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What factors do tutors take into account when deciding whether a trainee's teaching is outstanding?

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This paper draws on research (Ollin, 2009) on the impact of Ofsted's grading criteria (Ofsted, 2009) on teacher educators working in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS). Grading of trainee teachers in schools has been a feature of ITE for the compulsory education sector for a number of years whereas ITE programmes for the post-compulsory LLS have remained un-graded. However, recent government policies to introduce parity between teachers across all education sectors has now led to the introduction of qualified teacher status in the LLS (QTLS) and a common framework for ITE inspection that encompasses school and LLS teacher education offered through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As part of the inspection process, ITE programmes for LLS must identify trainees whose profiles match the Ofsted grading criteria against four grades – grades one to four - equated to the terms '*outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate*' (Ofsted, 2009).

The data are drawn from a research study of teacher educators' understandings of '*outstanding*' teaching and the impact of Ofsted grading criteria for ITE on teacher educators' observations of teaching. This paper summarises how teacher educators teaching on the Certificate in Education/PGCE in an HEI /FE partnership conceptualised '*outstanding*' trainee teachers. Research methods used were: compilation of trainee case studies by teacher educators; focus group discussion; semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposively selected sample of teacher educators.

Notions of 'Outstanding' trainee teachers

A long list of features associated with outstanding teaching was generated through analysis of written case studies and findings from teacher educator focus groups. These included overarching features such as '*high level of commitment and innovation*'; relational features such as '*excellent relationship with learners*' '*enthusiastic, enjoy creativity*'; pedagogical features such as '*student-centred teaching*', adapting '*flexibly to learner*'; teaching approaches such as '*makes learning lively by relevant projects topical and relevant to learners' age and interests*'; processes supporting teaching such as high quality planning and production of excellent resources, There were also references to teacher expectations '*ambition for*

learners', manifested through '*compassionate and challenging delivery*'. It is unlikely that any experienced teacher would quarrel with these features and they corresponded broadly to Hattie's meta-analysis (2009) which drew conclusions about 'expert' teaching. They also corresponded with many of the Ofsted criteria related to '*outstanding*' trainees. The case studies and focus groups also emphasised the importance of the trainee as *learner*, as well as *teacher*. In the long list of examples given, trainees who had a strong commitment to their own learning and development translated this into a high level of motivation to learn more about teaching and learning with the aim of improving their own practice. As Coffield and Edward suggest, even long lists will still fail to be comprehensive and will probably contain internal contradictions derived from the specific requirements of different teaching contexts (Coffield and Edward, 2009). Three key issues were raised by the focus groups: the impact of Ofsted grading terms, the tensions experienced because of dual identities of FE lecturer and trainee teacher (Orr and Simmons, 2010) and the effect of teaching contexts on how teaching might be judged.

The rich data derived from the semi-structured interviews indicated a more complex set of determinants, with some tutors placing more emphasis on some features than others. For some tutors excellent planning was an important feature of '*outstanding teaching*'; other tutors placed little or no emphasis on this in their responses during the research interviews. Where '*planning*' was emphasised, tutors related this to lesson planning, whereas Ofsted grading criteria place an equal emphasis on '*planning for progression*'. Observing tutors' comments 'put flesh' on the list of features generated by the wider body of teacher educators, showing how the notion of '*outstanding*' teaching occurred through the use of exemplars, illustrating, for example '*flexibility*' and '*ability to enthuse*'

Tutors' ideas of an '*outstanding*' learner brought in a number of features related to high quality course work, together with the ability and willingness to reflect and engage with ideas and theory. These features were related to the learner as a student on a University course with academic as well as professional requirements. However, wider attributes of being a learner were also present, in particular the '*willingness*' to learn, being '*diligent*' and '*enthusiastic*' '*attends all sessions*' – these features not only indicated a good '*student*' but also signaled a wider commitment to development through learning. '*Outstanding*' trainees were identified as eager to learn and used the more theoretical parts of the course, as well as input from observations of teaching to move their learning forward in relation to their practice. Observing tutors placed a great deal of emphasis on the trainee's ability to listen and learn from tutor feedback and it was clear that for these tutors '*outstanding*' teaching also included an '*outstanding ability to learn and develop teaching*'.

In teacher educators' case studies of '*weak*' trainees more emphasis was placed on the trainee as learner on the ITE course

than as a teacher, with a focus on lack of academic skills and poor motivation. Here a lack of academic skills could act as a barrier preventing the trainee from focusing on learning to teach. Although there were some contextual factors involved, including unstable work contexts and lack of teaching hours, a lack of motivation could signal a lack of interest in learning - the ‘bread and butter’ of the teaching profession. Interestingly the data revealed that there was a bias towards selecting male trainees as exemplars of ‘weak’ trainees. There are a number of possible reasons why this might be the case, including a greater number of males from craft backgrounds with few previous academic qualifications.

A significant issue raised in this research was whether notions of ‘outstanding’ varied according to teaching context. Although some teacher educators stated that they would base their judgements on the same aspects of teaching no matter what the context, most tutors thought that the teaching context did have an effect. This bears out recent research on the effect of learning cultures on teaching and learning (James and Biesta, 2007). The nature of the context where a trainee taught could affect the teaching approaches that were valued, the favoured methods of delivery and the kinds of resources that were considered appropriate in that context. Tutors suggested that different contexts had particular characteristics which demanded very different types of skills from teachers.

In many ways, ideas from the teacher educators on ‘outstanding’ trainees corresponded closely to the Ofsted grading criteria. For example, in the key aspects of ‘outstanding’ performance in lessons (Ofsted, 2009), Ofsted identify the ability to ‘teach lessons that invariably capture the interest of learners’ and expect ‘outstanding’ teachers to ‘have a rapport with learners’ which includes ‘high quality dialogue and questioning’. They also mention flexibility and the ability to respond quickly to learners’ responses. These were all areas identified by participants in the semi-structured interviews. However, there were areas where there were some differences from the Ofsted criteria. Ofsted expects that the trainee will teach students to explain how the teaching has helped them progress. This was not included in tutors’ discussions of ‘outstanding’ teaching, although it is unclear what Ofsted intends here. It could indicate the teacher’s role in developing active learners who are aware of how they learn, or it could indicate using the students’ views for evaluation purposes.

Teacher educators’ suggestions corresponded to most of the Ofsted grading criteria for all four aspects of trainee performance, although there were some gaps. Responses made very little reference to targets, including feedback and target setting. There was no mention of ‘Every Child Matters (ECM)’, and although many of the values underpinning ECM were implicit in many tutors’ comments, this omission is surprising, given its current importance in Ofsted inspections. Another feature which did not appear in any tutors’ ideas of ‘outstanding’ was a trainee’s capacity to carry out summative

assessments. This is worthy of further consideration, given the emphasis on ‘measurement of achievement’ and ‘retention and achievement’ together with the high value placed on trainee ‘development’ in Ofsted inspections.

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