

PROFESSIONAL MENTORS HAVE THEIR SAY: ITT (INITIAL
TEACHER TRAINING) AS A KEY FEATURE OF AN IMPROVING
SCHOOL

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PROFESSIONAL MENTORS HAVE THEIR SAY: ITT (Initial Teacher Training) AS A KEY FEATURE OF AN IMPROVING SCHOOL

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Abstract

This article reports on a detailed survey conducted with over fifty professional mentors. It explores their views about the significance of ITT in the development of effective continuous professional development within their schools and examines its influence on raising professional standards. It also refines the inter-relationship between ITT and school improvement. Although ITT is clearly seen as a positive force in reinforcing professional activity within schools there are some pertinent messages for the Higher Education Institutes and for the government as professional goodwill cannot be assumed to be an endless resource.

It was rightly observed that our earlier reflections (Child and Merrill, 2002) on the role of ITT as a positive force in school improvement was fundamentally celebratory and presented illustrative material drawn from our combined experiences in ITT over several years. This article analyses data obtained from a comprehensive survey of senior staff in schools that work in partnership with a large HEI in the North of England. The findings confirm our contention that ITT has influenced schools' approaches to continuous professional development. They also underline the potential for it to achieve more if fully integrated into a school's strategic planning for improvement.

The respondents

Fifty-five professional mentors completed the questionnaire. The table below illustrates the diversity of the schools they represented.

School/Colleges	No in sample
11-16	33
11-18	21
State	51
Independent	3
Voluntary-Aided	10
College of FE	1
Middle School	1

Table I Participating schools

The geographical range extends from Carlisle in the north to Preston in the south; and from Blackpool (on the Fylde coast) in the west to Nelson in the Calder Valley in the east. The sample contained schools of all types: from rural and urban environments and from areas of affluence and social deprivation. Additionally, no respondent had less than five years' teaching experience and all were experienced mentors.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to capture the views, values and reflections of this experienced and well-informed audience by inviting them to respond to fifty statements. They were encouraged to indicate their preferred response without undue contemplation and could choose a response from a selection of five. In the design of the questionnaire statements were collected from several sources and scrutinised by the research team and other critical readers to eliminate ambiguity and to ensure relevance. The statements were grouped around the key features of the inquiry but these were not displayed together in sub-sections within the questionnaire; they were randomly distributed so that the respondents were more likely to make their selections in an uninhibited manner and be freed from focusing on a particular aspect. This random distribution also enabled the placing of statements to establish consistency of opinion. Similar safeguards were deployed in using a mixture of positive, negative and neutral statements. These strategies sought to secure validity. (Appendix 1 contains a full copy of the questionnaire)

Findings

a) Professional Development

Schools' involvement with ITT is optional. Indeed, some schools have intentionally eschewed any commitment to teacher training. The TTA is in the process of identifying non-contributors and will be deploying its regional officers to visit these schools and discuss the benefits of ITT with headteachers and governors in these particular schools.

We believe that this research will provide persuasive evidence of the benefits which accrue from an integrated approach to ITT as part of a wider school improvement imperative. There is no doubt that ITT cannot be a bolt on extra. 52% of our sample maintained that ITT is rarely a whole school issue. However, 76% asserted that a school without ITT is professionally disadvantaged. We sought to tease out the advantages that participants identified. Some of these fall into the category we define as "feel good" factors. In response to statement 12 over 98% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that student teachers bring vitality to a school. More precisely, there was clear evidence that ITT was a powerful instrument in raising standards and could operate on a whole school level as well as the individual level. Interestingly, there was near universal support (98%) for the concept of ITT activity influencing the teacher who might be described as "professionally stagnant". And a further 87% concluded that ITT can raise professional standards.

The survey sought to identify what aspects of the ITT activity actually contribute to these positive feelings. One area is the influence practising teachers can have upon the quality of future entrants to the profession. ITT means that mentors and classroom teachers become deeply connected to the standards (currently expressed in DfEE 4/98 but revised standards apply in September 2002) which apply to qualified teacher status. In assessing the competences of those student teachers for whom they have responsibility, they also engage in personal reflection about their own performance. They are able to scrutinise their own competences as they reflect and advise on others. There is increasing emphasis on encouraging practitioner reflection and some provocative research (Hudson, 2002) that suggests strategies to achieve and sustain it. 87% of respondents confirmed that students encourage evaluation and 91% were pleased to be able to influence recruitment into their profession. Student teachers bring to their work the benefits of their reading and an introduction to the most up to date research into pedagogy. They also cast a critical, but accepting eye, upon the many initiatives which have been asked of schools over the last few years. They are a conduit between the HEI and the partnership school and bring with them insights unburdened by the realities of the busy school or a complex and inhibiting history. This may well explain why 83% see ITT as an appropriate and welcome route through which a school can resonate with new ideas. The survey also explored the influence of ITT in creating a career structure within schools and stimulating promotional aspirations. Just over half the sample agreed that ITT had stimulated career development in this formal way.

b) Best Value

We were interested to discover how professional mentors view ITT when asked to examine the school's time and resources devoted to mentoring students set against the retaining fees offered by the HEI's and the other benefits which are claimed to derive from ITT activity. It comes as no great surprise to record that ITT is underfunded: 83% of respondents held this view. 59% consider schools do not get value for money and a stunning 93% say staff are not *fully* rewarded for their ITT activities. It is interesting that when the lexis in the statements relates to cash, or when it alludes to monetary provision, professional mentors are strongly of the view that ITT is inadequately resourced. When the debate moves into other areas of advantage and benefit the responses become far more positive. This emphasises the very nature of teaching and teacher training: there are intrinsic benefits which outweigh the strong sense of inadequate funding. The more cynical reader might well suggest that this has been the case in the long history of centrally funded education.

There are some important pointers for the future management of teacher training. To our minds, there is an urgent need for the HEIs (as senior partners and as quality assurance managers) to offer to their participating teacher trainers a more sophisticated support package. 78% of the sample said that they wanted to see more CPD (continuous professional development) opportunities structured and created by the HEIs. This contention was supported by responses to statement 45 and here 69% said that CPD benefits are underdeveloped.

Student teachers in school can generate opportunities for CPD as they can release teachers from the classroom to engage in other tasks. The professional mentors drew a subtle distinction when asked about the use of time. Only three respondents took the negative option to record that ITT took up too much teacher time. However, only 28% claim that student teachers generate *meaningful free* time for teachers, whereas 63% took the view that student teachers create *quality time* for other staff. We have italicised these key words because in drafting the statements we were seeking to explore perceptions of time with greater precision. We conclude that *free time* is considered an inappropriate phrase as if to imply some kind of shirking of responsibility; quality time is redolent of something professional, a time in which CPD might be occurring.

c) Mentoring

Effective mentoring is at the heart of ITT. The skills for successful mentoring have been well documented (Veenman et al, 1998; Dunn and Bennett, 1997) and HEI's must continue to invest in a developing programme for all staff who fulfil this role. Our survey demonstrated some disappointment that mentoring qualifications did not have national recognition. 55% supported this view and a similar figure underlined the inadequacy of training. There was no doubt, however, as to the importance of establishing qualifications with 62% of respondents in agreement. We argued (Child and Merrill, 2002) that a major benefit for schools involved in ITT was the transferability of mentoring skills to other aspects of the school's life and work. It was our contention that a school staff enriched by the experience of mentoring and managed by those with high order mentoring skills was likely to achieve change and improvement more readily because there would be a culture of recognition, and a mature approach to the analysis of strengths and weaknesses. A compatible conclusion is drawn by the research into collaborative cultures (Barnes and Bennett, 2001). There was unanimity (92%) in saying that mentoring skills are transferable. Two schoolteachers (Butler and Geeson, 2002) seconded to work on PGCE courses state, "mentoring has become an increasingly significant mode of professional development." They continue: "where mentoring has been an integral part of the school's ethos, there is likely to be greater collaboration amongst staff in sharing ideas, schemes of work and practice." Their findings confirm the assumption made some five years earlier (McIntyre and Hagger, 1996) that "a more experienced colleague can facilitate the professional development of a new teacher or a person new to a particular stage in a career".

d) Research and Reflection

The development and maintenance of the reflective practitioner is the mantra of all ITT and CPD activity. The DfES (Learning and teaching-A strategy for Professional Development) seeks to encourage this by the funds it has allocated to strategies like Best Practice Research Awards, bursaries and secondments. Our survey produced two remarkably consistent and encouraging results. Without exception, every single professional mentor identified ITT as a profound source of practitioner reflection: in fact they acknowledged that it *encouraged* reflection. Just as importantly, nearly 70% maintained that ITT encouraged a research culture in their schools. It seems to us that

these indices should stimulate central government into providing a sustained funding stream to enhance good practice still further. We are aware that a new kind of Advanced Skills Teacher (ASTITT) is to be funded in schools which are recognised as successful trainers. We would press this further and argue for consideration to be given to the concept of Professional Development Schools as in the USA. We are grateful to the Dean of Education at St Martin's College, in highlighting the work of The City Heights K-16 Educational Pilot in San Diego which seeks to meet the needs of a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood through an educational system re-energized by a close HEI-school partnership. At its centre is the transformational power of high quality sustained professional development.

e) Not Only Teachers

One indication of the fuller integration of ITT into the schools was the responses to statements about the impact on non-teaching staff. If ITT is not a bolt on extra then staff who might expect to be distanced from it are in fact deeply involved. We discovered that over fifty percent of schools deployed non-teaching staff in the delivery of the General Professional Studies course which explores issues in education and is not subject specific. 20% claimed that the status of non-teaching staff was raised because of their involvement.

Summary

If education is to meet the needs of society, teachers will certainly be required to accept an increasing burden. Expectations will be articulated in many ways: the raising of pupil achievement at all key stages (starred level 4's and super grade A's at advanced level etc); using the new technologies; including all and respecting diversity in all its forms; and embracing the vocational-academic continuum. This challenging agenda will only be fully met if teachers and those responsible for structuring their initial and continuing training, deliver what is needed at the point of need. The TTA has just announced a £1.5 million grant to a LEA-HEI consortium to do this very thing. In Lancashire, for example, it has provided £1.3 million to support professional development and improve teacher retention. The Head of Education of the partnership teacher training institution which will design and deliver this on-the-job professional development training said, "we will be able to deliver accredited continuing professional development courses specifically designed for the needs of the schools and their teachers." (Lancashire Evening Post, March 15th 2002).

We believe that the results of our survey confirm that ITT, as part of a school's strategic plan for improvement, is fertile ground for continuing professional development. There is sufficient goodwill, experience and skills amongst key professionals within the schools to harness ITT to greater effect. A good and effective school will not only ensure quality training for those about to enter the profession but it will also, as a structured by-product of this activity, enhance the skills of its staff and raise the level of pupil achievement because the culture of the school will be an empowering one in which all members of the community are learners. It is pleasing to note that under the new OfSTED inspection

framework, schools' ITT involvement is to be formally commented upon rather than given its former cursory mention. There is cause to be optimistic but there is no room for complacency: ITT is still grossly underfunded. To fail to increase the level of funding may be to fail both our teachers and their pupils.

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