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SCHOOL LED TRAINING: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE NEW SCHOOL DIRECT INITIATIVE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND, THE EXPERIENCES OF TRAINEES AND TRAINERS

Abstract

This paper presents research undertaken with trainees, mentors and tutors who are associated with the new School Direct initiative in England. Introduced quickly in 2012, this was a new way of training teachers which is seen as *school-led*. That is, schools, not higher education institutions, are the leaders of this programme and in many cases universities have been cut out of the process of training teachers. The change has had serious implications for schools, education departments in universities and trainees. This research, with primary sector trainees, attempted to discover the views of recent and current trainees, mentors in schools and tutors from programme providers. Though at present the research is small and focussed on the primary phase, some serious issues have arisen including the theoretical content of the programmes and the mentors' ability to underpin practice with educational theory and subject knowledge and to use the government's qualified to teach standards correctly.

Key words: teacher training, school direct, mentors, subject knowledge, school-led

Introduction

Following the coalition government's initiative introducing the School Direct Programme (SDP) of teacher training in 2012, there was a rapid move of government allocated training places, from university programmes into schools, which are grouped together in consortia or under the guidance of a School-Centred Initial Teacher Training Provider (SCITT). Some universities have become involved in working with the school partnerships and SCITTs, in order to deliver some of the required theory and to support mentoring in schools, but their role in teacher education is rapidly declining. A great deal of concern has been expressed about this move by education researchers and universities, as within high performing systems the move has been against in-school training, towards a more university research-based education (BEA/RSA, 2014; Swain, 2014). Kelly (2015, p. 30) in part blames universities for the problem, due to their 'spineless acquiescence to government policy'. As in most previous programmes of Initial Teacher Training (ITT), of whatever type, the SDP needs to be underpinned by scholarship, integrating educational theory with practice. Teacher educators, wherever they are based, need to ensure that the trainee teachers develop a high level of skills, knowledge and confidence, whilst also supporting the trainees in educational research activities. The question for school-led training is: will mentors have the time or expertise to engage the trainee in the level of reflection and scholarship necessary to produce high quality, outstanding teachers? Previously, concern had been expressed about the quality of mentoring of trainee teachers in school-based programmes (Brookes, 2007) and in the SDP much more is required of mentors than was previously the

case. Quality is judged by Ofsted inspecting schools against a set of government standards and prospective teachers are assessed against them and have to comply with these standards before qualified teacher status (QTS) can be awarded. The Cambridge Primary Review, (Alexander et al., 2010), the outcome of research conducted by Cambridge University into the condition and future of primary education, pointed out that there has been a tendency in ITT to represent teaching as merely the ability to acquire and use a narrow set of practical skills, leading to teachers becoming acquiescent followers of accepted methods, rather than exercising professional judgement to select the best approach to teaching. Certainly, all those involved in training teachers, acknowledge that in order to promote children's learning, trainees need to have access to a large body of knowledge on which to base their teaching efforts, including subject knowledge and pedagogical theory. Darling Hammond (2000a in Fullan, 2007, p. 273) identified six common features of ITT programmes:

- A common, clear vision of good teaching that is apparent in all coursework and clinical experiences;
- Well-defined standards of practice and performance that are used to guide and evaluate coursework;
- A curriculum grounded in substantial knowledge of child development, learning theory, cognition, motivation and subject matter pedagogy, taught in the context of practice;
- Extended experiences (at least 30 weeks) which are carefully chosen to support the ideas and practices presented in coursework;
- Strong relationships, common knowledge and shared beliefs among school and university based faculty;
- Extensive use of case study methods, teacher research, performance assessments and portfolio evaluation to ensure that learning is applied to real practice.

It has been interesting to examine the School Direct approach against this list. In addition, a list of 'what every teacher needs' was presented to the Carter review of primary education (and publicised in his widely followed blog) by Professor John Howson (Howson, 2014, no page). These included knowledge (up-to-date subject knowledge), knowledge of how to teach and assess the outcomes of what they are teaching (pedagogy), and lastly child development, an area that Howson believes has been the most neglected one in ITT programmes in the last thirty years and is now included in the Carter Review suggestions (Carter, 2015). This report also stresses that behaviour management, evidence-based teaching techniques, assessment and special educational needs should also be addressed and more subject knowledge included.

The one year SDP has a number of features not observed in the varied, previously established teacher education programmes in England. These features include the idea of bringing schools together to form a partnership under a teaching school (though SCITTs had long been established), whose role it is to bid for training places from the government and provide support and training to mentors in schools. In some cases SCITTs, teaching schools and universities provide experienced tutors, who visit the schools and observe and advise students, as well as providing theoretical input, generally in a central location. Schools employ trainees

as unqualified teachers during their training year and in many cases pay them a salary. (In this research those still in training, or who have recently qualified, are called trainees or NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers) so as to distinguish them from qualified teachers).

The idea behind the programme was to attract well-qualified graduates with three to four years career experience (Ratcliff, 2014). Concurrent with the SDP introduction a new set of Qualified to Teach Standards (QTS) was introduced by the government (the fourth change in fifteen years) and this has had a serious impact on the role of the mentor (DfE, 2011). The Carter Review recommends that yet a further modification to these standards is necessary. Mentoring has been a common feature of school based training for many years, but now, in SDP, the role of the mentor has been reconceptualised, with the focus on mentors becoming the key figures with responsibility for much of the school-led training. It is essential therefore that mentors are prepared for and supported in this new role, as doubts had previously been expressed as to the efficacy of the preparation of staff in schools for mentoring (Hobson & Malderez, 2002).

The School Direct initiative reflects government thinking that college and university courses were too theoretical and academic and that trainee teachers needed more experience to enable them to meet the demands of professional practice in the classroom (Harrison, 2012). At the heart of this innovation is the mentor, within the school setting, a crucial instrument in trainee improvement. Miller (2002) elaborates on this idea, stressing that we need to understand the complex linkages between:

- a person's knowledge, skills and attitude
- academic performance and personal life
- motivation, performance and achievement
- career aspiration, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Mentoring as a role within the school not only benefits the mentee and the mentor; Child and Merrill (2002) explored the transferability of mentoring skills to other aspects of school life and work, proving that the staff as a whole, and in turn the children's learning, benefited hugely.

The research

This research involved a variety of providers of the SDP and included trainees from a SCITT and school consortia and was concentrated on the early years and primary phases. A mixed methods approach for data collection was chosen, questionnaires for all trainees and the SDP NQTs, to obtain information about details of the programme and semi-structured interviews with four of them to explore attitudes and beliefs. In addition, three tutors were interviewed and a group of mentors at training sessions provided details of their beliefs about, and attitudes towards their role in SDP training. Trainees were being prepared for a variety of key stages at infant and primary level from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (1), EYFS/Key Stage (KS)1 (4), KS1 (2), KS1/2 (12), KS2 (3). In other training routes, most trainees are prepared for two age levels and some of the trainees on SDP were not happy with training for one stage only, though all SD trainees have several weeks experience in a contrasting school and with a different key stage from the one in their host school. This is part of the programme requirement.

Research results

Three NQTs already qualified via SDP and nineteen trainees completed questionnaires; twenty females and two males, reflecting the female makeup of the primary school teaching force. Ages varied, three (1 male) were between 21 and 30, three were in the 31-40 age group, six in the 41-50 group (1 male) and one in the 51 – 60 group. This reflects the different makeup of SDP trainees from those on PGCE programmes who tend to be in the younger age groups. The ethnic makeup was mainly white, eighteen women and both men, plus one Black African and one Asian woman. Nineteen of the group were receiving a training salary, three were programme only (unsalaried) and the salary question was important to several, as they had been previously employed in the school as learning and teaching assistants or stressed that the need for a salary (ten respondents) was one of their reasons for choosing this route into teaching. Six had already been working in the school in which they received training; ten thought training in school was better than via university and eight, that work-based training best suited their learning style. In the interviews NQTs and trainees supported the idea that in-class training was a good way to become a teacher. The amount of time allotted to theory (subject and educational) differed. Responses varied between four to seven hours, with two saying ten hours. This reflects the different approaches of the providers and included, in some cases, set tasks to be completed in trainees' own time. Four trainees only had theory input at their host school, five at SCITT premises, twelve at a different school from their host school and one at a variety of schools. Thirteen found the theory input very useful, eight quite useful and one of little use. Interviews with trainees and tutors and trainees' questionnaire responses raised doubts as to whether the theory input was sufficient. One tutor, who had great experience of other training programmes, stressed that QTS gained on the SDP is not a highly academic qualification and that he had to be forced to alter his philosophy and stop worrying about the deficit, as he saw it, of theoretical input on the programme. Respondents were asked to indicate from a list what areas had been included in the theoretical input. It was interesting to see that every trainee ticked behaviour management, thus demonstrating current government and Ofsted concerns. However, one noted that most of his problems in his host school were caused by a lack of a clear school behaviour policy, so it was difficult to apply his learning in practice. The next areas which were ticked most often were child protection, differentiation, special educational needs and using ICT. Worryingly, learning theories, child development and lesson planning scored lower, around 58% of trainees ticking these areas whilst subject knowledge scored slightly higher. Educational theory, ideas about different teaching methods and assessment theory scored only a 40% response and concerns were expressed by tutors and some trainees about the lack of input in these areas, leaving trainees relying on what they saw demonstrated by teachers and mentors in the classroom. One tutor summed up this deficit 'students on this programme learn 'how' to do things, rather than 'why' they are being done in that way'. The SDP delivered by the SCITT had stopped grading theoretical work giving pass or fail only, as a strategic focus on the theory did not feature in the award of QTS. He was also concerned about the low input of education research in the programme, (only 54% of trainees responding yes to a question asking if research featured in the theoretical input), feeling that it echoed

government beliefs that teaching is a skill not an academic exercise. However, one trainee spoke about the amount of research that was mentioned in the theory sessions she had received and how she had been trained to reflect and use action research herself. This demonstrates the variability of input from the different providers of training. Several trainees commented on the low status of theoretical input, but many were satisfied and even pleased as they were 'not expected to do essays'. One interview respondent thought the balance between theory and practice was right as learning 'on the job was best'. Equality issues, working with parents and interview techniques appeared to be of low importance, the latter understandable as most would find employment in their host, or a partnership school.

Meetings with mentors, senior staff and tutors, were extremely variable in number. Some mentors gave feedback daily, others weekly, or in one case only six times in a whole year. Over half of the trainees considered their mentoring good to excellent, 18% rated it as average to fairly good, but worryingly 18% also rated it as poor. Those who had effective mentors praised them in questionnaire and interview responses for their willingness to demonstrate good practice and their flexibility towards the trainee and their needs. However, not all comments were positive, two interviewees in particular criticising the quality of mentoring they had received, one finding that the mentor disregarded the needs of the training course and limited the time she was allowed to teach alone. She felt her ideas and contributions undervalued and that her mentor showed little interest in her development, rather using her to cope with an impossible work load. She did however find the training received from other areas of the course good. One NQT explained that without the support of the visiting tutor he would have left the programme as he and his mentor had little rapport. Tutors expressed concerns about the variability of mentoring, feeling some did not understand the role and were employing a 'deficit model', looking for what trainees were doing wrong. This, therefore raises questions about mentor training and Miller's (2002) perceptions of the complex role of a mentor do not appear to be addressed, in many cases, by these teacher educators, due in part, to time pressure on mentors and how they are selected (seniority appearing to be the main criterion, rather than suitability for the role). Some trainees/NQTs remarked on this, feeling that the choice of mentor had for them, not been successful and that, in the school, there were better and more helpful members of staff who could have fulfilled the role. Some mentors, it appeared, had been made to undertake the role and the amount of training they received and time given to them to carry out mentoring was very varied. It became clear from these discussions with mentors that some did not have the requisite knowledge and confidence to apply the teaching standards in practice, on occasions misinterpreting some of the standards and some were not using the latest versions. In a training session, out of twelve mentors, using a scale of 1-10 (where 10 conveyed great confidence in applying the standards) over half respondents recorded scores of 5 or below. As, in some cases, mentors are the main assessors of trainee performance against the standards this gives rise to concern.

Some trainees/NQTs met school senior staff regularly, but over 50% had never had input from a senior member of staff. Input from a visiting tutor from a lead school, a university or a SCITT was more varied but 32% had no such input, which left many relying solely on in-school feedback. One visiting tutor expressed serious concerns over this, as the question must be asked; have mentors and school staff the

time or experience to be the sole judge of teaching standards? On occasions mentors were not using up-to-date versions of the standards which are, according to one tutor, 'very complex as, to cut down the numbers of standards to be met, several had been placed under one heading'. A trainee could be really good at one part of a standard, but in need of improvement in another area, making assessment difficult. Support and input from visiting tutors in school and during theory training was considered excellent by those who were fortunate enough to receive it, but several commented on the pressure on students and staff to cover all that was needed, as such a small amount of time was given over to this, around of four to five hours a week in term time.

When asked how well they had been prepared for the teaching role (having been given a list of areas that have to be addressed), most considered that they were very well, or quite well prepared in most areas, apart from how to assess children's work. This raises concerns about trainees perception of teaching, that is, they appeared in answers to the questionnaire and in interviews, to see teaching being about the acquisitions of skills not knowledge. One trainee, felt very well prepared to teach as she believed 'the best way to learn new skills is by practising them' and she would have 'been very frustrated if confined to a lecture room for part of the year'. However, one tutor expressed concerns about the limited time spent in other schools by these trainees, compared to those on other training routes. This lack of variety of experience, especially for those who are training in a school they have worked in for some time, could lead to a limited perception of how to use different approaches to teaching and learning.

Conclusion

These are early days for the School Direct initiative, but already some serious concerns have arisen. The lack of a theoretical base by which teaching and learning should be underpinned gives cause for anxiety. When judged against Darling-Hammond's (2000a in Fullan, 2007, p. 272) common features of ITT programmes, there appears to be a lack of emphasis on a clear vision of good teaching, a curriculum grounded in substantial knowledge, including child development, the shared beliefs between schools and universities and the lack of in-class research. The areas that are compatible are well defined standards of practice, as these are set by government (though not always well understood by mentors), and the idea of extended practice (though mostly limited to one school). The role of mentors and their training is also an area that needs to be developed, as many teachers are not well prepared for the role, especially as they are now centre-stage in the training process. SCITTs and universities do provide mentor training, but the diverse nature of the SDP leaves too much of this to chance and the idea that teaching is based on skill development, not knowledge, is one that is to be deplored. It is doubtful if mentors or even visiting tutors, with very limited time at their disposal, can fully prepare trainees to become well-informed, research-led teachers. In competition with the rest of the world, it must be asked if the UK government is making this training programme initiative from a soundly researched base or merely from a strongly held ideology which is unsupported by research, or evidence from history, or from other successful countries. As Kelly (2015, p. 30) suggests, is 'England on the way to turning initial teacher training into an international joke at the very time

the government is trying to raise the status of teaching in the eyes of parents and children'?

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