

Managing Meat One: perceptions and anxieties of trainee teachers as they enter the Learning and Skills Sector for the first time

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Abstract

The notion that trainee teachers are anxious at the prospect of standing before their first class is as commonplace as it is understandable. This small-scale study, carried out with a group of aspiring Further Education (FE) lecturers on a Stage One Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme in 2007, is the first of a series of three articles which promises to inform pedagogical practice in the context of ITE in the Learning and Skills Sector (LSS). Using a multimethod approach, the study examines trainees' confidence and anxiety levels at the start of the course, evaluates their confidence levels following a 'crash course' in managing challenging behaviour and analyses the biographical features which may be perceived as influential in their confidence levels. Working within the concept of action research, the study seeks to identify ways in which the programme and trainee preparedness can be improved for current and future entrants to the teaching profession to the benefit of their learners. The findings of the study, in contrast to much of the available literature, advance an initial argument for better preparation of trainees prior to teaching placement, particularly so when young female trainees are preparing to teach at Entry level.

Key words

Learner Behaviour; Teacher Education and Training; Trainee Biography; Anxiety; Confidence.

Introduction

Working within the concept of action research, this first article follows trainee lecturers as they embark on their teaching careers in the Learning and Skills Sector and is concerned with their confidence and anxiety levels at the start of their teaching placement on a two year in-service ITE course. The study draws on a small-scale study of two groups (a daytime group of eight and an evening group of 18 trainees) with a view to improving the programme at a general FE college, where I was until recently employed as Centre Manager for Teacher Education.

The research topic was identified during initial formative assessment of trainees' Reflective Journals (RJs) on the third week of the course, where almost half of the trainees expressed some apprehension at the prospect of student misbehaviour whilst on placement. Such concerns are understandable and there is a literature that suggests that the same concerns are prevalent in teacher training more widely. For example, *'This [student misbehaviour] is probably the greatest fear of most trainee teachers'* (Gray et al, 2005: p. 198), a notion shared by Kyriacou who draws on the Elton report (DES, 1989) to echo similar sentiments: *'Discipline is one of the major areas of concern for student teachers...'* (Kyriacou, 1998: p. 79).

However, given that not all trainees expressed similar apprehensions in their RJs, and that not all of the trainees were new to teaching, I ventured to critically analyse the relationship between trainees' biographies and confidence levels.

General rationale

Teaching practice has been widely acknowledged (Wallace, 2002; Avis et al, 2003; Bathmaker and Avis, 2004; Maxwell, 2004) as a problem area for many trainee teachers across various contexts where the prospect of disruptive behaviour *'...is a source of central concern to beginning teachers'* (Cohen and Mannion, 1989: p. 11). Whilst there is a literature that explores the primary and secondary school routes into teaching quite well, Further Education, or the LSS, is served less well although similar concerns emerge. For example, there is the suggestion that ITE trainees in the LSS have inappropriate expectations of the learners they will be working with as Butcher postulates:

'Inexperienced teachers can often possess unrealistic expectations about the likely behaviour of 16-19 students. This is important because the inflated expectations about compliant behaviour and positive attitudes to learning can falsely inform planning for the 16-19 classes.'

(Butcher, 2005: p. 114)

Further, there is a body of empirical knowledge which attempts to relate trainees' biographies to their confidence levels through a thin vein of epistemological findings. For example, Gutherson and Pickard's (2005) study found that trainees' prior experiences were influential in their confidence levels, particularly regarding behaviour management, yet suggested that gender, age and subject specialism made no difference to their confidence. Similarly, whilst prior experience of working with young people proved to be influential in raising trainees' confidence in managing difficult behaviour, interestingly and without explanation, such experience was felt by their sample to be of no value in teaching.

Whilst the authors posit the interesting notion that, perhaps, behaviour management skills are either innate or develop naturally over time and, therefore, perhaps need not be taught, they also raised the problematic issue of trainee ignorance:

'Or could it be that those with no experience were not fully aware of what they were letting themselves in for? ITT providers may need to be aware of this and consider what they can do to increase confidence levels of those with little or no prior experience. At this time the trend seems to be simply to refuse them entry to the course.'

(Gutherson and Pickard, 2005: p. 2)

Bathmaker et al (2002) made a more detailed study of trainees' biographies where their experiences of learning were analysed against their teaching placement experiences and which suggested that FE learners were ill-prepared by compulsory schooling, a factor which the trainees felt unable to overturn and which their ITE course, and their own experiences, had not prepared them for. In a later study Bathmaker and Avis (2004) similarly revealed perceptions and dispositions which gave a strong flavour of helplessness with trainees drawing on their own experiences as learners yet feeling unable to motivate their own students. More recently, Moran and Abbott (2006) echo Hall and Raffo's (2003) suggestion that trainees' cultural capital influences the approaches they take when dealing with disaffected learners.

Whilst there is a literature that reveals a wealth of disparate findings, there are also notable gaps or small spaces in knowledge calling for an exploration of the unique place of culture, agency and context in the level of preparedness of trainee teachers in the LSS.

Whilst the various works of Avis and Bathmaker et al are the exception, the tangible relationship between challenging behaviour and trainee biography is a notably absent dimension and one which this series of three articles seeks to address.

Methodology

A mixed method questionnaire was completed by all trainees in both groups at the end of the fourth session since most trainees had not started teaching at that point. Quantitative tick boxes were used for trainees' biographical and subject teaching data whilst qualitative data was accommodated by the inclusion of two open-response boxes where respondents could describe their pre-placement worries. All seven trainees attending the Monday group, and all 16 attending the Tuesday session, completed the questionnaire with the smaller group designated as the control group and the larger group as the experimental group.

A follow-up questionnaire was designed and given to the experimental group following a mini-lesson on managing challenging behaviour and included both qualitative and quantitative methods. The respondents were to rate the usefulness of the session, compare their confidence levels in relation to those of the previous week and justify their responses.

Summary of key findings

An inductive approach to coding (Altrichter et al, 1993) was used to synthesise the trainees' responses where categories were chosen from analysis of the data and groups of descriptors assembled under each category. Closer analysis of each response was then made and summarised as follows, with pseudonyms used throughout.

Most trainees embraced the opportunity to express their concerns with some, for example Quinn taking the opportunity to criticise his employer, ranging widely in topic and detail and from which a number of themes emerged.

The most common concern amongst trainees (ten responses) was the amount of 'paperwork', for instance course and session planning and administrative demands. These concerns may mirror the findings of Butcher (2005), in epitomising the need for accurate planning, and the beliefs of Minton (1991), Kyriacou (1998), McBer (2001) and Curzon (2004) where effective session planning was perceived as central to any notion of class and session control, although respondents did not make clear any such link. A follow-up question would have been useful in identifying whether this concern was a result of the perceived rigour of ITE study, although four of the seven trainees who were already qualified at or above this level answered in this way, or whether it was due to the lack of familiarity with systems, although four of the eight experienced trainees answered in this way including Una with 14 years (the greatest) teaching experience.

A close second was the theme related to issues of class control, behaviour and student responsiveness with trainees' responses (nine) showing a range of discomfort from Wendy's "...*unpredictable behaviour*" to Sarah's "...*coping with them if they become threatening or aggressive as I've never dealt with students before*". Such descriptors sit well with Gutherson and Pickard's (2005) and Mills and Midwinter's (1998) assertions that trainees have little awareness of what they are

letting themselves in for and reinforce the beliefs of the text book theorists. It is notable that half of the trainees with previous teaching experience identified this as a concern. Similarly notable is Gary's belief that preparation for managing challenging behaviour was essential preparation (although not a confidence issue for himself), notable since he was the only one in the Monday group with any appreciable teaching experience.

Subject knowledge, pedagogical issues and teaching 'delivery' was the third most common concern (seven), with an encouraging underlying ethos of introspection and reflection clearly in evidence in the responses.

Inexperienced respondents were also concerned about achieving inclusiveness in their sessions and for their students' achievements whilst in their charge, two notions which echo Hall and Raffo's (2003) significance of trainee culture influencing their approaches. Teaching observations were included in this category since trainees seemed to be particularly concerned about others' perceptions of their professional practice and subject pedagogy in front of class although none of those with more than six months experience cited this as a concern.

Trainees' biographical data was derived from the first questionnaire and identified the following themes.

Gender

Whilst the average minimum age between gender was negligible (male = 42 years, female = 39 years) none of the males were concerned about behaviour, which contrasted with Gutherson and Pickard's (2005) findings, although 66% were concerned with the paperwork.

Females differed according to age, particularly so by group, where the Monday group average minimum age was 40 years, with none below the age of 31, and only 20% of them being concerned about behaviour. This contrasted sharply with the Tuesday group, the average female age being 33 years, where 46% had concerns about behaviour rising to 60% of the under-31's and rising further to 75% of females aged 21 to 30 years without any teaching experience, again at odds with Gutherson and Pickard (*ibid.*) who found age to be immaterial.

Children's and students' ages

There was no correlation between trainees' children's ages and those of their students, dashing my tentative theory that those trainees with children of a similar or older age to their students might be better prepared for managing post-16 learners, a notion that came from Maxwell's (2004) belief that biography had a crucial influence on trainees' expectations.

Levelness

The level that trainees were beginning to teach at revealed that, whilst only one trainee teaching at Level 3 was anxious about behavioural issues, there was a steady increase in inverse proportion to learner levels where 57% of all females teaching Entry level were concerned about behaviour, a factor which may echo the Bathmaker and Avis (2004) study where trainees' own learning experiences were of little use in preparing them for groups at this level. Here, I offer the notion that trainee teachers are less likely (my assumption) to have studied at Entry level as teenagers, a feature of their teaching placement which may have exacerbated their uncertainties.

The second questionnaire was used with the experimental group at the end of the mini-lesson with responses tabulated and analysed for themes as follows.

In order for the session to be deemed effective it was decided that a score of four (very useful) or five (essential preparation) on a Likert scale, coupled with improved confidence since the first questionnaire was completed the previous week, would be the benchmark. Whilst 88% of respondents rated the session at four and above (76% rated it at five) only 70% were more confident. Of those who were more confident, 58% teach a narrow band of under-21s, although this may not be significant. Of the two respondents who rated the session at five, but kept the same confidence level, one failed to give a reason and the other conceded that she had spoiled the form.

76% of respondents described identifying class control and behaviour-related strategies that they could use in their teaching although other responses may have alluded to this also. Although these figures seem to support Hodkinson's (2004) suggestion that '*All academic knowledge is socially constructed*' (p. 11), they leave a question mark over Gutherson and Pickard's (2005) claim that the solution to effective class control is not found in a toolkit of strategies.

Again, this questionnaire raised some good examples of reflection. For example, Martha (ranked at five and more confident) rated the most useful session material as "*Priority areas and managing behaviour*" because "...it explained how and why my learners acted the way they do [sic] and this will change my own behaviour to positive", a theme which reinforces the belief of Maxwell (2004) that some trainees cope better when they relate to their learners' needs rather than relying on theories.

Conclusion

The study found that trainees' major concerns centred around the planning, preparation and administrative demands of the teaching placement, a concern that may have a basis in either the local context or the particular demands of the ITE course since the literature suggested nothing of the sort. This finding suggests that perhaps ITE providers could explore ways of alleviating trainees' concerns regarding the administrative demands of the teaching role.

However, the very close second concern for trainees, that of class control and behaviour management, revealed a wealth of qualitative data which both confirmed and denied previous research findings at the macro level. For instance, trainees' responses gave a strong flavour of stepping into the unknown with some trepidation and a sense of foreboding - a recurring theme in the literature. Nevertheless, and contrary to the suggestions of Gutherson and Pickard (2005), gender and age were found to be significant factors in that none of the male trainees, regardless of age or level of teaching, cited student behaviour as a potential concern. Yet in contrast, females were clearly identified as having concerns about managing challenging behaviour, a feature that became strikingly more noticeable the younger the trainee to the point where 75% of those in their twenties and inexperienced in teaching at Entry level cited this as their primary concern. Here, results from the experimental group suggested that trainees' confidence levels, as a result of the mini session on managing challenging behaviour, improved significantly where 88% rated the session as 'very useful' with 70% more confident as a result. I therefore contest that, whilst there may be some truth in Gutherson and Pickard's (2005) postulation that such ability naturally develops, their consequential suggestion that behaviour management and class control strategies therefore need not be taught, may be inappropriate for all learners, especially for females in their twenties preparing to teach at Entry level. Hence, I argue that the findings suggest that ITE providers embed pedagogical techniques for managing challenging behaviour as a core component of trainee teacher preparation prior to them embarking on teaching practice or placement.

Of equal concern to trainees was the worry that their pedagogical practice or teaching craft might be found wanting, an emerging theme allied to notions of professionalism where trainees' cultural dispositions were possibly influential in how they both perceived their learners and influenced their approaches to teaching them and which suggested a well-developed professional awareness particularly amongst those qualified at Level 4 and above. Here, the findings hinted at a deeply problematic mix of cultural dispositions and perceptions which sit well with the post-16 research of Bathmaker and Avis, (2004) and Maxwell (2004) where trainees drew on their own experiences as learners to inform their approaches. Here, there may be a case for ITE providers carefully enculturating trainees into Entry level classes and being mentored by experienced practitioners familiar with the particular nuances of Entry level culture.

I therefore argue that the findings reinforce those of several sources in the literature (Rogers, 1997, Mills and Midwinter, 1998, Hall et al, 2004, et al.) who suggest pre-placement preparation is an essential contribution to ITE programmes whilst maintaining that these remain seriously under-researched areas of our work and continue to lend themselves to educational action research for the benefit of all who work and learn in the sector.

The second article in the series, "How shall we know them?" – the relationship between trainee teachers' habitus and their perceptions of their learners' abilities' (forthcoming) explores trainee teachers' perceptions of their learners' abilities, and how and why those perceptions change over the two years of their ITE training.

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