

“It’s just a stage I’m going through”: moving student teachers from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’

Dr Mark Bettaney
Faculty of Education and Health, University of Greenwich

Introduction

This article identifies three published models of professional progression in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and uses them to ask questions about the stages of pedagogic development that student teachers tend to go through. It is written primarily to enhance student teachers’ understanding of the processes involved, and to give them the vocabulary they may need to reflect on their on-going professional development. However, experienced teachers and lecturers from disciplines outside of teacher training may also find it thought-provoking to consider where their own teaching methods sit within the categories of pedagogic progression or curriculum delivery, which are presented here. In this respect, the work of Twiselon (2000) may be particularly apposite.

The context

As I write this article, the third year undergraduate student teachers on the BA Primary Education programme on which I teach, are beginning their final teaching experiences. They are keen to secure the best grades possible, since they (rightly) perceive that achieving high grades will enhance their prospects of securing employment in a competitive market. Strangely, given the high stakes, the majority of students receive graded judgements passively, irrespective of what those grades are. If, for example, I am able to grade an observed lesson as being ‘good’, the student in question will invariably heave a sigh of relief at having passed the assessment, and look pleased. This is understandable. But it is a rare student who, on receiving a grade of ‘good’, will heave a sigh of relief, look pleased, and then ask ‘OK, but what must I do to become outstanding?’

The answer to that question invariably lies in an understanding of the stages of professional development that students go through on teaching programmes. When I visit schools to observe students, I have become rather accustomed to seeing very safe lessons, where students are more concerned with passing the assessment event than with demonstrating progression. Understandably, the avoidance of failure is a first priority, and this can take the form of rather sterile, easily managed, easily assessed, product-based activities for the children, involving a minimum of child mobility or input. The student’s view is often that the children must be seen to learn what it is intended for them to learn. The lesson is therefore designed to facilitate and demonstrate that learning, and only that learning. Any additional or incidental learning is therefore both unexpected and unlikely. Such an approach can easily result in a ‘good’ grade, because there is little to go wrong, and there are unlikely to be any surprises in children’s responses. But equally, it is an approach which presents me, as the assessor, with a barrier – a barrier which often prevents me from being able to award an outstanding grade, and for the same reasons. Thus, students reach a ceiling in their

performance. Being consistently graded as 'good' is a safe and comfortable place to be. This ceiling is sometimes referred to as a plateau (Furlong and Maynard, 1995).

I write this article then, with an aim to encourage student teachers to move into territory that is less safe, more risky.. However, first let me report on the responses from Year 2 students during a recent group tutorial when I asked them to suggest risky things they might do in a lesson. At first they rather missed the point, suggesting professionally unacceptable things.

Charlie: Teaching without a plan, that's risky (laughs)

Emma: Yeah, or being rude to your link tutor.

Nicolle: No, but seriously, doing complicated maths in front of the children – I panic when I'm being observed, and I got it wrong once.

Me: Did that result in failure?

Nicolle: No. [The link tutor] knew I was nervous and checked [in the debrief that] I understood the maths. It could have done though. I was scared at the time.

These students directly associated the word 'risk' with risk of assessment failure. Notice also how these responses are all about the student. There is no mention of children's involvement here at all.

However when I substituted the word 'risky' with the word 'ambitious', suddenly things become clearer, and more child-centric. In the same tutorial, when asked to suggest ambitious things that a lesson might contain, the students were much more reflective, and aware of the needs of the children.

Charlie: Wider differentiation, I'd do. My teacher uses a sort of carousel system, four groups rotating around completely different activities in different subjects over two afternoons, and she makes it a bit harder or easier for each group each time. It's awesome.

Nicolle: In maths I let the children decide different ways of calculating a number problem once. It was great because listening to them I could see their thought processes. Some of them could suggest loads of ways, some...

Annette: ... Yeah but Nicolle, problem solving is OK, but where that's risky is you can't be sure how they will solve the problem, or even that they will. That's dangerous isn't it? Surely they have to be successful if you're being observed ...

Me: I wasn't thinking especially of when you are observed ...

Oli: ... I'd love to do more drama, not just stories, but acting out maths problems or the result of a science experiment. My teacher got a group [of his year 5s] to act out the story of a pot of water that boiled at the top of a mountain at a really low temperature They were all water molecules with their hands (demonstrates) or the flames, trying hard to heat the ... It was either that or we all had to go up a mountain to do the experiment, and that's not going to happen, is it? Is that drama? I don't know, but it's better than doing stuff on paper. But I am not sure I've got the confidence to do that yet.

Me: Would you do those things if you were being observed?

Together: No; I don't think so; no.

Oli: I'd like to think so, but (smiles self-consciously) probably not.

Maheni: I will do it when I'm not being looked at, but I don't know what my tutor would think. Like, would she like it?

Maheni brings us back down to the safe lesson by identifying her need to first satisfy the things the assessor might like. Her priority is to avoid failure; to avoid the wrath of the link tutor. For her, that dreamed-of 'outstanding' grade is likely to remain elusive, because safety is her default position.

Stages student teachers go through

Many writers (Bullough and Gitlin, 1994; Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; Furlong and Maynard, 1995; Twiselton, 2000) have identified a range of stages that teachers go through when learning how to teach. The choice of focus of such studies tends to centre on either classroom management skills, or subject delivery skills, but in each study, clearly delineated paths of progression are categorised. The two skill types are intricately entwined and my experience in the development of student teachers has shown these models of development, although dated, remain perceptive and helpful, and have not yet been superseded.

As far back as the mid-1970s, Fuller and Brown (1975) identified three recognisable linear stages that student teachers go through, which they (Fuller and Brown) labelled as survival; mastery; and consequence orientation (survival concerns; task concerns; impact concerns). By 'survival concerns', Fuller and Brown show that in the early stages of development, student teachers hold a very ego-centric approach to their teaching (show this resource; ask that question; use this example; check the time; stick to the plan). The second stage, 'task concerns', refers to a movement away from ego-centricity to an awareness of what the children are doing in a lesson (keep them busy; get them to discuss this; draw that; explain this to your talk partner; line up in alphabetical order). The third stage, 'impact concerns' shows an awareness of what the children are learning, and how effective their learning experiences are. In this stage, the children can influence their learning or the activities. They can show independence. They may have choices and preferences. The teacher is no longer the sole driver of the lesson. Outcomes are not pre-determined. Risk of the unexpected is therefore a factor.

Building on Fuller and Brown (1975), Furlong and Maynard (1995) suggest their own categorisation of five broad stages – early idealism; personal survival; dealing with difficulties; hitting a plateau; and moving on. The early idealism stage can be painful, professionally, and can be the undoing of students in their first school experience. Bullough and Gitlin (1994) observed that at the beginning of their training nearly all teachers have a clear and idealistic image of the sort of teacher they want to become. This persona is made up of vignettes of diverse and memorable teaching practices or personalities which the students themselves experienced as pupils in schools. However, the student teachers often experience a transition, in which this self-constructed image is invariably swiftly and painfully swept away by the reality of modern classroom organisation, planning, assessment, behaviour management and subject delivery. That transition accomplished, the stages of progression suggested by Furlong and Maynard (1995) show close parallels with Fuller and Brown's (1975).

The Fuller and Brown (1975) model ties in extremely tidily with a model of progression developed by Twiselton (2000). Twiselton was interested in developing the teaching of literacy, and her motivation for research was her stated observation that

‘...there is a danger that even student teachers at the end of their training view the curriculum as an end in itself, without questioning, exploring or fully understanding the rationale underlying it’ (Twiselton, 2000: 391).

Writing when the National Literacy Strategy (1998) was at its most influential, Twiselton’s paper suggested that the NLS had increased that danger, and to justify this claim she drew on observations of teachers new to the profession from a previous study (Twiselton & Webb 1998). Twiselton (2000) identified three distinct hierarchical categories of delivery type, which she considered were identifiable positions that a teacher might adopt in response to the demand to deliver a prescriptive curriculum.

- Task Managers

The NQTs preoccupation is product orientated; the criterion for success is that all children are on task; the logistics of the task are amplified (instructions, layout, time restraints, resource-use); children’s’ education is outcome-led

- Curriculum Deliverers

The purpose of the task is highlighted; learning objectives are clear, but isolated as ends in themselves; learning objectives are willingly accepted by the teacher as being arbitrarily received from within an externally ‘given’ curriculum; the selection of learning activity is imposed upon, not selected by, the teacher

- Concept/Skills Builders

Concepts and skills define the task; the task is only important as a vehicle for learning; the concepts and skills that are being learnt are advertised and reinforced; the value of the process of the task outweighs that of the product to both teacher and children.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, but they do give a good indication of the developmental stages experienced by a good proportion of student teachers. Student teachers on their journey to become autonomous and effective practitioners, may like to consider where they would place themselves in these various categories and, whether progression to a different category might be possible or desirable. It is true that we might question whether all categories identified by Fuller and Brown (1975), Furlong and Maynard (1995), or Twiselton (2000) apply equally to both Early Years and primary settings, or whether ‘mastery’ is even possible in the organic and changing professional teaching environments that teachers find themselves in today. However in the pursuit of that ‘outstanding’ grade, it can only help a student to consider whether a plateau has been reached, and whether ‘consequence orientation’ (Fuller and Brown, 1975) or ‘concept building’ (Twiselton, 2000) might be attainable.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would urge all student teachers, after each school observation, to question their assessors, whatever grade has been awarded, as to how that grade might be improved upon in future. It is a reasonable question to ask and demonstrates a commitment to professional development. The categories presented in this article may help as a model for progression and may help to guide those conversations. I am not suggesting that all students in all curriculum subjects should be capable of achieving outstanding grades all of the time - that would be naïve and unrealistic. All students will have aspects of the curriculum that they feel more comfortable teaching than others, and so a student may feel able to experiment in one subject whilst clinging tightly to safety in another. That is understood. But if students on professional programmes want to push past the plateau that safe, tidy, teacher-driven lessons afford, then considering how one might incorporate risk, or how one might allow additional or incidental learning to blossom in a classroom or setting would be a giant leap towards the 'outstanding' grade that every student teacher dreams of.

References

- Bullough, R. & Gitlin, A. (1994) 'Challenging teacher education as training: four propositions.' In: Fish, D. (1995) *Quality Mentoring for Student Teachers*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- DfEE (1998) *National Literacy Strategy: framework for teaching*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- Fuller, F.F. & Brown, O.H. (1975) 'Becoming a Teacher.' In: Furlong, J. & Maynard, T. (1995) *Mentoring Student Teachers*. London: Routledge.
- Furlong, J. & Maynard, T. (1995) *Mentoring Student Teachers*. London: Routledge.
- Guillaume, A. & Rudney, G. (1993) 'Student' Teachers' Growth Towards Independence: An Analysis of their Changing Concerns.' In Furlong, J. & Maynard, T. (1995) *Mentoring Student Teachers*. London: Routledge.
- Twistleton, S. (Nov 2000) 'Seeing the wood for the trees: the National Literacy strategy and Initial Teacher education; pedagogical content knowledge and the structure of subjects.' *Cambridge Journal of Education Vol 30 No. 3*, p 391-403. Cambridge: Carfax.
- Twiselton, S. & Webb, D. (1998) 'The trouble with English: the challenge of developing subject knowledge in school'. In: Richards, C., Simco, N., & Twiselton, S. (eds) *Primary Teacher Education High Status? High Standards?* London: Falmer Press.

Author Biography

Dr Mark Bettaney is the BA Primary Education programme leader at the University of Greenwich. Before becoming a university lecturer he taught for 14 years in primary schools in north-west Kent and south-east London, and in that time developed a keen interest in mentoring and student development.