The invisible educators: exploring the development of Teacher Educators in the Further Education system

Diane Thurston
Newcastle College
Success North

Abstract

This article outlines the scope of proposed case study research to be conducted from May 2010 and intended to explore factors which support the development of Teacher Educators (TEs) in post-compulsory settings – a significantly under-researched professional group. The article reviews the research literature in this area, identifying significant omissions, and presents an initial overview of the case to be explored. The article identifies models of Teacher Educator development, originating from English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education which will inform this research, as well as the role of Teacher Educator as researcher.

Key words

Professional Development; Teacher Educator; Induction; Post-Compulsory Education.

> *'The nature of teaching about teaching demands skills, expertise and knowledge that cannot simply be taken for granted.'*
> (Korthagen et al, 2005: p. 107)

I currently work in a teacher education team composed of 14 full-time, and four to six part-time TEs in a post-compulsory education setting. Three of the part-time members of the team are undertaking a 'formal' programme of professional development specifically designed to bring them into a teacher education role. Six of the existing team have undertaken similar programmes (at the same educational provider or elsewhere). In addition, induction processes apply to all new recruits to the team to support them in the move from a teaching to a Teacher Educator role, or in moving from teacher education in other settings. These induction processes operate in addition to organisational and departmental processes. There is experience of developing TEs within the team in this 'formal' manner, though not all TEs in the team have 'achieved' Teacher Educator status through this process, which appears to have originated within the wider field of EFL/ESOL teacher education. My interest in this research area stems from my experience as a Teacher Educator in post-compulsory contexts, including my current setting, and my own development as a Teacher Educator supported by both formal and informal processes, as well as my involvement in the development and support of colleagues moving into a Teacher Educator role.

As a result, the research question of how TEs may be developed, and the concomitant question of what skills, understanding, knowledge and attributes a Teacher Educator may require, has arisen from my professional setting.

This research will contribute to an emerging research area (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Koster et al, 2005) increasingly undertaken by TEs (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 1020; Smith, 2005: p. 177). A recent Government-funded research project (contributed to by the CETTs in 2008-2009) resulted in a composite report (Harkin, 2008, as yet unpublished) making specific recommendations for the development of TEs. However, the transition from 'expert' teacher (a term that will require further analysis) to the role of Teacher Educator remains *'under-researched'* (Harrison and McKeown, 2008: p. 153). TEs research teachers **not** other TEs (Koster et al, 2005: p. 160), and research about TEs within post-compulsory contexts is rare (Noel, 2006: p. 151). This means that a range of questions about the learning of TEs remain unanswered:

- how are TEs developed?
- what can the post-compulsory sector learn from and offer the development of TEs in compulsory settings?
- what role does mentoring play in the development of TEs?
- what skills, understanding, knowledge and attributes does a Teacher Educator in the post-compulsory sector need?
- do we need 'standards' for TEs? If so, who sets the standards and defines the professional attributes of TEs?

The range of these questions poses an initial problem in themselves, thus the research question has been restricted to focus on one area of exploration, starting with the large teacher education team outlined at the beginning of this article, and is expected to contribute to the discussion of what supports the development of teachers who teach teachers.

The research will explore approaches to developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes of effective TEs, and aim to identify principles underpinning their training/development, and 'paradigmatic' examples of what has been termed good practice in this area (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 1023). Due to the paucity of research focusing on TEs within Lifelong Learning contexts, this paper draws on research about the education of teachers for compulsory contexts, typically within Higher Education institutions, interpreting findings from the perspective of a Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) Teacher Educator.

What informs the practice of Teacher Educators?

Caroline Cox outlined four pillars of educational practice: *'tradition'*, *'prejudice'*, *'dogma'* and *'ideology'* (cited in Hargreaves, 1996: p. 12). Other writers outline a broader range of influencing factors: initial training, reading, experience and professional discussion (Bassey, 1995: p. 149). Still, others argue that educational practice should be research-based (Hargreaves, 1996; Ball, 1995), although definitions of educational research, and therefore practice based on it, are wide. Similarly, researchers are divided with regard to the respective value of practice informed by reflection (Boud et al, 1985; Moore, 1999) and evidence-based (and/or evidence-informed) practice (Hammersley, 1997; Hammersley, 2007). However, little research tackles the question of what informs the practice of TEs – this is an important area of enquiry if we accept the premise that the practice of teacher education is not an innate skill (Korthagen et al, 2005), and a further assumption that the learning experiences of teachers/TEs inform their own practice (Edwards, 1997; Kirstin, 2007; Korthagen, 2004).

Despite increasing attention around teacher education in the Learning and Skills Sector, this interest had not resulted in *'commentary or published research about the TEs who deliver the training'* (Noel, 2006: p. 151). This influential paper aimed to encourage debate about *'experience, qualifications, knowledge, skills and qualities necessary to fulfil the role of TEs in the sector'* (ibid: p. 151). As such it is an important contribution to recent research on TE development in the UK (Murray and Male, 2005; Harrison and McKeown, 2008; Murray, 2008), in Europe (Korthagen, Koster et al, 2005; Lunenberg et al, 2007), the USA (Zeichner, 1999; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2005), and elsewhere (Smith, 2005). It should be noted that the majority of research to date has investigated TEs delivering training to pre-service teachers destined for compulsory settings. In contrast, Noel (2006) adopts a focus on TEs working within Further Education colleges with in-service teachers across the education and skills sector.

A second landmark study suggested that TEs are an *'under-researched and poorly-understood occupational group'* and in particular that their needs at early career stages are unexplored (Murray, 2008: p. 118). Murray aimed to survey and identify approaches to TE induction at a sample of institutions, explore a sample of TE induction experiences, and highlight examples of good practice (ibid). The researcher concludes that most induction provision occurs at departmental level and may be viewed as Work Based Learning (ibid: p. 117). The researcher characterises the needs of TEs as *'complex'* (ibid); challenges the perception that expert teachers automatically become effective TEs; and notes that *'nearly all'* TEs in English HEIs have moved from the school sector (ibid: 119). It is significant therefore that the new TEs do not note experiences supporting their move to the teaching of adults, or development of pedagogy for teacher education (Murray and Male, 2005). Murray notes *'a sense of irony'* that some teacher education departments *'may be functioning as restrictive learning environments'* (Murray, 2008: p. 129), defining two approaches to induction experienced by new TEs within this study: induction by 'monitoring' or by 'immersion'. Murray goes on to highlight the need for an induction curriculum, recognising individual needs and exploiting communal learning. Support for such a curriculum is widespread in this emerging area of research (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Smith, 2005; Harrison and McKeown, 2008), and a guidance document for university teacher education providers is available from ESCalate (Boyd et al, 2007).

Does mentoring support the development of Teacher Educators?

Mentoring has been described as *'a new mantra'* in western countries and a significant part of *'quality reform'* (Sundli, 2007: p. 2001). Qualifying teachers have identified mentors as supportive of learning (Malderez et al, 2007: p. 233), and a recent literature review identified significant support for the use of mentors in Initial Teacher Education (Morton et al, 2006: p. 28). Recent government reforms to ITE in the post-16 sector describe the use of mentors as *'essential'* (DfES, 2004: p. 8). The need for mentors to undergo training also appears to be supported by research findings (Webb et al, 2007: p. 8). However there is a need for more research with regard to how to develop skills in mentors, described as a *'relatively uncharted'* area (ibid: p. 173), and a significant gap with regard to the role of mentoring in the professional learning of TEs.

The views of the Teacher Educators

Research in teacher education is predominantly qualitative, with *'self-study'* common (Cochran-Smith, 2005: p. 224; Zeichner, 1999: p. 8–11), and experimental design viewed as *'impossible'* (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 1022). Research conducted by TEs working in Higher Education institutions and preparing teachers for compulsory settings far outweighs research from and about education and skills contexts. Research by researchers in education and skills settings tends to focus on specific aspects of TE practice, for example, classroom observation (Cockburn, 2005). Lack of attention to TE development in the latter sector was striking. Inspection data, judging TEs as *'suitably-qualified'* and taught elements of TE programmes *'good'* (Ofsted, 2006: p. 1), also suggests that effectiveness is undermined by *'isolation'* (ibid: p. 8). Further studies need to explore the degree of transferability of findings across the two settings. A range of perspectives arise from studies by TEs based in university settings, and exploring teacher education for the compulsory sector.

TEs, like teachers, need to be exposed to *'alternative perspectives and approaches to practice'* (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 1026). *'Traditional approaches'* adopted by university-based TEs have been described as *'irrelevant'* amid calls for *'new visions'* of teaching and learning in the education of teachers (ibid: 1021). Elsewhere it has been claimed that academics are *'rarely exposed to role models who demonstrate effective teaching'* (Marsh and Hattie, 2002: p. 634). Attitudes of student and novice teachers reflect the value attached to modelling approaches (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 1036; Smith, 2005). The practice of modelling in teacher education has a long tradition in English Language teacher education, developing into the practice of *'loop input'* where process and content are aligned (Woodward, 1991; Woodward, 2003). Opportunities to *'engage in inquiry with a learning community'* are judged to be *'vital'* for the development of TEs (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 7).

Teacher Educators as researchers

In university settings, a shift from *'positivistic'* to *'broader'* research methodologies has led to increased research by TEs (Zeichner, 1999: p. 8), with qualitative research described as a *'burgeoning body of work'* (Cochran-Smith, 2003: p. 7). Qualitative approaches, almost universally adopted by researchers in this search, are *'often discounted'* (Cochran-Smith, 2005: p. 223), with research undertaken by TEs not valued as a result of *'knowledge hierarchies'* (Zeichner, 1999: p. 4). Others refer to the low status of TEs (Zeichner, 1999: p. 7; Korthagen, 2005: p. 111). The developing knowledge base for teaching has been described as remarkable but TE research has not had a corresponding impact (Korthagen et al, 2006: p. 1038). In the literature located, there is a widespread assumption that a key feature of the university-based Teacher Educator role is *'to conduct and publish research'* (Cochran-Smith, 2003: pp. 5-6; Cochran-Smith, 2005: p. 224; Koster et al, 2005: p.158). This assumption has not been tested in measuring the effectiveness of TEs who combine teaching with research. However, pressure exerted on TEs as a result of the research burden (Cochran-Smith, 2003: p. 6) and the potential detrimental impact on their teaching is noted (Smith, 2005: p. 186), and surveyed student teachers do not view research as *'necessary'* for TEs (Koster at al, 2005: p. 165). Elsewhere, a quantitive focus identified *'strong evidence'* to challenge the *'myth'* of the link between research productivity and teaching effectiveness (Marsh and Hattie, 2002: p. 628). Although surveyed university-based informants did not view *'scholarly activities'* as significant for their learning (Murray, 2008: p. 126), Noel (2006: p. 159) posits an expectation of scholarly activities for TEs in both HEI and Further Education settings.

While research activity is viewed as *'integral'* to the work of university TEs (Boyd et al, 2007: p. 16; Noel, 2006: p. 159), pressures within the LLS sector may impede research activity. This may be a particular issue as elsewhere the issue of work intensification in the sector is stressed, with the majority of FE staff exceeding contracted hours, describing stress as a feature of working life (Villeneuve-Smith et al, 2008: p. 2), and described as being tested to *'breaking-point'* (Coffield, 2008: p. 50) in part by changing policy (Ball, 2008; Edward et al, 2007). The role of teacher as researcher, however, is longstanding:

> *'When someone reflects-in-action, he (sic) becomes a researcher in the practice context.'*
>
> (Schon, 1983: p. 29)

Thus, experience and reflection support action research (Kemmis, 1988: p. 168), described as *'the greatest achievement of educational research'* (Bassey, 1995: p. 149). The question remains, however, whether TEs in the LLS should be expected to publish research, and whether such activity has benefits for their practice, status or well-being. An alternate perspective would regard the role of TEs as pivotal in preparing the teachers for the challenges of this sector, and within this view, an active research role could be empowering, offering:

> *'…a language for challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others.'*
>
> (Ball, 1995: p. 116)

The challenge of how to develop this research capacity and how this can be supported within the pressured working environment presented above remains. An exploration of the purposes of research activity for TEs is required, along with research to test the impact of such activities on Teacher Educator practice, and the learning and teaching practice of student teachers.

Conclusion: coming into view?

This brief review highlights imbalances in research into TE development. Research by university-based TEs exploring teacher education in the Further Education system is rare (Nasta, 2007; Noel, 2006; Harkin, 2008); research produced by and about education and skills contexts is rarer still. The research produced is predominantly qualitative, potentially limiting in its influence over policy-making (Oakley, 2001: p.94). It is essential that TEs within the Further Education system become visible and contribute to public debates about the future of teaching and learning within the sector. A place to start could involve exploring alternative research methods in the area of teacher education research. Such an approach could start with *'exploratory-interpretive'* research approaches (Webb et al, 2007: p. 174), taking account of contextual factors while encouraging exploration by practitioners. This would fit within an enlightenment model and with Ball's view of the role of research, offering an alternative to:

> *'…modes of thought …articulated for us by dominant others.'*
>
> (Ball, 1995: p. 116)

Importantly it reflects a view of evidence-based practice informed by practitioner-generated research.

In addition, there is a need to tackle the under-researched area of the professional development of TEs within the LLS sector. A wide range of research procedures may inform the pedagogical activities, attitudes and understanding of teachers. Such procedures may include the use of case studies which allow for:

> *'…the indeterminate nature of educational values and principles, and the context-dependent nature of judgements about which concrete methods and procedures are consistent with them.'*
>
> (Elliot, 2001: p. 77)

One of my research aims is to inform and engage practitioners, supporting a view of practitioners as *'partners'* in the development of research perspective and ultimately policy (Coffield, 2008). I would welcome contributions to this proposed research area, currently at an early stage, from colleagues in the sector.

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