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Serendipity and intentionality in personal professional development

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This Thought-piece seeks to share some of the influences on my personal professional development as a teacher educator. Through this Thought-piece I wish to provide a stimulus for others as they consider their own professional development, especially for those who are considering becoming a teacher educator and for those going through induction into the profession.

The context

Recent policy-driven developments in initial teacher education in England have produced a rapid increase in school-led routes into teaching. There has been a shift from the traditional university-led one year postgraduate programmes that leads to a masters-level award towards school-led teacher training called School Direct. For this route schools recruit their own student-teachers and chose a provider with whom to work in their training. These may be universities or school-centred initial teacher training providers (SCITTs). Some SCITTs work in partnership with universities to award the one year postgraduate qualification.

Student-teachers on the School Direct route may either be employed by schools who pay for their training, or the student-teachers themselves pay fees to the provider for their training in the same way that they would if they were on the university-led postgraduate programme. They may be working towards an internationally recognised postgraduate award or may be aiming to achieve Qualified Teacher Status for teaching in England. This rapid change has led to a large number of school-based teacher educators who are new to this role and may not recognise it as a separate profession from teaching. They can be remote from the professional community of teacher educators where they would have access to the growing body of professional knowledge and pedagogy as well as an opportunity to develop their identity as a teacher educator. The challenge in initial teacher education is to develop high quality teachers with a broad understanding of the educational system, who have a professional voice and are critically reflective practitioners within a context where collaboration is threatened by competition.

My profile

After leaving school I studied for a first degree and PhD in biochemistry and started a career in neurochemistry. Following a career break to start a family, I wanted to inspire others to gain an interest in science, so I completed a year of postgraduate study to become a secondary science teacher. After 11 years of teaching I made a gradual transition into becoming a teacher educator based in a University School of Education. My journey to teacher educator began as a mentor to a student-teacher which I found the most energising aspect of my school life. I became more involved in the professional development of my peers and started visiting science student-teachers in their school settings and leading some of their taught sessions. For five years I took increasingly more responsibility for the learning of secondary student-teachers. I found that being a teacher whilst being a teacher educator gave me a good grounding and learning became very collaborative with my student-teachers. Finally I was working 50% of my time in school and 50% at the University. This was very challenging as I was the science teacher who did not have a science laboratory assigned for me to teach in,

and I was the teacher educator who did not have a desk of their own at the University, because I was part-time. This helped me to make that final step into a career in leading the professional learning of teachers.

Over the transition period I undertook a masters in leading learning, enabling me to become a more articulate professional within a supportive professional learning community. I found this a wonderful way to develop my understanding of this new profession I had entered. I was able to learn from the teaching and modelling of my peers. I focused on how my subject knowledge had changed from teaching science to teaching 'teaching'. I was very excited the day I found a special edition of the European Journal of Teacher Education (2008) entitled 'The induction and professional development of teacher educators', avidly devouring the articles, amazed that others were experiencing similar challenges in the transition from teacher to teacher educator. I found the books of Loughran, (2006 and 2007) regarding explicit modelling, exciting as I explored how I could enact the pedagogy that I wanted my student-teachers to develop.

As a result of my masters studies I presented a paper at the annual conference of the International Professional Development Association, which I submitted to their peer reviewed journal. This was a very significant point for me, because the reviewer who had rejected my paper was present at the conference, and approached me to discuss with me how to develop my paper further. What a privilege it was to have an experienced teacher educator giving me personal mentoring to develop my writing. I am delighted to say that first paper was accepted when I resubmitted (White, 2011). This process helped me to develop my identity as a teacher educator, making steps into the wider professional community as well as examining my practice through self-study.

From my initial role of teaching secondary student-teachers and their mentors, a new aspect emerged, that of leading a new programme of initial teacher education. This involved more partnership work and I had increasing responsibility for supporting school-based teacher educators, who have also been the focus of my research. So now my grounding of being a teacher educator whilst leading the professional learning of new teacher educators has enabled me to continue my collaborative style of learning alongside my learners. Through this time of rapid change, it has been vital for me to keep a focus on our core values of contributing to the creation of excellent teachers who have a positive impact on pupil learning in school. For me, this is often through leading effective professional development of teacher educators.

My research and professional practice are closely linked. For my research to be relevant, cutting edge and to have credence and an impact in the professional community I serve, I have found it essential to be actively practicing as a teacher educator myself. This has given me unique access to listen to other professionals in the field in primary and secondary schools and Higher Education Institutes, to execute and disseminate my research. As a practitioner myself I have found it essential to use research and scholarship to ensure my work is effective, pertinent, progressive and evidence-based.

On reflection I am aware that both serendipity and intentionality have both played a part in my professional development as a teacher educator and researcher. If the opportunity to mentor a trainee had not arisen in my school, then I may never have considered the field of teacher education for myself. Initially my intentionality was towards taking on more work in teacher development rather than to 'become a teacher educator' as I did not recognise that role as a distinct profession, but rather an extension of my teacher identity. I set out to do a masters in leading learning because I wanted to have the theoretical underpinning for my role as a teacher educator. Along the way I became integrated into the professional learning community and began to develop my identity as a teacher educator and a researcher. There were many significant colleagues in my journey from teacher to teacher educator, prompting my thinking and actions, for which I am very grateful.



← Read 'Innovative pedagogies...'

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