a shortage of teachers, especially in subjects such as science and maths, a number of different school-based routes began to emerge. The school based routes were founded on the idea that the student teacher underwent a programme that was based in the training school, although there might be University teaching that was 'bought in' by the training schools. The first school centred route was the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) in 1999 which in 2012 was re-launched as 'School Direct' (SD). Alongside the GTP there came School Centred Initial education training (SCITT) where designated schools would have a number of students either on their own or in small federations. In 2002 the 'Teach First' programme was introduced and then in (2010) Training school alliances. The proliferation of routes into teaching can be seen as an almost tangible symbol of an education system that since the Education Reform Act (ERA 1988), has been based on de-regulated market principles, a form of liberalism known as neoliberalism. The school based routes were set up to be in direct competition with the Universities, and in the spirit of neoliberalism centres of teacher education became known as 'providers'.

In 2014, despite many claims that the teaching profession has never been stronger and that there had 'never been a better time to be a teacher' (Gove, 2013), Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Education, commissioned Andrew Carter, the headteacher of a school based teacher education partnership in Surrey to carry out an independent review of teacher education. In launching this review Michael Gove said:

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While we have already taken steps to improve teacher training, including through the popular School Direct route, it is right that we look at how we can ensure all courses are providing the best possible training.

(Gove, 2014).

This report was published in January 2015 and one of the headline recommendations was that there should be a renewed focus on evidence based teaching (EBT). Of course the notion of EBT is not new although it was later superseded by evidence *informed* practice (EIP) and so this return to EBT is significant and worthy of scrutiny.

At first sight EBT may be seen as an unquestioningly positive force because it acknowledges that practice in a professional context such as teaching should be based on something more than personal whims. It may also enable student teachers (STs) to question and move beyond an 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975) which is a phenomenon whereby it is argued that student teachers come to teacher education courses having experienced many hours in classrooms observing teachers but that they only see the 'front stage' in the manner of someone watching a play and so at best, have very limited conceptions of what lies behind the observable practices.

In this paper it will be argued that since education is subject to high levels of political intervention (Chitty 2009; Garratt and Forrester 2012) teaching, now more than ever, is a political act (Apple 1995) and given that politics is principally a concern with pragmatic solutions then finding 'what works' is tempting although given the heterogeneous nature of educational contexts such divergence is problematic. The idea of seeking a method that 'works' can be seen as analogous with the search for 'best practice' as there is an assumption that teaching is merely a matter of applying the correct method and ignores the importance of personal relationships. It also needs to be remembered that education has a moral dimension (Carr 2000) and if the purposes are reduced to simple ends then matters of democratic contestation and deliberation may be marginalised or disappear altogether (Biesta 2007). The Carter Review, given that it has been commissioned by the Government, can be constructed as a quasi-political statement. This means that there is some ambiguity as EBT can be seen both as a persuasive rhetorical device that is exerting political authority on teachers as well as a potentially empowering force and the dimensions of this will be explored in this paper.

### **Educational Policy landscape**

A feeling that education was not 'fit for purpose' led to the Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s undertaking a radical reform of the public sector which led to the Education Reform Act (ERA) in 1988. The ERA (1988) gave the Secretary of State for Education over 400 extra powers (Chitty 2009) and led to reforms of education that were very much in line with the modernisation of all parts of the public sector at the time. Margaret Thatcher initiated reforms that were based on a radical combination of neoliberal free-market thinking and individual liberty coupled with more traditional neo-conservatism (Garratt and Forrester 2012). These 'neoliberal' ideologies gave rise to the kinds of practices that hitherto had been more usually associated with the private sector. The advocates of this market ideology believed that all parents and carers should have the right to choose the school they wanted their child to attend (Chitty 2009) and so schools became education 'providers' and children and parents were recast as 'customers'. One of the contradictions of neoliberalism is that ostensibly it involves the redistribution of power away from the centre and so in theory a diminution of state power. However, in practice, in order to operate in such a free market milieu it is necessary to have strong measures to regulate the market (Wrigley 2006). In the case of education schools are now funded directly from central government but alongside this their outcomes are ever more tightly 'policed' by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) and so this freedom can be seen, at best, as form of restricted autonomy.

The placing of education into a marketplace meant that there had to be ways to make comparisons between schools so that the 'consumers' of education would be able to make choices. Of course it has to be borne in mind that the education marketplace is at best a quasi-market (Walford 2000), not least because schools do not yet have completely free choice over the pupils they take and of course they cannot outsource their inspection requirement to a body other than Ofsted.

### Teacher preparation in England and Wales

The notion of whether new teachers are 'trained' or 'educated' may seem like a trivial distinction but it is argued here that this underpins how we understand teaching as a profession. If preparing new teachers is seen as a matter of training then it can be located in a theory of professionalism referred to as a Technical Rationalism (TR) where the practices can be seen as principally instrumental and reductive. Partly as a response to TR, Schön (1987) developed the idea of teaching as a matter of Professional Artistry (PA) where he envisaged the teacher as an intelligent problem solver in an open environment. While it needs to be accepted that TR and PA present a stark binary they provide a valuable theoretical lens with which to consider new teacher preparation. If it is constructed as a matter of 'training' ITE can be viewed as a matter of Technical Rationalism, whereas teacher preparation as a matter of 'education' is more congruent with notions of Professional Artistry.

Technical Rationalist view	Professional Artistry view
<p>Follows rules, laws schedules; uses routines and prescriptions.                      Uses diagnosis/ analysis to think about teaching.                      Wants efficient systems.                      See knowledge as graspable and permanent                      Theory is applied to practice                      Visible performance is central                      Setting out and testing for basic competence is vital                      Technical expertise is all                      See professional activities as masterable                      Emphasise the known                      Standards must be fixed; standards are measureable:                      Standards must be controlled                      Emphasises assessment, appraisal, inspection, accreditation.                      Change must be managed from the outside                      Quality is really about quantity of that which is easily measurable                      Technical accountability                      This is training                      Takes the instrumental view of learning.</p>	<p>Starts where rules fade; sees patterns and frameworks.                      Uses interpretations and appreciation to think about learning.                      Wants creativity and room to be wrong.                      Sees knowledge as temporary, dynamic and problematic.                      Theory emerges from practice                      There is more to see than the 'surface' features.                      There is more to teaching than the sum of the parts.                      Professional judgement counts                      See mystery at the heart of professional activities.                      Embraces uncertainty                      That which is most easily fixed and measureable is also trivial; professionals should be trusted.                      Emphasises investigation, reflection and deliberation.                      Professionals can develop from the inside.                      Quality comes from deepening insight into one's values, priorities and actions.                      Professional answerability                      This is education                      Sees education as intrinsically worthwhile</p>

**Table 1.** Characteristics of TR and PA models of professionalism (Based on Fish, 1995).

Teacher education in the UK has tended to be based in Higher Education although in the 60s it was envisaged principally as a 'training' model with most students qualifying to teach with a certificate of education and no higher academic qualification. This was largely superseded by a move to an all graduate profession with the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) being the preferred route. At this point Higher Education involvement in teacher education in England and Wales was universal. The realisation that there was a shortage of teachers and that taking a year to complete a PGCE was often not an option for more mature candidates led the New Labour Government at the time to develop the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) in 1998. This was a programme for graduates who wanted to gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) while working. In effect candidates had to work in a school as an unqualified teacher in order to participate in the programme, which could last from three months to a year. In 2012 the Department for Education announced that The GTP would no longer exist, and was replaced with a new scheme called School Direct (SD) although the principles of the programme being based in school were much the same.

Alongside this in 2002, following the 'Teach for America' initiative in the USA, a new route into teaching called 'Teach First' was introduced in the England and Wales. Teach America was an organisation established in 1990 and was heavily sponsored by public sector investors with the idea of recruiting university graduates and professionals to teach for two years in urban and rural communities throughout the United States. The goal of 'Teach For America' was for its members to make both a short-term and long-term impact by working in areas of social deprivation. 'Teach First' was seen as a social enterprise and was registered as a charity. Its aims are to address educational disadvantage in England and Wales. It coordinates an employment-based teaching training programme where participants can gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) through the participation in a two year training programme that involves the completion of a PGCE along with wider leadership skills training. Following completion of the two-year programme, participants become Teach First ambassadors. This fragmentation and proliferation of routes can be seen as a visible symbol of neoliberalism with potential student teachers now having a range of choices in a more open market than had been the case before.

In terms of teacher education the focus in Coalition Government (2010-2015) policy messages has consistently been one where school based routes have been lauded and Higher Education barely recognised despite the Government's own organisation for inspection the curriculum, Ofsted, consistently finding favourably for routes based in Higher Education (Parliament, 2012: 61). In 2013 Michael Gove was at pains to praise the SD programme:

School Direct - our new programme for ITT - has been shaped in the image of outstanding schools, like yours, the type of schools which already grow their own teachers and groom them for greatness; encouraging heads and teachers all over the country to follow your lead, and to emulate your success

(Gove, 2013).

'Teach First' has also been presented as a flagship of teacher education.

The third key strand of the London Challenge was a focus on increasing the number of outstanding teachers through professional development and recruitment of the best graduates via Teach First - which was in its first few years a predominantly London centred programme. Of the 1,000 Teach First trainees who completed training under the last Government over three-quarters were based in a London school

(Gove, 2012)

The assumption seems to have been that school based routes are very much the routes advocated by the Government while the routes based in HEI sector, such as PGCE, were subjected to something of a 'deafening silence'.

### **The Carter Review**

In May 2014 Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Education, announced that there would be an 'independent review of the quality and effectiveness of ITE courses in the UK'. The report was to be chaired by Andrew Carter OBE, Headteacher of South Farnham School, leader of a school-centred ITT provider and ITT lead on the Teaching Schools Council. The review panel were charged with looking across the full range of ITT courses and were asked to seek views from those involved across the sector to: try and define effective ITT practice; assess the extent to which the current system delivers effective ITT; recommend where and how improvements could be made; and finally, recommend ways to improve choice in the system by improving the transparency of course content and methods.

The report was published in January 2015 and made a number of recommendations. One of the principle recommendations in the report was a call for evidence based teaching (EBT).

Evidence based teaching- ITT should instil an evidence-based approach to teaching by inducting new teachers in where and how to access relevant research, how to evaluate and challenge research findings, how this can be applied to classroom practice, as well as why using research matters.

(Carter, 2015:70).

This might seem to be an unquestioningly good thing but it will be argued here that EBT is far from a panacea and some implications will be examined in the following section.

### **Problematising Evidence based teaching (EBT)**

The notion of 'evidence' is *writ large* in the Carter Review although at no point is there any kind of philosophical de-construction, although this is to be expected in a report that is a quasi-policy statement. It should be stated at the outset that to reject the idea that notions of evidence are not important or even irrelevant needs to be firmly rejected. What it is important to do is to explore the idea of what we might mean by 'evidence' in teaching and to locate this in some of the wider debates in education in general and teacher education in particular.

Since the ERA (1988) and the move to education being in a marketplace it has come under the control of a new 'public management' (Ball 2008). This also meant that there was an explicit acknowledgement that the public had the right to know how their taxes were being spent. This accountability was now seen as central to the democratic process regardless of the political hue of the governments between 1988 and the present day. It also follows that for the sake of public confidence, it makes sense to know that teachers, who are in effect the employees of the public, are using 'approved' methods. Indeed it can be argued that part of what it is to be a member of a profession is to have access to, and be able to adopt, the accepted practices of that professional body (Robson 2006). The Coalition Government's position on the methods that teachers employ in the classroom has been somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand the message from Ofsted was that they were only interested in inspecting outcomes but at the same time in 2013, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education at the time, was expressing a concern about 'discovery learning'. In a speech in September 2013 he said that part of the problem was; "...belief that education should not be an activity in which the teacher imparts knowledge to the child but a pursuit - by the child - of what it

finds interesting". Michael Gove also had firm ideas about how it is that student teachers should be learning to teach.

Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom. Which is why I also intend to abolish those rules which limit the ability of school leaders to observe teachers at work. Nothing should get in the way of making sure we have the best possible cadre of professionals ready to inspire the next generation. (Gove, 2010).

It seems clear from this that Michael Gove saw learning to teach as a form of apprenticeship that was best located in a TR frame a model that is sometimes referred to as 'sitting next to Nellie' (Watkins and Whalley 1995); which conceptualises the process of learning to teach as one where practical skills are imparted and quality is defined in terms of mechanics and debates about wider concerns of value are side-lined (Fish 1995).

A characteristic of education policy messages, particularly in modern times, has been the use of various rhetorical devices in order to make the message a persuasive one. This embracing of public relations was especially prevalent during the New Labour Government (1997-2010) and became known as 'spin' (Wring 2006). For example, there has been much talk of 'driving standards up' which can be seen as persuasive but also ambiguous. While it is not acceptable to argue for a 'lowering' of standards it is appropriate to ask for some philosophical examination of what is meant by 'standards'. Indeed Whitty (2005) argues that under New Labour the idea of 'standards' was a completely 'unexamined' feature of policy discourse. Related to this it can be seen that policy messages are often presented in a way that assumes neutrality. The assumption being that if the policy is neutral it is apolitical. If it is apolitical it is objective and therefore 'true' (Apple 1990). This can mean that if something is seen to be 'factual' it is automatically seen to have 'value', then this can serve to drive moral concerns to the periphery, a concept that is central to critical theory (Ingram 1990). In this way it can be seen that, especially in modern times when education policy is subject to high levels of political intervention, whether they are aware of it or not, teachers are involved in a political act (Apple 1995).

Given the politicisation of education a term such as EBT can be seen as a persuasive rhetorical device. It may seem unconvincing to argue for practice based on 'whimsy' or 'fancy', especially in a policy milieu where education is seen as rational and capable of prediction and control (Radford 2008), but that does not mean EBT can be seen as a panacea and an unquestioned 'good'. Hammersley (2004) goes as far as to suggest that the term 'evidence based practice' is a slogan which is designed to discourage opposition.

One of the difficulties with EBT is that even if we could agree on what constitutes 'evidence' in teaching, practitioners could not be expected to undertake a comprehensive review of that evidence and then take an informed choice about what evidence to heed. Consequently evidence based solutions, such as synthetic phonics (a system of teaching reading to young children advocated by the Coalition Government), tend to be presented to teachers and the implication is that there has been a comprehensive review and this is 'the' best method. In this way the idea of seeking 'best' practice can be seen in the manner of the quest for the Holy Grail, the idea that there is a *perfect* method out there and that it is just a matter of finding it. Coffield and Edward (2009) pose the question that if following the establishment of 'good' practice which then gave way to 'best' practice will, in time, be superseded by us 'hitting the buffers' and discovering *perfect* practice. One of the principle weaknesses with such a perspective is that it assumes that the teacher is just an accomplished 'deliverer' of the 'perfect' method. This is deeply problematic not least as Hattie (2008) showed in a



meta-analysis of effects in education that the teacher-student relationship was the third most powerful factor in how well children learn. This can be likened to the telling of a joke where it might be assumed that if the 'teller' follows the script then the joke will be well received by the audience. Of course this is far from the case and for most of us the qualities we project onto the joke teller and the way that the joke is told make a significant difference.

Given that policy text is so well produced and persuasive it is worth remembering that policy text and scholarship are very different types of literature. McLaughlin (2000) reminds us that policy text is deeply political and is essentially a concern with finding pragmatic solutions to problems in society. Of course the problems themselves are those that have been identified by politicians and so may be subject to a degree of reification. Scholarship on the other hand is best constructed as a heterogeneous body of work that consists of a variety of approaches such as philosophical argumentation, descriptive research where questions about what is happening are considered and research where issues of 'cause' and 'effect' are examined (Pring 2015). The provenance of scholarship is also worth considering. There is the research carried out by universities which may be carried out by PhD students and also a whole range of funded projects and also the kind of more small scale practitioner research envisaged by Lawrence Stenhouse (1985). What all this scholarship has in common is that it is based on a search for truth using methods accepted in the field (Poulson and Wallace 2004) and may often be subject to a long period of gestation. Time is often in short measure for policy makers who are frequently under pressure to come up with solutions quickly.

The final point is that it is important to be clear about the authority of political text. Max Weber, a German sociologist, argued that authority can be based in three sources, namely traditional, charismatic and legal-rational (Giddens 1997). Given the circumstances of its commission, the Carter Review is a policy document, or at least a part of the policy making process, and as such has legal-rational authority. In the same way politicians have a political mandate and also, by dint of their role, have the platform to be able to get their messages to the public. However, this is very different to charismatic authority where people will follow leaders such as Nelson Mandela because of their personal qualities or the intrinsic authority of knowledge generated through scholarship. The problems of scholarship being disseminated in schools are well rehearsed and Whitty (2006) suggests that perhaps a more formal distinction between research *of* education and research *for* education might be helpful.

### **Conclusions**

The support for the development of evidence based teaching (EBT) in the Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training (2015) might be seen as a sign of rigour, an acknowledgement of 'science' and an uncontestedly positive thing. However, this call for 'evidence based teaching' is far from an unquestionable 'good' and it has been argued here that there are both possibilities and 'side-effects'. It should be remembered that the initial wave of 'evidence based' teaching was superseded by 'evidence informed' practice and so the re-emergence of EBT in the Carter Review can be seen as indecision, a retreat, a re-appraisal, a return to 'common sense' or perhaps something else. Given the high levels of political intervention in education since the ERA all educational policy messages, quite naturally, are couched in such a way as to reinforce the pre-dominant ideologies of the time (Ball 2008). With this in mind the re-emergence of EBT is highly congruent with the explicit discourses of de-centralising of power which have been such a feature of the neoliberal reforms of education since the ERA (1988) and have crossed subsequent governments in a manner almost completely free of rupture.

The Carter Review into ITE (2015) does not offer any explanation of how EBT is conceptualised but this might be seen as beyond the purview of a policy text which is primarily concerned with finding



practical ways to get things done (McLaughlin 2000). All professions are characterised by a heterogeneity of values, beliefs and practices that have been developed empirically over years and in many cases represent terrain that is been bitterly contested. To be in a profession such as teaching is to be inducted into that community which means that among other things newcomers have to become familiar with the joint enterprise of that community, be able to work with other professionals and develop competence in a range of actions which represent the shared repertoire of that community (Wenger 1998). It is clearly not sensible, logical, moral or safe to say that 'anything goes'. However, there might be a danger that EBT, through being reductive, and promoting a narrow message might lead, if unquestioned, to a convergence that lacks the necessary nuance for teaching in different contexts.

EBT can also be interpreted as an attempt to move to 'best practice' which is highly problematic as, in order to decide the 'best' practice, we need to know what the outcomes might be and who this is 'best' for (Coffield and Edward 2009). It also assumes that we will be able to recognise it when we see it. The focus on EBT might be closely aligned with the 'success is virtue' culture and reduce notions of 'value' to a subordinate status (Biesta 2007). It also assumes a high degree of homogeneity between educational contexts which is also problematic.

In thinking ahead it is argued here that student teachers should be encouraged to see policy text as something to be analysed rather than as a script. Furthermore, student teachers have a right to understand that teaching is a political act and should be encouraged to develop understandings about how these transactions are played out in the current policy arena. In reflecting on capitalism Wrigley (2006: 62) proposes that: "Capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what is really going on". In the same spirit student teachers have a right to know what is 'really going on' when they are engaged in their 'political work' as teachers and a critique of EBT should be a part of this. Finally, it is important to remember that there is a difference in the provenance and authority of scholarship and policy text and student teachers need to become critical, educated consumers of both. The unqualified endorsement of EBT in the Carter Review (2015) should be welcomed but not seen as a panacea.

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