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Stakeholder views of teacher training routes

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Abstract

In recent years in England there has been a move away from Initial Teacher Training (ITT) taking place predominantly in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to becoming schools led. The two main routes undertaken by graduates wishing to teach are the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and Schools Direct (SD). Both routes offer opportunities to spend time in more than one school. A small case study was undertaken in one HEI to compare and contrast these routes in the light of government policy initiatives and reforms towards increasingly school-led ITT. Seven main themes emerged from the data collected: recruitment, placement, growing your own, support and mentoring, facilities and research, peer groups and communities of practice and reflection. Both routes offer benefits to both trainee and provider and both offer the opportunity to spend an extended time in placement schools. However, there is a danger that the underlying pedagogical understanding of teaching and learning could be lost if the push towards schools led ITT is maintained and HEIs continue to withdraw from teacher education.

Keywords

Initial Teacher Training; PGCE; School Direct; Routes into teaching; HEI.

Stakeholders Views of Teacher Training Routes

This paper looks at the two main routes available for trainee secondary teachers in England; University led, the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and schools led, School Direct (SD) from the perspective of a number of stakeholders, linked to a university, known here under the pseudonym 'Foxedge'. Both routes are aimed at trainees who intend to teach in secondary schools and already have an undergraduate degree in their chosen specialist subject. For either pathway, trainees need to have GCSEs (or their equivalent) in English and Mathematics at grade C or above. Additionally, trainees have to pass professional skills tests in literacy and numeracy, prior to commencing their studies.

The traditional route, the PGCE, is a full time course, of one year duration, with both time spent in university and a minimum of 24 weeks spent in two different schools (DfE 2016a). Since September 2012, trainees have had another option, SD, where schools can train 'teachers in the subjects and phases they need, in the way they want them trained' (Gov.UK, 2012).

Although schools had always played an important part in teacher training, the partnership between them and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) became formalised with the introduction of Circular 3/84 (DES 1984). This document, for the first time, set out the minimum period trainees should be in school whilst training. The implementation of Government circular 9/92 (DfE 1992) required schools to take a lead role in training, thus shifting control further away from HEIs and into schools. These changes were described as 'the political rape of initial teacher education' by Gilroy (1992:5). However, current Government policy rests on the assumption that 'more time spent in schools inevitably and unproblematically - leads to better and 'more relevant' learning' (McNamara & Murray, 2013:22) and that ITT should be based in the 'best schools - those up-to-date with what

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works best in the classroom and with the keenest interest in maintaining rigorous ITT standards’ (DfE 2016b:12).

During the 1990s there were three main routes into teaching: partnerships led by HEIs, with most students achieving a PGCE, School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) where a consortium of schools offered training and which accounted for approximately 5% of trainees, and Employed Based routes (EBITTs) which involved on the job training, examples of which included the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) and Teach First. Despite the House of Commons (2010) identifying England as having one of the best qualified and trained teachers, the Coalition government pressed for change with the publication of a White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). This highlighted the push towards ‘more training on the job’ (DfE, 2010:20) and created Teaching Schools with the potential to ‘take over leadership of teacher training from universities’ (Whitty, 2014:468). This shift in policy seemed surprising in light of the Chief Inspectors’ report on Initial Teacher Training (ITT); Ofsted (2010:59) stated ‘there was more outstanding initial teacher education delivered by higher education-led partnerships than by school-centred initial teacher training partnerships and employment-based routes’. As Whitty (2014:468) identified ‘the main vehicle for realising this change is School Direct’.

In 1994 the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) assumed responsibility for overseeing ITT (Furlong et al., 2000), with the aim of funding and improving the quality of teacher training. It was relaunched in 2005 as the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) with an expanded remit to embrace the whole school workforce. It further changed to the Teaching Agency (TA) in 2012 with additional responsibilities previously covered by the General Teaching Council for England. It subsequently became part of the National College for Teaching and Leadership with the aim to improve the quality of the education workforce and helping schools improve (NCTL, 2013). By subsuming the TTA and its later iterations back into the DfE, the government signalled its intention to take even more control over teacher training and the bodies that deliver it, as indicated in an email of June 2012 (Teaching Agency, 2012). The current Government and indeed the previous Coalition Government, appear to view teacher education as a lever with which to raise achievement and improve schools (Furlong et al., 2000; Murray 2014, Golding 2015).

England, with its move away from university led teacher training to school-based and school-led provision, is in contrast to other countries with high performing school systems. For example, Finland has had university based teacher training since the 1970s with all teachers required to hold a Master’s degree. In South Korea, teacher education takes place in Universities or dedicated teacher training colleges and in Singapore, all teachers are trained in university (Universities UK 2014). This links to an OECD report (2011) whereby the most successful school systems in the world, Finland, Singapore and Shanghai, although they have strong practical elements, retain university based provision. This enables the trainees to engage with pedagogical principles and to participate in their own research through Masters and Doctoral study.

The changes in the way teacher education is provided in England might be said to have been hasty as it has ‘created a degree of instability within some institutions delivering ITT following a rapid change in core allocations’ (Universities UK, 2014:31). This has hindered the ability of HEIs to strategically plan ahead and has resulted in some courses being closed or even withdrawal from ITT altogether. For some HEIs these changes have been the final straw and have been viewed as a risk to their core business or to their research interests and outputs (Whitty, 2014). The impact of fewer HEIs offering ITT would result in fewer choices for potential trainees of where to train, the need for students to relocate in order to access a training place at an HEI and a diminished local supply of NQTs.

Routes into teaching

The DfE website (getintoteaching.education.gov.uk) shows two main training options; school-led training or University-led training. The former is described as being 'based in a school where you will be part of school life and work with experienced teachers from day one' and the latter as 'teacher training...based at a university'. However, trainees undertaking the university based PGCE spend approximately two thirds of the course in at least two different teaching placements.

With teacher training now becoming school led as well as school based (Brown, Rowley and Smith 2016), the subsequent diversification results in different partnerships offering trainees different experiences and different types of training. Some trainees will find this suited to their particular learning style and expectation of their training, although ensuring similar quality of outcome from such a diverse range of courses and experiences will be challenging.

The main method of school-led training is through School Direct (SD) and has followed on from previous government initiatives in school-based teacher training such as Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) (Teacher Development Agency 2006), School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) (DfE 2013) and Teach First (Teach First 2013). The course is 'designed by groups of schools in partnership with a university or a school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) provider' (DfE 2016a). The carrot for trainees over the more traditional PGCE is 'the schools recruit...with a job in mind' (DfE 2016a) thus offering the possibility of a position in the network of schools within which the training takes place. SD is further divided into two; the basic SD route and the salaried route. The former route is unpaid, run by a school or group of schools in conjunction with a university or SCITT. In the salaried route, students are employed by the school as unqualified teachers whilst they learn on the job. This route is designed for those trainees with three years or more work experience 'in any career' (DfE 2016a), not necessarily in education. SD schools have lead responsibility for teacher education, working in partnership with an accredited provider which may be an HEI, school partnership, consortium or they may be a fully credited provider of ITT in their own right.

Methodology

The objectives of this project were to explore how the two main routes into teaching (PGCE and School Direct) are perceived by stakeholders of an HEI in England (given the pseudonym 'Foxedge University' here). This university offers both PGCE and SD and these routes were compared and contrasted in the light of recent changes in Government policy towards increasingly school-led ITT (Whitty 2014).

Taking an interpretivist approach, I collected qualitative data to 'make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). Corresponding with this approach, a case study was used to explore the stakeholders' perceptions, in 'its natural setting, recognising its complexity and its content' (Punch, 2005:144).

Data were collected from a purposive rather than random sample, from a variety of stakeholders in Foxedge University; two members of staff from the University (Jack and Jessica), two from partner schools who recruit SD trainees (Harry and Olivia), a PGCE trainee (Amelia) and a SD trainee (Poppy). All participants were given pseudonyms, all completed consent forms, and the study was approved by the University Ethics Committee and adheres to BERA (2011) guidelines.

Semi-structured interviews (Quinn Patton 2002) were conducted with all participants to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues experienced in the two routes into teaching. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were initially coded (Gibbs 2007) then grouped and conceptualised (Miles and Huberman 1994)

This small scale project does not attempt to generalise, rather to provide an insight into the routes into teaching and identifying perceived advantages and disadvantages of university led and schools led ITT provision within the local area of the HEI.

Findings

Recruitment

With the expansion of SD, concerns have been raised regarding the potential differences between supply and demand caused by the deregulation of trainee numbers (Roberts and Foster 2015, Hilton & Tyler, 2015). This is more evident in oversubscribed subjects such as History and English, where SD has been more successful in recruiting rather than STEM subjects, especially Mathematics and Physics.

The premise behind SD is the schools recruit trainees with a view to subsequent employment (McNamara & Murray, 2013) and, as cited on the DfE website, as having ‘a job in mind just for you’ (DfE 2016a). The suggestion by the DfE is it is a ‘popular choice for those who hope to secure a role in the network of schools where they train’ (ibid). This was a key factor for Poppy, as a trainee, in her decision to apply through SD as it was ‘one less thing to think about’. However, schools do not have to employ trainees they take on under this programme, as was the case in Poppy’s SD school; ‘most of us doing SD here do not have jobs’. The difficulty for schools such as Harry’s that recruit SD trainees is he has ‘to do a little bit of second guessing to see shortage subjects, who might be moving on, going on maternity etc’.

In this study, there seems to be a mismatch between the key promoted benefit of SD (having a job in the school where training took place) over the PGCE route (DfE 2016a). The original expectation of SD was that the trainees would be employed by their training school (Hodgson 2014), however, both schools interviewed said when recruiting new staff, SD trainees had to go through the same procedures as all other candidates. As a consequence, there have been instances when SD trainees have not been successful in this process. Thus the only advantage for the SD trainee is that both they and the school know the strengths and weaknesses of each other, in greater depth than perhaps can be ascertained in interview.

Placement

Being part of university led training allows students to undertake their teaching practice in more than one school. SD providers would say the same thing, however the difference with the latter is that frequently, these schools are linked in partnership and often share the same or very similar ethos (Universities UK, 2014).

Olivia, a senior member of staff at an SD partner school, felt each school ‘has a very specific context with staff, students and catchment...all schools would report to have tiny nuances around a basic ethos’. However, if schools are in partnership with one another, there is every possibility that they are very close geographically and in ethos. This point was picked up in interview with Harry at his SD partner school; ‘there is a danger with SD that you are exposed to a certain type of school’. Jack, from Foxedge University, endorsed this view; the ‘lens through which the training is delivered is one of school ethos, of school preference, of school tradition and habit and perhaps not with the objectivity we [Foxedge University] would try and offer with a PGCE’. If trainees experience diverse placements, it is a crucial element in ‘moving prospective teachers toward greater cultural sensitivity’ (Causey et al 2000:35). It affords a greater awareness of notions of difference in values, beliefs, settings and management style within educational locales and broadens the trainees own stance.

Placements through the PGCE route at Foxedge University are viewed positively. Amelia, the PGCE trainee, explained there is an excellent ‘variety of schools for placement [which] allows us to consider where we might best fit into the educational establishment’. Counterbalanced to this, as Jessica from Foxedge University pointed out, is the fact the trainees ‘know which school [they] are going into in SD and can forge links much more quickly’. I suggest the underlying consideration needs to be that trainee teachers need ‘well planned exposure to and engagement with a range of expertise’ (Carter, 2015:22) in order to understand the different challenges provided by different schools in different settings.

‘Growing your own’

For schools, the main advantage to SD seems to be the opportunity to ‘grow your own’ i.e. select, train and develop those trainees the school wants to work with during their one year of training. As a result, schools have greater influence over training ‘their’ teachers (Hilton & Tyler, 2015). Both SD partner schools highlighted the ‘element of choice compared to PGCE when you do not know who you might get on placement’ (Olivia) and to ‘see if they are a good fit’ (Harry). This is an advantage if a school is looking to train, recruit and retain staff, moulded in the school ethos from the beginning. For some schools, it is one way of addressing staff shortages in some subjects and has the potential of growing leaders from within (NCTL, 2015).

Whereas there are advantages to schools who take on SD trainees, the longer term benefits to trainees are less clear. If they have been trained in a school with a particular ethos, which is considered pivotal there, it may not be the case when they move to another school, later in their career. As Harry (SD school partner) pointed out, moving from one school to another, not in partnership, could be described as ‘a bit like going to another country, like going to America, they speak the same language, but the customs are very different and the systems are very different’. The key issue is that the school will gain trainees they want working in their setting but longer term, as Jessica from Foxedge University highlighted, it will only work if the school are delivering good quality training and allowing the trainees exposure to other schools (Gewirtz, 2013).

Support and mentoring

One of the advantages, highlighted in interview with SD partner school colleague Harry, is the ability to offer more ‘bespoke professional development’ (PD) where ‘we can be more responsive to their [the trainees] needs’. The fact that some of the PD can be personalised, be in smaller groups and can go into greater depth may be something university PGCE courses could adapt to. However, ‘the rate of progress in placement A is quicker for PGCE trainees because they have probably had more sustained pre-programming at university’ (Harry).

In comparison, one of the weaknesses identified in this study is the over-reliance on already overworked teaching colleagues in facilitating SD training (ATL 2013). In addition, Ward (2014) questioned whether schools have the time and/or expertise to support trainees to gain the necessary theoretical background and support research to improve their practice. Although SD partner schools felt ‘learning from observing the widest range of teachers is vital’ (Olivia), there is far greater responsibility placed on the subject mentor. The disadvantage of relying on mentors for guidance is a danger that trainees pick up the ‘habits of the person who is your mentor’ (Olivia). It raised the question of how mentors can be trained to debate the variety of different teaching methods and styles with the trainees, without falling back to their own default model (Hilton and Tyler 2015). Such concern has been previously expressed regarding the quality of trainee teacher mentoring within school-based programmes and the capacity to deliver it (Brookes, 2005; Hodgson, 2014).

For both routes into teaching, the stakeholders in this study felt the importance of building relationships with mentors and tutors is key to the professional development of trainee teachers. Certainly, Amelia (PGCE trainee) found tutors [at Foxedge University] excellent for 'guidance and advice'. High quality mentoring is critically important for trainee teachers (Hobson et al 2009) and although 'effective mentors are outstanding teachers...outstanding practitioners are not automatically outstanding mentors' (Carter 2015:41)

Facilities/research

One area of concern seems to be whether or not schools are able to provide teachers and trainee teachers with the opportunities to engage with research and enquiry. In their report into Research and the Teaching Profession, BERA (2014:11) found 'opportunities for engagement in the research process correlate closely with the quality of teaching and through this, with student outcome.' Linked to this view, the teaching union, the ATL (2013), stated that SD is too classroom based with little time allowed for reading and reflection. The physicality of moving from school to university affords the trainees space away from the setting in which they are undertaking their practice and that distance can often allow reflection without the pressure of the classroom (Universities UK, 2014). By increasing the period and emphasising the benefits of spending even more time in schools, the government appear to have rejected 'research-based knowledge rather than...integrating such knowledge more effectively with that developed in schools' (Burn & Mutton, 2013:3).

However, as the senior staff from SD schools pointed out, the 'trainees are still members of the university with access to libraries etc', nevertheless, 'the academic back up, access to tutors, libraries etc., gives it a more academic feel'. The SD trainee, Poppy, found it invaluable having access to the library at university as she found 'there are only a few books in school' and that 'my tutors [at Foxedge University] are really knowledgeable'. As Olivia from the partner SD school pointed out, the impact of 'research on education has grown exponentially – that's quite an important thing'. Consequently, Jessica from Foxedge University, felt it essential that trainees have that 'exposure to research'. The PGCE trainee, Amelia, endorsed engagement in academic research as it provided 'excellent insight into classroom practice and ...developed and improved my skills'. This accords with BERA (2014) and Carter (2015:27) who felt schools should be research-rich environments with ITT clarifying 'why engaging with research is important'.

Peer group/ Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) saw learning as being socially situated, from interaction within a group rather than via specific pedagogic practice. This social element learning is a community of practice (CoP) (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). Yandell and Turvey (2007) felt schools are considered to be CoP, which have smaller CoPs within them. Similarly, I would argue, Universities offering PGCE courses are also CoP for the whole cohort of trainees, with smaller CoPs when in subject groups.

Both whole cohort and smaller, subject group CoPs, enable the trainees to 'learn within a cohort of their peers to strengthen their perspective' (Universities UK 2014:3). PGCE trainees, such as Amelia, valued this opportunity to engage with peers with whom ideas can be shared. Such groups within the university provide a CoP which small SD providers cannot do, a failing acknowledged by the SD partner, Olivia; 'there is some security in learning with others who are going through similar experiences'. As both Jack and Jessica from Foxedge University pointed out, 'these CoP, these connections remain after the PGCE has finished' (Jack). In addition, trainees on the PGCE route 'have time to talk through the assignments, to share good practice' (Jessica). This resonates with Trowler & Knight (2004) in their study of new entrants into a faculty and the issues that can arise in creating shared meanings.

However, those trainees choosing the SD route do have a CoP in their subject area in school but not necessarily one which included other trainees. The ‘opportunity to come together in subject groups especially where trainees may be isolated’ is key (Carter 2015:40). SD trainees do participate in whole school continuing professional development (CPD) and as Olivia from the SD partner school highlighted, ‘as such the trainees will be part of a community of learners’. It is important that ‘providers build communities of practice for trainees, providing opportunities for them to come together and learn in peer groups’ (Carter 2015:39). This is particularly so in situations where there are only a small number of trainees in the school or where the partnership is small (ibid)

Reflection

The fact that SD trainees spend so much of their time in school raised the issue of how, where and when can they become reflective practitioners (Schon. 1983). As Jack, from Foxedge University, pointed out, the PGCE trainees have ‘chances to reflect in a neutral environment...if they [the trainees] physically come somewhere else, away from school, where there is a level of understanding and empathy...it is a safe place in which to reflect’. This view was supported by Amelia, the PGCE trainee, who indicated, ‘access to tutors for guidance and advice (independent of the schools) is a valuable resource’. This time away from their placement was an advantage for the PGCE trainees in that it afforded them a different environment for them to be able to reflect on their experiences, without the pressure that can be found when in school (Golding. 2015). As Lawes (2011:24) highlighted this enabled the trainees to have a ‘critical distance’ from which to view their practice experience without, as Harry, from the SD partner school pointed out, being ‘sucked into’ school life.

The SD trainee, Poppy, thought it would be of great benefit to ‘leave stuff behind [in school] which you cannot do if you are SD’. This “safe” space, away from their placement also afforded an opportunity for professional dialogue with which trainees may otherwise not engage. As Jessica, from Foxedge University advocated, by providing the trainees with the chance to ‘read, discuss, have fruitful discussions, to question, to compare, to contrast is really invaluable...you don’t have that time to do that in schools’. Trainee teachers need space to engage and reflect on theory as well as managing the practical aspects of their training (Hodgson 2014). This was more easily available to PGCE trainees than their SD counterparts.

Other issues

Schools do not need to take a broad, strategic view of how and where teacher training takes place; their core business is teaching and education. As Jack, from Foxedge University pointed out, ‘contributing to teacher training is 6th in the national list of priorities [for schools] which isn’t very high’. Places on either the PGCE or SD are not now regulated in terms of locational, regional demand and subsequently, there is the real possibility of a shortfall in teachers in some subjects in some areas of the country (Hilton & Tyler, 2015). This is exacerbated by the fact that SD training providers do not have to employ those trainees they recruit. In the geographical area of the country where this study took place, SD is notably underdeveloped in comparison to other regions. House prices, transport links, rising pupil population and the number of trained teachers leaving the profession are all factors which are contributing to a mounting ‘crisis in teacher recruitment and retention’ (NUT, 2015).

In a survey conducted by the teaching union, the ATL (2013), it was identified that some members thought more time in school may help some trainees prepare for the reality of teaching, however, more felt the importance of theory in their training could be lost and that the additional resources available in an HEI would be missed. Nonetheless, as Jack from Foxedge University observed, ‘simply quantifying the training in terms of the numbers of weeks [spent in school] is quite short sighted because you could spend 38 weeks in school and still not be the most well qualified trainee’. What

also needs to be considered is the impact that having a large number of additional trainee teachers has on the students in school. The benefits accrued from having trainee teachers in the classroom (Hurd, 2008; Hayes, 2004; Lee & Wilkes, 1999) need to be carefully weighed up against the pupils' wellbeing. Additionally, with increasing numbers of trainees in school, the need for staff with effective mentoring skills grows too.

Conclusion

Grimmett et al. (2009) felt that the role of universities is somehow being blamed for actual or perceived problems with the quality of graduating teachers. However, the House of Commons (2010) reported that England has some of the best qualified and trained teachers. In 2012, the House of Commons Select Committee for Education supported the need for a continuing role for universities in teacher training and that any reduction could bring 'considerable demerits' (House of Commons, 2012:32). Nevertheless, government policy is pushing forward the notion of teacher training to being both school led and school based (Brown, Rowley & Smith, 2016).

The purpose of ITT is to 'prepare teachers to be able to cope effectively in the classroom in terms of both the knowledge and the practical skills that they will require' (Carter, 2015:21). Trainees get a practical element whichever route they select. As Poppy identified; 'you get real vocational training and for me that's what teaching is about. It's about whether or not you are great in the classroom and you only find that out once you are there'. This practical element though needs to be balanced by and supported with a deeper pedagogical understanding of theory of learning and teaching (Carter, 2015).

The student allocation system, 'open season' (Jack from Foxedge University) for recruitment of trainees into PGCE programmes run by HEIs, is putting at risk the departments/faculties/schools of education within these institutions as they are unable to predict how many trainee teachers they will recruit and thus long term/medium term strategic planning is just not able to happen (Gewirtz, 2013). Some HEIs have already pulled out of teacher training, others are downsizing (Whitty, 2013). Nevertheless, 'the PGCE has both kudos and a level of critical perception on the part of the public so that seems to have currency' (Jack). In summary, 'it is very difficult to draw conclusions about whether one route into teaching is any more effective than another' (Carter, 2015:47).

This is an early stage and small scale investigation of the different routes into teaching, from the experiences of different stakeholders in one HEI. It is not intended for these findings to be generalisable, rather a continuation of the debate into ITT and where it should take place. More research into teacher training routes would add to this discussion. It is important that teacher educators, wherever they practise, should be mindful of the impact government policy has on their trainees understanding of, and engagement with, pedagogy of learning and teaching.

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