

Poverty, Schooling, and Beginning Teachers Who Make a Difference: A Case Study From England

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Abstract

Education policy makers in England have, over the last thirty years, radically changed schooling. The introduction of a national curriculum, national testing regimes, school inspections and school league tables has been at the heart of these changes as they constitute the basis for claims for and concerns about school and system improvement. The pre-service education of teachers has also been transformed during this period. Once dominated by time spent in higher education, teacher 'training' as it is known, now consists of diverse routes, all much more school-based. The latest policy shift to 'teaching schools' and the 'school direct' route intentionally makes universities even more marginal to teacher preparation.

At the same time, policymakers, schools and university faculties of education remain concerned about children from low-income families whose life opportunities are not enhanced by educational success. The thirty year policy settlement of marketization and privatization has produced some overall increase in the mass level of education but has not shifted the tenacious correlation between parental income and levels of formal education and educational attainment. Teacher educators in higher education and in schools have little time or space to address this question directly.

In this chapter we present a case study of the teacher education programme which is deliberately designed to address questions of poverty and educational disadvantage – Teach First, a 'leadership development' scheme which takes 'high calibre graduates' into the most disadvantaged schools in the country.

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1 Introduction

In Britain today 3.6 million children are growing up in households so poor, providing basics like heating and food is a daily struggle.

It takes time and persistence to change the story of a child's lifetime, but with every day that goes by thousands more children get left behind.

The stark reality is that children from the poorest families, who are eligible for free school meals, are only half as likely to get five A*-C grades at GCSE as other children.

The achievement gap begins long before a child starts primary school, and continues long after. A child growing up in poverty can all too often become trapped in a downward spiral of job opportunities, poor health and involvement in crime. In some areas they will even die sooner than their wealthier neighbours.

The reasons are complex. The problem looks different for different children in different parts of the country but stems from a lack of opportunities, a lack of resources, and the low expectations others have of them. Put simply, a child's socioeconomic background—things they can't choose like the street they grew up on and how much their parents earn—have too much of an impact on how well they did at school and the choices they have later in life.

Educational inequality in the UK is real. It's happening here, it's happening now and it's preventing too many children from living the lives they could and should.

We are Teach First and we believe this can change. (Teach First 2014d)

In this chapter, we address the Teach First teacher-education program¹, which, in England, is deliberately designed to address questions of poverty and educational disadvantage. Teach First, a charity, is based on Teach for America, and other variations are now operating in many parts of the world. This scheme takes 'high calibre individuals' into the most disadvantaged schools in the country (Teach First 2014a). Teach First is often seen as undermining 'quality' teacher education, as participants begin with a short six-week university-based induction program before they are placed in schools to work as teachers. However, schools generally like the program. They see it as not only alleviating a teacher shortage, but also providing enthusiastic and by and large very capable people who want to work in circumstances that many more qualified teachers do not.

Here, against the backdrop of increasing poverty and the current neoliberal English policy settlement, we offer a case study of a university education faculty, two schools, and their Teach First teachers. We suggest that, in the context of radical school autonomy, working for equity in the short term is less a question of systemic intervention, and more a question of systematic school-by-school action. In this situation, universities still have an important coordinating role to play, if they can maintain good working relationships with schools and their staff.

¹

The Teach First charity does not identify itself as an initial teacher education program; the website describes instead a two year 'Leadership Development Programme' (Teach First 2014a)

We begin by outlining the current policy context in England before going on to signal the depth and spread of poverty.

2 Teacher Education in England: A Brief History

English education policy can be understood, as Apple (2001) suggests, as an uneasy combination of two approaches: neoliberal (market approach to provide greater freedoms) and neoconservative (tightly controlled and centrally governed systems of restrictions and sanctions). Beginning in earnest with the 1988 Education Reform Act, devolved schools and increasingly powerless local authorities have become subject to centralized audit and governance. The rhetoric of parent choice, competition, transparency, and autonomy has accompanied the ever-growing importance of examination results, league tables, and inspections (Ball 2008; Gunter 2011; Whitty 2002). Today, English parents can choose to pay for private schooling or, depending on their geographical location, can opt for selective grammar schools, centrally financed academies, free schools, schools within a teaching school alliance, local authority schools, or they can even set up their own free school with government funding. A similar pattern of market choice and increased accountability has emerged in relation to teacher training.

The picture of initial teacher education (ITE) within England is now very complicated. Potential teachers can choose from various routes, ranging from Troops to Teaching (an attempt to attract former service people skilled at enforcing discipline), employment-based routes (such as Teach First), and more traditional programs such as the undergraduate Bachelor in Education (B. Ed) and Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). More recently, schools have been encouraged to offer placements through School Direct, a program that can lead to qualified teacher status (QTS) and, if universities are involved, may also lead to the award of PGCE, in many cases with masters level credits. Accrediting providers of ITE can be universities or high-performing schools designated as the lead school within school-centered initial teacher training (SCITT). This is a markedly different picture from 40 years ago when all teacher education involved university provision and government involvement was limited.

How did we get here?

In 1979, Prime Minister Callaghan challenged the ‘secret garden’ of schools and declared that there would henceforth be greater government interest in assessment, curriculum, and teacher training (Callaghan 1976). This pronouncement heralded the beginning of a myriad of ITE policy initiatives. Increased monitoring and control of university teacher training began in earnest in the early 1990s when the government prescribed the amount of time trainee teachers should spend in schools (Department for Education 1992); implemented a centralized inspection body for schools and ITE; and introduced the first SCITTs. At the heart of this policy agenda was the desire to involve schools more in teacher training and to challenge traditional university provision, which was perceived as being too theo-

retical and out of touch (Judge et al. 1994). Successive government policy initiatives effectively introduced centralized control of the content of ITE courses, including a short-lived prescribed national ITE curriculum (Department for Education and Employment 1988). Lists of competencies morphed into a set of prescribed ‘standards’, outlining the skills, knowledge and understandings required for successful qualification as a teacher.

Higher education now has an ambivalent place in ITE within England. The coalition government’s White Paper (Department for Education 2010) and accompanying Implementation Plan (Department for Education 2011) further shifted the direction of policy from school-based to school-led ITE. The government view that “teaching is a craft and is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman” (Gove 2010) produced the School Direct route. Schools that bid for School Direct placements can choose to work with SCITTs to accredit the provision, rather than with universities. It is claimed that bids for School Direct trainees have increased over the last three years from 3,000 to 17,700 (from a pool of 35,000 places) (Taylor 2014). However, there is as yet no localized system of monitoring supply and demand for these places; these are awarded to lead schools and universities who perform well in Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspections. And while the White Paper did discuss the importance of Master’s level qualifications for teachers, this seems to have been subsequently downplayed. In 2012, the government announced that academies and free schools could employ unqualified teachers.

This chapter focuses on Teach First, the other major school-led ITE route. Teach for America and Teach First are the founding models of a national Teach For All movement with a shared mission to place highly qualified graduates in schools serving communities with high levels of socio-economic deprivation. Teach First was launched in London in 2002, adapting Teach for America’s model to the English context. The two-year Teach First program begins with a 13-month university-accredited route, leading to both QTS and a PGCE; some of the PGCE modules are assessed at Master’s level and participants are encouraged to complete their Master’s level qualification during the second year of the program. Unlike the Teach for America model, Teach First and universities work in partnership and collaborate with schools to support participants during their initial training year. During the second year of the program, the training focuses on leadership development and is led by Teach First and other local partner organisations . The 2010 White Paper (Department for Education, 2010) announced a considerable expansion of Teach First.

Teach First is ambitious. Its goal is “to end inequality in education by building a community of exceptional leaders” (Teach First 2014a). It recruits highly qualified graduates “to become inspirational classroom leaders in low-income communities across England and Wales” (Teach First 2014a). Since 2002, it has placed over 5,000 teachers into low income communities(Teach First 2014c). At the time of writing, Teach First is committed to retaining collaboration with university partners.

However, Teach First is no longer the only program to officially focus on poverty. The new Ofsted framework for teacher education (implemented from June 2014) demands that all trainee teachers are prepared to teach in schools serving socio-economically deprived communities. While Teach First is now not unique in its concern with poverty, it is still the only route that centralizes the relationship between poverty and schooling as its major mission and *raison d'être*. And the reality is that there are plenty of schools serving communities marked by economic inequality and poverty to go around.

3 Poverty in Britain

Britain is a profoundly unequal society. The Great British Class Survey (Savage et al. 2013) reported seven social class groupings: the elite (6%), the established middle class (25%), the technical middle class (6%), new affluent workers (15%), traditional working class (14%), emergent service sector (19%), and the precariat (15%). The economist Guy Standing (2011) argues for a broader definition of the precariat than this, suggesting it represents a 'new poverty' experienced by immigrants, young educated people struggling to find employment, and members of the traditional working class and service sector. Poverty is not confined to those on benefits: many Britons now work several part-time jobs or get by in the gray economy and the majority of the poor are now in relatively secure work for which the wages are below the national poverty line (Living Wage Commission 2014).

Poverty statistics are inevitably contested, but Oxfam suggests one in five people in Britain lives below the official poverty line and the Child Poverty Action Group suggests a rate of one in four children. It is highly probable that child poverty will be even greater by 2020, despite government reduction targets, because of slow growth in employment and wages (Reed and Portes 2014). There is now significantly increased food poverty in Britain: this affects children and young people in particular (Cooper et al. 2014). Young people also report concerns about the hidden additional costs of schooling—trips, equipment, tutoring—as well as assumptions about their circumstances, ranging from alleged lack of ambition to having space for homework and access to online provision (Save the Children and Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014).

What is generally agreed, however, is that poverty, as a marker of social inequality, is strongly associated with poor health and increased accidents at home, insecure and overcrowded housing, lack of access to green space and clean air, reduced life expectancy, and reduced life opportunities (National Children's Bureau 2013). University entrance figures (Higher Education Funding Agency for England 2013) and PISA data (OECD 2013) confirm the longstanding correlation of poverty with early school leaving, lower levels of qualifications and lower participation in further education and training. It is this nexus of income, education, and other associated social issues that Teach First aims to redress.

4 Research about Teach First

There is to date very limited research about Teach First and its graduates. Evaluations are mostly positive (e.g., Hutchings et al. 2006). Allen and Allnutt (2013) report that Teach First graduates did generally improve GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examination results. Muijs et al. (2013) examined the engagement of Teach First teachers in their second year and argued that they exercised leadership, particularly in informal roles in which they could initiate and manage change. In order for this to happen, Muijs et al. suggest, the school needs to provide practical hands-on support at the departmental level, as well as a senior management committed to distributed leadership. This is congruent with our research and that of Bell and Cordingley (2014), who also stress the need for a strong professional learning environment. Goodlad and Hull (in press) suggest this can be found in part in the university Master's course that follows on from the PGCE. Blandford (2014) suggests that Teach First's focus on core values, purpose, and ethos are important contributory factors in its teachers becoming leaders.

However, not all research is uniformly approving. Smart et al. (2009) argued, using Bourdieu, that the predominantly middle-class entrants to the Teach First program used the experience to their own advantage, accumulating social and cultural capital for themselves, while perpetuating 'truths' about working class students and 'ability' as the primary mode of success in schooling. This chimes with research on Teach for America (Straubhaar and Gottfried 2014), which suggests that recruits see themselves as committed to ending social injustice, but also as competitive and entrepreneurial people who are teaching for a brief time before pursuing a more lucrative and prestigious career.

5 Our Research

In this chapter, we focus on two secondary schools involved in the Teach First program; they are partners for The University of Nottingham teacher-education programs. We selected the schools on the basis of their good practice in supporting trainees, and Teach First teachers flourished in them. We wanted to investigate positive examples so that we could understand the principles that led to this 'success'. Our sample is thus purposive, and intended to yield insights potentially of interest to other schools and ITE programs. We do not suggest that these schools are representative in any sense; rather, our interest is in gaining an insight into school practices that not only support, but also retain, Teach First trainees in the profession.

We are insider researchers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). We know the city and its schools well. The first author of this chapter, Jo, is Director of all ITE programs (PGCE, School Direct and Teach First) and brought considerable

knowledge and experience to this research. The second author, Pat, has undertaken other research in both schools but has very little day-to-day contact with ITE, and this lack of direct engagement helped to ‘defamiliarize’ the experiences of the teachers we interviewed. We recorded conversations with the five teachers (see Table 1) and their two mentors, and here, we draw on a thematized analysis of these conversations, as well as our ongoing knowledge about the program and the schools.

Table 1 The five Teach First teachers

English teachers	A1: Oxbridge, B.A. History and English literature (First) The Blue School	E: post 1994 university, B.A. English Studies and History (2.i) The Green School
Mathematics teacher	B: Russell group, B.A. Management Studies (2.i) The Green School	
Science teachers	A2: Russell group university, PhD Human Genetics, BSc Human Genetics (2.i) The Blue School	H: Russell group university, B. Eng. Medical Engineering (2.i) The Green School

Both of our case study schools serve different parts of very substantial areas of council housing. The first school, The Green School, is in North Nottingham, one of the poorest neighborhoods outside of London. North Nottingham is regularly subject to alarmist readings of its high teenage-pregnancy rates, high levels of young people not in education, employment or training, poor health, and low university entrance rates. Most of the secondary schools in the area have recently been judged as ‘failing’ by OfSTED on the basis of below-target GCSE results. The second school, The Blue School, is located just to the west of North Nottingham in a former coal-mining village.

The first school, The Green School, recently converted to academy status and was judged as “requires improvement” in its 2014 inspection. It has about 600 enrolled pupils. It struggles to attract and retain teachers and sees Teach First as one way to ensure a supply of enthusiastic and committed staff. The second school, The Blue School, has an enrolment of 1,050 and has also recently become an academy. Before converting to academy status, it was judged by inspectors as having “serious weaknesses.” It now claims to be one of the most improved schools in the county. The Blue School has no serious staffing difficulties, but switched from taking PGCE students to Teach First because school leaders were interested in what they understood to be the quality and commitment of the trainees.

6 Teach First: Why Join?

Both The Green School and The Blue School programs suggest to us that when the program is working optimally, there are three key processes at work: a ‘call’ to young graduates, a holistic vision of social justice in education, and building disciplinary identities.

6.1 A ‘Call’ to Young Graduates

Teach First offers a compelling and attractive vision to many young graduates. The program is unique in that it selects placement schools based on high levels of deprivation. Because the program aims to decrease the gap between children from different economic backgrounds, it could be argued that the program is predicated on social justice. The Teach First participants we interviewed confirmed that they were attracted to the Teach First vision:

Teacher A1: I hadn’t even thought about being a teacher, I wanted to work in the charity sector so I was looking through jobs that were advertised...I always felt that the charity jobs sounded like they were going to make a difference and then you were never actually doing anything meaningful, you were just sat behind a desk and it was going to be boring or you would be doing something that was so far removed from anybody having any impact that it would just be frustrating. So when I started reading about Teach First what I liked was that it seemed you could feel straight away you were on the frontline doing something important, doing something where you felt that it was valuable...

Teacher A1 goes on to explain that she had attended a challenging school and wanted “*to make things better.*” Teacher B also shared this sense of “giving back.”

Teacher B: My parents were in poverty. I thought I’d be teaching kids like me and I thought it was quite nice because I’ll be giving back to where I came from...I know that if I’d gone into banking, into the city, I would have just moved out and that’s where I would be forever, so I thought it was nice to give back mostly because of where I came from...I wanted to go into banking but a friend of mine had done the program and she encouraged me, she said you get loads of support, you go into these schools, and it is really...she said to me about not having to stay after the two years and that was quite appealing. She said they’ve got all these partners you could go and work for...so if you don’t like your two years, you don’t have to stay. And I think that is what pushed me into it, the thought I could leave and still go into a grad program. But having gone into it, I don’t think I want to leave.

However, this was not what attracted E and A2. They had wanted to train to teach from the outset, but were attracted to Teach First in particular as an employment-based route. Although they agreed with the program’s values and vision, it was the structure of the training and working that first attracted them.

6.2 A Holistic Vision of Social Justice in Education

The Teach First social justice vision is congruent with that held for all ITE programs at Nottingham and this is foregrounded from the start of each pathway. A central aim across all ITE provision is to help beginning teachers “*to develop strategies to promote social justice through both their teaching and by engaging more broadly with the life of a school and its wider community.*” The ITE programs all aim to help beginning teachers “*to develop positive relationships with young people which value them for who they are and what they bring to education*” (extracts from unpublished aims and ethos statement, UoN). Trainees on the Teach First route are encouraged to compare the School of Education ethos statement with the aims of the Teach First program and to understand that they are joining a university partnership with a long-standing commitment to addressing issues relating to inequality and disadvantage.

6.3 Building Disciplinary Identities

Teach First teachers are offered a way to fulfill this vision through the identification they have already developed with their discipline.

Teacher A2 gave up a successful career as a university-based scientist to join Teach First:

I love my subject...I want to encourage kids to go to university and study it and be that scientist and I want to inspire them in that subject....Teach First has put me in a school which isn't where I would have thought about...but I like being here and I can do the same thing with these kids and maybe that is even more reason to be here because that thing that I am passionate about—these kids need the opportunity to do that as well...I've now got those connections to take the kids...to university and I can share my experiences. When I talk about being in the lab, I can have the bottom set classes, who are normally noisy and a nightmare, staring at me for the whole lesson if I just talk about stuff that I am passionate about.

Fulfilling the possibilities inherent in disciplinary and professional identity formation (e.g., Brown and McNamara 2011) may be important, we suspect, in the retention of Teach First graduates; this has not yet been researched.

7 Teach First: The Partnership Process

While there was strong commitment to the Teach First mission, our five teachers saw themselves as part of their school and its community:

I think you realize when you are in the school, not that Teach First isn't real, obviously it is real, but that's no longer why you are there. The culture of Teach First...you kind of grow away from it...you get stuck in to what's going on... (Teacher H)

Our five teachers very quickly found that the development of their teacher 'identity', their sense of who they were, what they were doing, and how, was intertwined with their location. They felt part of the struggles of the school to make a difference.

How did this happen? The shared values across the partnership of Teach First, the university provider, and the placement school are a necessary but insufficient step. The partnership must work together for the entire period of the traineeship: there must be a shared approach between the university and school partners, and a joint commitment to 'learning to be a teacher' and sensitively managing external pressures.

7.1 A Shared Approach between Partners

The process of becoming inducted into Teach First can be a lengthy one. It begins with a pre-ITE phase: potential trainees, some of whom might be career changers, speaking to a Teach First recruiter; attending events; demonstrating commitment to Teach First values and an ability to meet the desired competencies at the assessment center; and then signing an agreement to meet the program's expectations. Throughout this period, potential participants are invited to attend a range of social and professional events. Then the ITE year begins: they attend a summer institute, a structured induction program at a regional university, which focuses on the vision, the charity's impact goals, and dimensions of leadership. Summer institutes are broadly similar across different locations: they focus on the developing self, the notion of teaching as leadership, and the need to build a sense of personal values strongly aligned to the priority of redressing educational disadvantage and raising pupil attainment—but each regional team is able to adapt these foci to suit their local contexts. After the regional phase, the participants join the National Summer Institute, where they are inducted into the national cohort of Teach First participants and they meet with the previous year's cohort.

The support given to the trainees by teacher educators during their induction is crucial. At Nottingham, the Teach First Summer Institute is accompanied by a planned ITE curriculum taught by experienced teacher educators. The focus of this curriculum is deliberately designed to counter-balance some of the prevailing discourse about challenge and disadvantage, especially through the development of understandings about place-based (e.g., Gruenewald and Smith 2008) and asset-based principles and pedagogies (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). A socially just approach to schooling (e.g., Wrigley et al. 2011) is reinforced through activities carried out in the early days in the placement school and revisited through assignments and a year-long reflective journal. This spiral curriculum allows Teach

First, and other ITE participants, to continually engage with the reasons they entered the program in the first place.

7.2 University and Schools are Jointly Committed to ‘Learning To Be a Teacher’

Most importantly, support is given to the schools about how to induct and support the trainees. As well as tackling deficit discourses about schools and communities with the trainees, the university also works closely with school mentors to counter any potentially damaging misunderstandings about the beginning teachers, for example, how to mediate the tag line “*exceptional graduates*” (Teach First, 2014b). During the first week of the summer institute (and beyond) mentors work alongside tutors in university-based sessions to examine the detail of the program and its values, and to better understand the reasons trainees opt for it. School mentors are involved in activities with their beginning teacher(s) from the outset to understand that they are at the beginning of their ITE program and in need of appropriate support; this is accompanied by explicit guidance on how to offset criticism and misunderstandings about beginning teachers on the Teach First program. This was explicitly referred to by our case study participants, who stressed that their initial and good introduction into their schools was made possible by the school’s understanding of the program and the acknowledgment that they were training throughout the year, rather than being ‘exceptional’ teachers from the outset. This recognition ensured that they could turn to school colleagues for help if and when needed.

Before becoming involved with Teach First, both The Blue School and The Green School were already known to us as strong ITE partnership schools with the capacity to support beginning teachers. They had a positive attitude to teacher education. The Blue School mentor said:

We were looking for something where we could work with the university but kind of mold them to our way of doing things because they are with us from day one...I think there are some schools that look at Teach First as a cheap recruitment route, but we didn’t. We looked at two faculty areas that would be supportive, but would also benefit from that extra teacher to enhance the timetable. So it isn’t driven by a need to recruit. It is driven by what can we offer someone who is coming into the teaching profession.

Successful induction and progress towards qualified teaching status on an employment-based route seems to us to be fundamentally linked to the placement-school culture. Our two schools foregrounded the importance of relationships between pupils, between teachers and pupils, between teachers, and between teachers and school leaders. Each school prioritized support for beginning teachers to feel part of a professional learning community and to understand and share the school ethos. Our five beginning teachers described supportive departments, open

access to senior leaders within the school, and pupil-centered approaches to teaching and learning.

7.3 University and Schools Sensitively Manage External Pressures

The schools also shared a sensitive stance towards the way you have to ‘do’ policy, without it corrupting the core of what you believe in. Teacher A1 believed that The Blue School’s unsatisfactory inspection status was the reason it supported innovation: *“Because of the situation that the school is in, there is more scope for people to try different ideas and experimenting is really celebrated.”* This runs counter to the usual narrative of inspection pressure producing curriculum conservatism (see Gillborn and Youdell 2000 for an extended exemplar of this).

Both our case study schools openly discussed the need to balance accountability requirements, for example, to quality assure teachers across the school through leaders inspecting performance, with the needs of new entrants to the profession who might not be able to perform the acts necessary to meet the demands of this accountability system. University staff worked with schools to ensure that observations of the beginning teachers’ lessons were seen as formative rather than summative. The five beginning teachers and the school mentors all spoke positively about this approach. In both case study schools, there was a point towards the end of the ITE year when the beginning teachers felt that they did want to be part of the school quality systems.

Teacher B described this as a turning point; while she could see that this style of lesson feedback would not be as developmentally useful as observations on the ITE program, she felt that she was ready to fit in with the school systems. Reflecting on why she made this choice, she explained that she realized that *“I’m not really university or Teach First anymore. I am The Green School.”*

8 A Partnership for Growing Activist Professionals

Our five Teach First teachers developed a strong sense of professionalism and its practices. Rather than see teaching as ‘job’, which requires following curriculum and best pedagogical practices determined elsewhere, these Teach First teachers saw themselves as producers of professional knowledge and practice. This happened in three ways:

- the teachers believed they had the responsibility to adapt curriculum and design new approaches
- the teachers exercised initiative with their colleagues in order to encourage the kinds of professional conversations and activities that they thought were needed and valuable

- the use of formal assignments supported a reflective approach and cycles of reflection on practice.

8.1 The Teachers Believed They Had the Responsibility to Adapt Curriculum and Design New Approaches

Both chapter authors were pleasantly surprised, given the general state of commentary about the de-professionalization of teachers in England (e.g., Mahony and Hextall 2000), to hear Teacher B say: *“The school lets us try new things and it doesn’t matter if it goes wrong because change is dynamic and it is good, we don’t want to be stale, we don’t want to be stagnant.”*

The five teachers we interviewed all felt they had to develop what some might call resilience: *“How can you grow if you don’t make mistakes?”* Because they were constantly in the moment, in the action, they were making mistakes publicly on a daily basis as they were on full teacher timetables teaching their own classes.

Teacher A1: You learn how to cope with it...because you know that you are their teacher. It is not like you are in there for some of their lessons and then their real teacher is back in. You know that sense of responsibility is the worst thing, that feeling that you are doing a disservice to a whole group of students who would be better off without you. But I think that is a positive way to feel because all it does is force you to want to improve as quickly as you possibly can, you’ve got the ownership. If you want to do something, you can do it and if you want to keep trying things, you can keep trying them. There are no limits.

Teacher A2 had a strategy for innovation:

So what I did was pick a class, which was my class that I would try things with. Which was useful because we have built up a great relationship while I was trying things and they were responding to that and I got to the point where I know how they were going to react. Which is why I knew I could feel confident about trying something new and it wouldn’t matter if it didn’t work. I teach them this year and I think it has had a massive difference in our relationship this year.

The school’s attitude to ‘trying things out’ was clearly key. The Green School mentor told us:

We have prioritized the timetable so that the participant and their mentor share two lessons, so that they can discuss strategies and observe each other. So if the participant wants to take risks, then they can, and the teacher can help with that and back them up if needs be.

The relationship between the university tutor and the school mentor was also important to allow risk taking to occur. A dialogue about development rather than assessment was crucial:

Teacher A2: Definitely we had a really supportive university and really supportive mentors in school and it was all about that development, not about judgment, and I have never felt like it was a judgment, ever.

All five participants also spoke about ‘the peer effect’: support derived from being placed in a school with others on the same program. Our five teachers observed each other with similar groups and offered each other advice and pedagogical support. They exchanged information about what they had seen other more experienced colleagues do. The opportunity to share, and offload during difficult times, with others in a peer network within the school was a key factor in their successful progress. In addition, the teachers all spoke about the value of re-meeting their peers during the university days across the year. As Teacher A2 put it: *“Teach First is about networking and working together and supporting each other; they encourage that.”*

8.2 The Teachers Took the Initiative with Their Colleagues

The training teachers were very proactive about taking responsibility for their own development. They acknowledged that this was partly due to the kind of people that the program appealed to: self-motivated people committed to the Teach First vision. The university also encouraged ownership of professional development from the first days on the course and throughout tutor visits, when participants are encouraged to set the agenda for the observation and the post-lesson discussion. One of the school mentors noted: *“Nothing really comes from the mentor, it all comes from you, you’re constantly reflecting...you might run ideas past us, but everything you do is initiated by you.”*

Teachers in The Green School and The Blue school routinely organized trips, transition activities, and after school clubs, and were involved in whole-school events such as the awards evening. The five teachers initiated innovative activities over and above these and they often had wider impact than their own classroom or department. In The Green School, Teacher E began a debating team, held after-school sessions, and took the teams to debates in other local schools. Teachers A1 and E took part in a city-wide university film project involving after-school work. Teacher B regularly changed her classroom. It became a snowscape to teach rotational symmetry, a mocktail bar to teach conversions and measurements, and the whole class became zombies at Halloween to learn about the Fibonacci sequence. The two Blue School teachers collaboratively designed and taught a cross-curricular unit of work, which involved pupils solving a murder mystery, drawing on the science of forensics, and a range of English skills, such as inference and language analysis; this involved them team teaching in each other’s classrooms and sharing assessments.

Teachers A1 and A2 realized that their ITE program afforded them opportunities their experienced colleagues did not have: to be able to observe good practice across a range of lessons and subject areas. At a time of low morale following a difficult OfSTED inspection, they decided to develop a staff bulletin describing aspects of the good practice that they had access to. This served two purposes: first, it shared what strong practitioners were doing in their classrooms to encour-

age others to try similar approaches; and second, it raised morale by focusing on the good work happening in the school. In the following year, their approach was implemented across the school at faculty meetings, when examples of themed good practice (e.g., collaborative learning) were shared. Both teachers, however, felt that this was less successful as some colleagues were cynical about an imposed 'best-practice' approach, as opposed to their 'bottom-up' initiative.

It is unusual for training teachers to be able to introduce a whole school initiative in this way. When asked about why and how they were able to do this whilst still undergoing all of the other work associated with gaining a PGCE qualification on an employment-based route, their response was linked to two main factors. First, the participants felt that the university tutors and the school mentors actively encouraged them to take risks and to be creative:

Teacher E: You are encouraged to try things out and you are supported if it doesn't work. As long as you have thought out what you want to do and it has a purpose, they don't mind you trying. So, yes, it could go wrong and you learn from it. But at the same time it could be phenomenal, it could be great and be exactly what the school needed but no one has been willing to try it.

Second, the participants felt an obligation to be innovative because of the program they had signed up for:

Teacher A2: I do think there is something about the way Teach First sets things up, about this vision, this aim. I do think it encourages you to be a bit more ambitious and a bit more willing to take risks with what you are doing...

The support of the school was critical in encouraging this kind of innovation, and our cases concur with those researchers who have highlighted the importance of a supportive school culture and middle management, particularly at departmental level (Blandford 2014; Muijs et al. 2013). However, while other scholars have called this leadership, we want to argue for this being better understood as the beginnings of pedagogically focused, institutionally based professionalism that Judyth Sachs describes as "activist professionalism" (Sachs 2003).

8.3 Becoming a Reflective Professional

Interestingly, at a time when there is a policy shift towards school-led initial teacher training with a reduced focus on theoretical understandings, the teachers in this case study spoke about the necessity for a theoretically informed approach to their program. This theoretically informed teaching is provided by university tutors through face-to-face teaching alongside online teaching through the university's virtual learning environment, tutor visits, and assignments.

Although the beginning teachers acknowledged that the timing of the assignments meant that they often lost holiday time to complete the necessary reading and then writing, none complained that the work had been irrelevant or unhelpful.

Teacher A2: I think researching and writing assignments are important because it makes you step back from your classroom, your kids, and your marking, and your drowning in whatever data you are drowning in...that assignment, it makes you think about what you're doing and why you are doing it...I always felt like it re-motivated me...you start doing the assignment and you think, yes, this matters, this is why I am doing this.

Reflective teaching is a key component of the Teach First program. Alongside assignments, participants must complete a reflective journal. Weekly key readings and reflection points for discussion with school mentors and university tutors are provided. For the participants in this case study, having a strong grounding in relevant educational theory was very important:

Teacher A1: If I don't know the theory behind something then I don't want to do it...I need to understand the why of what I am doing...

Teacher B: Because I had to read around theories and literature for my assignments, I began to see the link to my practice, and it moved from having to do it, to wanting to do it. So now if there is something I want to understand better about how a child learns, I read about it in journals and things, it just informs your planning and your practice.

The assignments and the opportunity to reflect on practice using a lens of a formal assignment was often very productive. Furthermore, it supported a reflective habit, which involved not simply thinking about what had happened, but also seeking out reading that would help the teachers think critically about their practice.

9 Conclusion: Some Good News and Some Not So Good

We have suggested in this chapter that there are a set of 'optimum' practices for Teach First—a teacher-education program specifically designed to address educational injustice—to work well. These are strong partnerships with strongly congruent and locally adapted practices; support for learning how to teach; and permission, support, and space to develop as a reflective and activist professional. Despite the concern about the role of higher education and teacher education in England, we believe that this demonstrates universities still have an important coordinating role to play in ITE, if they can maintain good working relationships with schools and their staff.

We do, however, see some potential difficulties in scaling up the good practice we have described in this chapter. The most obvious lies in the difficulties and reluctance some schools experience in stepping away from a short-term view driven by rigid inspection criteria and targets. Focusing on the longer term requires school leaders to be courageous in the face of considerable external pressure to show quick changes in test results.. The second challenge lies ironically in one of the things that makes the Teach First program work: in moral call and mission.

Teach First teachers are instilled with a strong sense of personal responsibility for making a difference:

Teacher A1: I often feel bad if I'm not taking risks because I think I'm not being a good enough teacher. Like if I'm doing a lesson that I have vaguely done something similar to before, then obviously I am doing a good enough job.

In our experience, many Teach First teachers do feel very acutely disappointment, anxiety, and a sense of failure if they are not able to demonstrate tangible turnarounds in their classes:

Teacher B: ...waking up at five in the morning worrying about my Year 11s having gone to bed at 2 because they are not doing as well as they should be...If you don't get it right then the kids have lost that learning time and they can never get it back and that's your fault.

Often this sense of responsibility acts as motivation to keep going:

Teacher A1: Because Teach First highlights there is an issue [with schools in disadvantaged communities] it gives you more motivation to keep going. I think there are some people who don't respect teaching as a profession as much as they need to and maybe the best thing about Teach First is that you really respect teaching and you think that it is a really valuable thing to be doing. And when things get tough and it gets hard, then that's what you come back to: no, I really want to be doing this and you know why you are doing it.

While teacher educators and school mentors do their best to help trainees understand that there are immediate policy, as well as long term historical, social, economic, cultural, and political issues at work in the production and reproduction of educational inequality, this more nuanced doing-what-is-possible stance works against the very reasons Teach First recruited them in the first place. As with other ITE routes, there are significant dropout rates from the program, during and at the end of the two years, and we do think that this is a key issue to be addressed by Teach First, schools, and university partners.

However, the Teach First teachers that we have focused on have all decided to stay in teaching and not leave at the end of their two years. While two are moving schools for personal reasons, three are staying on in their initial placements, demonstrating that identification with the profession and with an institution does not necessarily stop at the end of the mandatory two-year period of work.

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