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The Academic Tribe of Teacher Educators

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Background

Research on teacher educators as an occupational group is limited, but existing studies indicate that teacher educators are often seen as having their academic and professional identities located across both Higher Education (HE) and school sectors (Menter et al 2006).

In the field of teacher education rapid changes have been triggered by shifting government requirements for pre-service courses (ITE) and stringent inspection regimes. Teacher education in England has been defined as a compliant system. This intensification of work on ITE courses may well have caused changes in the identities of teacher educators, but the nature of any changes has not been researched. Yet, under current arrangements for ITE teacher educators have central roles in the education of student teachers, influencing their future practices, values and attitudes. We therefore see analysing the identities of this occupational group as central to consideration of the quality and nature of ITE.

Research Questions

The project, titled 'The Academic Tribe of Teacher Educators' (A3TE) aimed to redress these omissions in existing research, building on a small-scale pilot study. In this particular paper, we report only on the part of the study relating to teacher educators' constructions of their own identities. The specific focuses of enquiry here were: firstly, to provide an evidence-based study of how teacher educators view their academic and professional identities; secondly, to identify if the educators saw any changes within these identities in the last three years; thirdly, to consider how any such changes had impacted on identity and work.

Methods

Previous research (Murray 2002, 2008) has identified a quadripartite mission underpinning teacher educators' work and identities, consisting of the following elements: taking pride in teaching students; being recognised as scholars/researchers; continuing to contribute to the school sector; and service. Other studies of teacher educators have identified that this occupational group is heterogeneous, but studies specifically focused on those working on teacher educators in ITE tend to see this sub-group as more homogeneous. Previous research also indicates that teacher educators need to have extensive knowledge bases of both schooling and teacher education in order to support extended pedagogical roles in their teaching

This was an interpretive study, drawing on established qualitative research methods for embedded case studies and conducted along ethical guidelines, provided by BERA. An institutional sample of three universities took some account of the diverse university settings for teacher education in England in terms of institutional differentiations. All teacher educators working on relevant ITE courses were asked to complete email questionnaires. Follow-up interviews in each university, with a purposive sample of staff, were used to explore resulting issues in depth.

This data was subjected to an initial content analysis that generated a number of emergent themes through the use of open coding. These initial codes were then refined by repeated analysis and used to define recurring themes. This process resulted in the creation of core categories to be included in the findings.

Frame

The project drew on previous work on teacher educators' identities and knowledge bases in the UK context. No existing theoretical frameworks offered a precise 'fit' for this study. We therefore harnessed a substantial body of research to theorise teacher educators' identities. We also worked with Becher and Trowler (2002) arguments that there are complex links between fields of enquiry, academic cultures or terrains and academic 'tribes' or groups (2002:159) in HE. A conceptual framework for analysing teacher educators' work as second order practitioners was also used. Drawing on these studies, we saw the varying identities which teacher educators construct and deploy in their everyday work as hybrid, complex and reconfigured in various ways, according to contextual factors and personal agency.

Research findings

Data analysis is still at an early stage, but our initial findings show some complex patterns in terms of the differing and multiple identities which pre-service teacher educators construct and deploy. Our findings indicate that the 'academic tribe' of pre-service teacher educators is far from homogeneous. Although those in our sample group share some common understandings of what it means to be teacher educators or 'second order practitioners', they also constructed and deployed differing shades of academic and professional identities for themselves. In the section below we give one exemplar of a differentiation in identities and knowledge bases. More detailed exemplars will be available in the full paper once data analysis is completed.

Having less than four years experience of HE meant that teacher educators were more likely to foreground their professional identities as teachers in schools, to stress the importance of having 'recent and relevant' experiential knowledge of schooling and to see on-going contributions to the school sector as a strong element of their professional identities. A second sub-group of teacher educators with four or more years in HE tended to emphasise their identities as teachers of teachers in HE, claiming key roles in the (re)production of knowledge about school teaching and strong pastoral identities. For another sub-group of experienced teacher educators, identity was essentially premised on a sense of being an academic and an active researcher. All the teacher educators, however, stressed the importance of still being able to 'play the teacher card' when necessary to assert their credibility with students and mentors.

The project aims to contribute to a greater elaboration of knowledge of how teacher educators see their academic and professional identities and knowledge bases. It also hopes to make a contribution to the growing international literature on teacher educators.

References

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