

Initial Teacher Education in an Age of Diminishing Space for Teacher Professionalism

There is an apparent conflict between the notion of professionalism promoted in ITE and the reality of teaching in many schools today, which often reduce teacher autonomy and deny student teachers the space needed to learn the profession. As Clare Brooks noted in the previous session, teachers in schools are reporting that they are 'doing what they are supposed to' or 'what they are allowed to do'. At the IOE we are finding this conflict increasingly problematic.

Professionalism and the liberal educational ideal

Our modern idea of the professional teacher is linked to a liberal tradition in education, as articulated by Michael Oakeshott(1975) and Richard Pring(2013). This tradition views education as learning knowledge that is 'worthwhile'. Michael Young (2008) has recently described how academic or theoretical knowledge is the primary purpose of schooling, since this knowledge is 'powerful' for explaining the world. The following criteria are central to the liberal model of education and hence emphasised in our PGCE geography courses:

- Autonomy: freedom of thought and freedom to plan and teach as the teacher sees fit,
- Knowledgeable: the teacher is an authority in their own subject,
- Reason: the teacher is critical and able to apply reason,
- Judgement: professionalism means being able to make decisions and apply judgement to situations,
- Creative: formulaic and dry lessons will be a turn-off for pupils. Teachers need freedom to find creative ways to communicate their subject to children,
- Open-minded: as education is an exploratory journey in the pursuit of knowledge, teachers must be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things,
- Education as a process: learning academic knowledge is often a struggle. It does not happen in one lesson, but depth of understanding takes time and effort.

The 21st Century Classroom

Many of our student teachers face the following expectations in their schools:

- All lessons must contain a starter, main and plenary, regardless of what is being taught,
- Lessons must begin with learning objectives on the board,
- Learning objectives must be predetermined, quantifiable, measurable and taught in discrete units of the lesson,
- Teaching is an evidence-based profession, so teachers must track the progress of pupils towards pre-determined objectives and targets,
- Schemes of work, lessons and resources are often pre-planned. While some mentors are great about weaning student teachers off these so that they learn to plan their own lessons, others allow students to become dependent upon them. In the worst case, students are given a powerpoint presentation and told to teach it.

These expectations have the following effects:

- Standardised or 'national' pedagogy (Marshall 2014) in which knowledge has become divorced from teaching methods,

- The commodification of knowledge, where it gets reduced to 'deliverable' chunks,
- Formulaic lessons which limit the creativity of the teacher and reduce spontaneity and the exploratory nature of learning,
- Limits the responsibility and accountability of the teacher for planning and delivering their own lessons,
- Limits the scope of the teacher to experiment, make mistakes and to learn from them, thus becoming a better teacher.

The changing culture of the 21st century classroom is not the fault of teachers/mentors. It is a product of a changing educational climate brought about by imposed accountability systems, creeping managerialism (Ward 2012), and political interference all of which erode the autonomy of the teacher. Of course, it is not only in schools that bureaucracy and instrumentalism have overtaken professionalism and education. Universities and colleges themselves now operate under equivalent assumptions (Williams 2012). In schools, much change has been driven by political rhetoric to 'improve' the performance. Ofsted clearly plays a significant part in promoting certain teaching practices and demanding 'evidence' of learning and progress, yet much of today's classroom practice has been established over the past decade through New Labour quangos and 'experts' (see Marshall 2014). Yet, ultimately, it seems that schools themselves have succumb to a culture of accountability and target setting, where their legitimacy is demonstrated through tracking pupils data rather than any moral conviction or belief in the value of academic knowledge. This does not mean that there are not dedicated professional teachers learning their craft. But the reduced space for autonomy and creativity is making this much harder, which raises significant questions. The most pressing question of all is surely: how can we defend teacher autonomy in the face of political pressure for accountability and results?

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References

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