Jack-Of-All-Trades, Master of None?: An Examination of Subject Skills Provision on Technology (Secondary) Initial Teacher Education Courses In England and Wales

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ABSTRACT: The author presents and discusses the implications of findings from her own research which reveal perceived inadequacies in the subject skills provision element of four secondary PGCE technology ITE courses. These inadequacies were identified by student teachers and their teacher mentors, and by newly qualified teachers and their supervising colleagues.

Keywords: initial teacher education, competences, technology skills

INTRODUCTION

In England and Wales, the widening of the content of the school technology syllabus, with the introduction of the national curriculum, inevitably widened the requisite knowledge base for technology teaching. Not only were the traditional craft, design and technology parameters extended to incorporate art and design, business studies, home economics and information technology, but there was also increased emphasis on the design process, highlighting generic skills, rather than craft-oriented, materials-specific, knowledge.

Concurrent with these changes to the content of school technology were changes to Post-graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) secondary initial teacher education (ITE). The Government’s Circular 9/92 (DFE, 1992) introduced a competences-based ITE curriculum, specifying five competences expected of newly qualified teachers, the first of which, subject knowledge, required newly qualified teachers to be able to demonstrate:

- an understanding of the knowledge, concepts and skills of their specialist subjects and of the place of these subjects in the school curriculum;
- knowledge and understanding of the National Curriculum and Attainment Targets (NCATs) and the Programmes of Study (PoS) in the subjects they are preparing to teach, together with an understanding of the framework of the statutory requirements;
- a breadth and depth of subject knowledge extending beyond PoS and examination syllabuses in school. (DFE, 1992, para. 2.2)

Considering that to these changes was also added that of secondary students’ increased time spent in schools as stipulated by the Government (DFE, 1992, p. 3), the task facing technology teacher trainers, of having to take on
board these changes and incorporate them within their ITE courses, was daunting.

This article presents and examines research findings which illustrate the extent to which, in England and Wales, in the case of four PGCE secondary technology courses, ITE prepares students adequately for teaching the widened technology curriculum.

BACKGROUND

Recent reforms in the UK

In 1992 the British Government declared its commitment to shift initial teacher education from the higher education sector into schools, and all subsequent reforms affecting ITE have reflected this school-based policy.

The British Government’s commitment to much more school-based ITE, heralded by the Consultation Document, 40/92 (DES, 1991), is reflected, in particular, in the reforms stipulated in Circular 9/92 (DFE, 1992), which require PGCE secondary students (graduates studying for a Post-graduate Certificate in Education teaching qualification) to be trained in higher education/school partnerships and to spend a minimum of 66% of their courses (usually of one year’s duration) in schools.

The Government’s Proposals for the Reform of Initial Teacher Training, the so-called Blue Paper (DFE, 1993), which set out proposals for the future administration and funding of initial teacher education, went further down the path of removing teacher training from higher education. Focusing on choice and diversity, the Blue Paper proposed a reduction of the length of undergraduate initial teacher education courses from four to three years, with financial incentives being offered to encourage higher education institutions to offer three year degrees.

More significantly, in relation to the PGCE for secondary school teaching, the Government has initiated a scheme for the establishment of school-administered, rather than higher education-administered, programmes:

...the Government has proposed some specific new approaches: in particular, a scheme for encouraging consortia of schools to offer postgraduate courses. Groups of schools pioneering this approach will be recruiting students for September 1993 and January 1994. There is evident interest, particularly from secondary schools, in proposals to expand this scheme. (DFE, 1993, p. 4)

As a result of this initiative, in September 1993 a dual system of secondary PGCE initial teacher education (ITE) came into operation in England and Wales. Running alongside the reformed higher education-administered provision were 250 student places on school consortium-administered programmes. These 250 student places were distributed amongst five different consortia. Each consortium typically, though not always, comprised five secondary schools, one of which was nominated the lead school in the