Performativity cultures and their effects on teacher educators' work

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Abstract

In this article I want to look at three specific areas of teacher education work, analysing how and why the practices and discourses of performativity have impacted disproportionately hard. These three areas are: the 'double whammy' of audit (Murray 2007) which teacher educators face; the particular nature of teacher education pedagogy and partnership practices; and the issue of what research-informed teaching and scholarship/research in the field means. In this article my particular focus is on teacher educators in England, working in a teacher education regime which now has few disciplinary foundations and often prioritises training rather than education for student teachers. This regime is sometimes seen as the 'English exception' and regarded with puzzlement or alarm in other countries. There are then some 'English-specific' factors here, notably the strong regulation by government and ongoing debates about the knowledge base of teacher education as played out in the proposed moves to wholly school-based models of teacher education. But, over and above these factors, the increase in performativity cultures is a global phenomenon which has impacted in some way on all who work in teacher education, wherever their university is located and whatever the national context.

Keywords: Teacher education; teacher educators; performativity cultures.

Introduction

In the last issue of this journal, Stephen Ball (2012) wrote about the impact of performativity cultures in higher education (HE), identifying the ways in which the audit practices associated with those cultures focus on measurement, leading to distortion and devaluation of the very meaning of work. In this article I want to deploy some of Ball's ideas about academic life in general to identify and discuss issues around the work of teacher educators, as a specific subgroup of academics. My particular focus is on pre-service educators, that is, those individuals who teach on courses such as the one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or undergraduate degrees with Qualified Teacher Status (BA QTS). This group of educators has been defined as distinctive and, in many ways, disadvantaged within academia in international studies ranging back to the early 1990s (Ducharme 1993). In Ducharme & Ducharme's (1996) study of teacher educators in the USA, for example, involvement in pre-service meant longer working hours, less research-related activity and therefore less career progression. Later studies in many countries (see, eg, Mayer et al. 2011; Menter 2011; Murray et al. 2011) have confirmed these analyses and identified that the 'fit' between such work and the demands of academia can cause significant tensions both for the field of teacher education and for the individuals working within it. In such research there is clear evidence that the impact of performativity agendas has contributed to an increase of those tensions over the last decade. Arguably, teacher educators, working in a professional field, have been hit harder by the impact of these performativity cultures than academics in other, more 'traditional' or 'pure' university disciplines.

Positioning the field within higher education

In order to understand teacher education, it is important to establish some features of this professional field and its positioning within HE. Set within the discipline of education, teacher education is inextricably related to the schools in which students will go on to teach. But its institutional bases are largely in the HE institutions which, at the time of writing, still provide the majority of pre-service courses, and from which most teacher educators work to induct their students into the profession.

In conceptualising teacher education as suspended between the worlds of school and higher education, Alexander et al. (1984: xv) comment that:

'One [schooling] provides its raison d'etre and the occupational imperatives to which it is bound to respond, and the other [higher education] the framework within which such responses must be located, and which has its own cultural and academic imperatives.'

This fundamental dualism in the field has brought with it a series of enduring bifurcations including academic/ professional and theoretical/practical (Maguire 2000). It has also had consequences for academic work patterns since one of the distinctive features of teacher educators is that they work across schooling and HE, at the interface of practices influenced by the Government, their universities, schools and teachers' professional bodies. In addition to profound changes in the HE sector over the last decade, teacher educators (and their students) have accommodated seismic shifts in the teaching profession, as the school sector has become a major target in successive government agendas for public sector reform. A factor here is the increased emphasis on what Davies (2003: 91) terms the 'management, surveillance and control' of individuals and professional groups in the cause of 'accountability' to the public. Radical change in both schools and HE has brought into teacher education accountability to both sectors, often involving two different sets of performativity mechanisms and an increase in both external surveillance and self-regulation.

How have these demands impacted on teacher educators' work?

Regular inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) were from 2008 supported by an annual self-evaluation exercise, involving the completion of a Self-Evaluation Document (SED). Among other aims, this SED purports to be a tool to help providers evaluate the effectiveness of their programmes. Although its submission to the then Training and Development Agency (TDA, now the Teaching Agency) is non-mandatory, it requires institutions to undertake self-evaluation performativity measures in the name of public accountability. In 2011 the University Council for the Education of Teachers expressed concerns about the toll that completion of the SED took on teacher education providers and commissioned a group of academics (McNamara et al. 2011) to undertake research to explore its costs and benefits. All the university respondents to the survey (n=34) perceived the SED as primarily only a monitoring and accountability tool for the then TDA and Ofsted. The majority spent more than 100 days of staff time preparing the document; few (9% of all respondents) felt that the self-evaluation process had a genuine impact on quality of provision and student learning; and only 25% saw it as a driver for any kind of change in their institutions. In many universities (74%) the SED was not well aligned to HE quality assurance mechanisms, resulting in the 'double whammy' of engagement in two different sets of audit procedures – and a huge amount of additional work for teacher educators.

A different example of how teacher educators are hit disproportionately hard by performativity cultures is found by analysing their pedagogical and partnership practices. Managerialist discourses within HE often draw on technical–rational models of learning to position teaching as a practical and instrumental activity, involving straightforward and depersonalised processes of teacher 'transmission' and student 'acquisition' of clearly defined knowledge and understanding. But, as already indicated, teacher education as a field belongs to what Schon (1987) characterised as the 'swampy lowlands of professional practice', and its knowledge base is therefore the 'endemic uncertainty' of professional knowledge (Furlong 1996: 154). Furthermore, for student teachers induction into the profession during pre-service courses is often perceived as a complex, professionally and emotionally demanding learning process. Small wonder then that many teacher educators see their work in supporting that induction process as also complex. Far from adopting technical–rational models of transmission, teaching as a teacher educator often draws on elaborated pedagogies (Murray 2002), such as modelling and reflective practice. Similarly, there is much 'hidden' and sophisticated practice in teacher educators' support and guidance for student teachers, which is often on an individual basis. These pedagogies and guidance strategies are part of a long tradition of student-centred methods in which teacher educators seek to model, mirror, rehearse and discuss the contested knowledge, professional dilemmas and sophisticated practices to be found in school teaching. But this provision of high-quality, professionally and academically appropriate pedagogies differs from practice in other areas of university teaching, is time-intensive and cannot easily be measured. This means that, sadly, such pedagogies can be questioned and devalued within the university, with often inadequate time allocated to them on official workload models. In effect then, performativity practices make much of

teacher educators' pedagogical and pastoral work invisible in audit terms.

Since 1993 all HE pre-service programmes in England have had to be taught in partnership with schools. The demands of such partnership work are also underestimated. Moving between schools and university as the sites of teacher education in itself places pressure on educators' time, but the work-modelling systems in place at some universities may not even record time for essential travel between partnership sites. All teacher educators working in schools necessarily adopt a 'pedagogy of guidance' (Guile and Lucas 1999: 212) with their partnership schools, undertaking activities such as mentor training, joint planning and evaluating, and moderating mentors' assessments of students. This is time-intensive work. Most importantly, developing and maintaining these kinds of partnerships is demanding in terms of professional skills and energies, not least because seemingly simple structures need to be underpinned by high levels of trust, and shared values and practices. These things inevitably take time and effort to establish and maintain. In a recent study of teacher educators' work, for example, Ellis et al. (2011) found that considerable amounts of teacher educators' time are spent on 'relationship maintenance' across partnerships. Needless to say, very little of this time has 'immediate measurable performative value' (Ball 2012: 30) and hence it may be close to invisible to those outside the day-to-day practices of teacher education.

Halsey (1992) in his seminal study of academics defined engagement in research and scholarship as one of the three core elements of academic work, alongside teaching and service. And certainly the provision of research-informed teacher education within universities is a shibboleth for many in the HE sector. Yet while scholarship and, where possible, sustained research engagement are an integral part of teacher educators' work, many individuals see themselves as struggling to be involved in those activities. This is sometimes attributed by the educators themselves solely to heavy and time-intensive workloads – and undeniably, that is an important factor. But a further issue is that many individuals are late entrants to academia, usually entering HE before completing doctorates and without established research profiles. They therefore undergo their research apprenticeship alongside the intensity of their teacher education work.

Performativity agendas around the repeated research exercises (the Research Assessment Exercise 1986–2008; the Research Excellence Framework 2014) have certainly affected individual teacher educators and their engagement in research. The audit pressures involved in these exercises over the last 20 years have led to the perceived devaluation of some teacher education research 'outputs' including practitioner action research, curriculum materials, textbooks written for teachers and publications in professional journals. The quinquennial exercises lead to the tendency, in some universities at least, to explicit or tacit assumptions that if research cannot be counted in the national audit then it is not worthy or valuable. But, needless to say, the audit counts only limited models of research engagement and overlooks the importance for many teacher educators of their research and scholarship making a contribution to their own teaching and to schools and teachers. In a field where the knowledge base for teaching and teacher education is increasingly seen as consisting only of recently acquired craft knowledge, this limitation of what 'counts' as research is far from helpful. It devalues the principle of *all* university teaching being research-informed and adds to historical uncertainties about the place of research in the field.

Performativity cultures have then had two major effects on teacher educators and their work. Firstly, they have resulted in an increased workload through the – often non-negotiable – participation of teacher educators in government audit procedures and inspection regimes. Lack of engagement and compliance here is not a viable option given the (very) high stakes of inspection and associated monitoring regimes for ensuring that all students meet the standards implemented through pre-service programmes. As noted above, teacher educators' engagement in these audit procedures is in addition to the quality assurance procedures used in universities. These dual-layered accountability mechanisms often threaten to bring different aspects of teacher education work into conflict with one another. The second effect, perhaps more serious, is that performativity regimes have rendered much of teacher education work, particularly established teaching and partnership practices and modes of engagement in scholarship and research, invisible in audit terms. It therefore becomes increasingly difficult for those outside the field to 'see' much of the work and to understand the high levels of expertise to be found in teacher educators' knowledge bases and pedagogical skills.

Stephen Ball (2012:30) notes that

> *'the first-order effect of performativity is to reorient pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development that have no immediate measurable performative value'.*

Dean (1999: 18) also states that the ways in which professional knowledge is generated are contingent, at least in part, on the 'organised practices through which we are governed and through which we govern ourselves'. Consequently, these 'regimes of calculation' (Dean, ibid.) and compliance, which proffer new and differing types of knowledge and expertise, may be seen as increasing their claims of authority over established professional practices and conduct in teacher education. In many ways, then, all of us in teacher education are involved in our own self-regulation, effectively becoming 'the auditor within' in ways which transmute our professional knowledge and our practices.

It would be naïve to deny these profound and often negative effects of performativity regimes in changing the nature of work in teacher education, but recent research also shows some interesting forms of what might be termed 'resistance' to the tyranny of those measurable performance outcomes. The results of the A3TE study (Murray et al. 2011), for example, show teacher educators in England continuing to engage in traditional and elaborated forms of pedagogy and pastoral support, focusing that labour-intensive and often acknowledged work around their personal missions to produce good teachers for the benefit of the school system. Similarly, many continue to focus their scholarship around their teaching and the needs of their students in school teaching rather than engaging fully in the research productivity 'games' associated with the national research exercise and its required outputs. In these ways the teacher educators in our study maintain their commitment to modes of work which focus on the social, emotional and moral development of student teachers. The broader literature on teacher educators (see, eg, Harrison & McKeon 2008; Boyd & Harris 2010) confirm that this continuing commitment to students as learners and to the future good of the field is not unique to the teacher educators in this study. Those modes of teaching may be largely invisible in audit terms, but their survival indicates that many in teacher education may not have not experienced a wholesale 'loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do' (Ball 2012: 30).

Conclusion

My analysis here may well have resonance for those working in the beleaguered field of teacher education. I would strongly suspect there are many teacher educators in England who do still find meaning and importance in their established practices in teaching, partnership and research, despite the cumulative effects of performativity regimes on their lives. If so, then the work of those educators is in many, many ways to be commended. However, we should also ask about the costs to individual well-being, resilience and career development when individuals are engaged in intensive yet often unacknowledged work which does not fit the quantified models found in many university performance indicators. And we should be posing some serious questions about what the invisibility of teacher educator practices, within the audit cultures of HE and schooling, might mean for the longer-term development and survival of pre-service teacher education in the university sector.

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