

Stand Up for Education

Why we need teachers who are fully qualified

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In 1981, Brian Simon wrote a short but highly influential article *Why no pedagogy in England?* In it he expressed concern about the way in which teachers were being trained and prepared for the classroom. Ideas about pedagogy, or the science of learning, took second place to pragmatism and practicality and with little attempt to connect theory to classroom practice. By 2004, Robin Alexander – someone who had, in effect, been at the centre of many government ‘reforms’ in the intervening years – revisited Simon’s work with an article entitled *Still no pedagogy?* in which he undertook an unflattering critique of the primary strategy of the government of the time. In the current set of Teachers’ Standards – the measure by which performance is judged – the word ‘pedagogy’ is entirely absent. What can explain such a startling state of affairs?

Those charged with the education of teachers, most of whom prefer the term ‘teacher education’ to ‘teacher training’, do not eschew the idea of pedagogy when preparing teachers for the classroom. Most try to introduce their students to the influential figures who have changed the way in which we have conceived of how young people learn. But an all-pervasive discourse in schools and the educational world, focussing on notions of constant progress, incremental improvement and measurable outcomes has meant that discussion of the works of Bruner, Vygotsky, Piaget and Friere have become something of a footnote to the pressing business of demonstrating that standards are being met. The ticking of a box to ‘prove’ that a skill has been mastered and the completion of a chart to indicate that a topic has been ‘covered’ – whether this be for the young people or the student teachers themselves - have taken precedence over any complex consideration of whether genuine learning has taken place.

The work of Schon and others in the latter part of the twentieth century did something to soften Simon’s message: many teachers who have gone beyond the stage of mere ‘coping’ demonstrate a willingness to enquire into and reflect on their teaching, leading them to the work of those theorists who cast light on the learning process. But for the 50% of teachers who currently undertake training and then leave the profession before completing five years, this development towards becoming a reflective practitioner will not take place – and the reason, as verified by a parliamentary report on attrition rates of 2012, is workload, and not salary.

The conclusion to be drawn from all of this is clear. If teaching - and preparing to teach - becomes little more than a series of repetitive, formulaic tasks that are not underpinned by sound theory helping us to understand how, when and why children learn, then the job just becomes a wearisome, disembodied series of obstacles to overcome. Teachers, therefore, need to be trained to be knowledgeable, reflective and critical about the important task they face if they are to sustain their efforts on behalf of our young people. Successive governments, however, have not seen it like this.

One of the characteristics of the Coalition government that academics and researchers find most alarming is its stubborn refusal to listen to research and expertise that do not fit its own agenda. This has been exacerbated in recent years by the willingness of Michael Gove in particular to disparage expert opinion on education as ‘the blob’ or ‘enemies of promise’. This mistrust is manifested in the way in which the

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government's preferred model of teacher training (not education!) is an on-the-job, school-based apprenticeship with minimal input from universities. The fact that the justification, in a document entitled *Training our next generation of outstanding teachers*, is predicated on the use of 'research' that would embarrass a lazy undergraduate adds further irony to the distrust shown towards university-based teacher education. Although university-based courses have consistently been highly evaluated by Ofsted, and such courses are always built around lengthy periods of school-based placement, this seems to be conveniently forgotten in rhetoric that brands such an approach 'over-theoretical'.

This mistrust and disrespect towards teachers means that the skills, knowledge and theoretical understanding they require – and which they need to develop throughout their careers – are ignored in favour of the model of the enthusiastic apprentice. The message is that this is a job that can be mastered by anyone with a bit of basic training. This opens the door to a situation where, according to the Department for Education's own annual workforce survey in 2013, there has been a threefold increase in the number of unqualified teachers in state schools since the 2010 general election, with some 6% of teachers in this position. In Free Schools, this figure rises to 13%. Similarly, the number of teaching assistants has also risen since 2000 to a figure of nearly a quarter of a million – again, three times its level at that point.

None of this is to suggest for a moment that teachers qualifying from a school-based route will not go on to be brilliant practitioners. Or that teaching assistants, who do so much to ensure the effective running of our schools, are not worth every penny of their measly pay. But when those teachers, unsupported by any theoretical underpinning of their actions and dragged down by unremitting bureaucracy, quit before they've had the chance to become fully formed professionals, that has to be to the detriment of our children. And when even the most well-meaning teaching assistant assumes teaching duties – the 'delivery' of the curriculum – that cannot possibly be a way of enhancing learning.

We have reached a situation where consideration of pedagogy has taken second place to the attainment of standards, the measurement of which is achieved through high-stakes testing and punitive inspection. Teachers themselves recognise that one of the outcomes of this is the narrowing of the curriculum – and many of them work hard to subvert this which is to be heartily applauded. Yet if we recruit into the profession those who are ill-equipped to bring knowledge and criticality to this situation, such reduction and diminution can only get worse. The victims of such a situation will, of course, be young people who deserve so much better.

Further reading:

Alexander, R. (2004) 'Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education.' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 34:1, pp 7-33

Apple M. (2004) *Ideology and Curriculum*. London Routledge.

Ball, S. (2008) *The Great Education Debate*. London Policy Press.

Schon, D. (1983) *The reflective practitioner- how professionals think in action*. New York. Basic Books.

Simon, B. (1981) 'Why no pedagogy in England?' *Education in the Eighties* in Moon, B & Shelton Mayes A. (1994) *Teaching and Learning in the Secondary School*. Buckingham. OUP.