

## GUEST AUTHOR

In every edition of *Research in Teacher Education* we publish a contribution from a guest writer who has links with the School of Education and Communities at the University of East London. Eline Vanassche is associate professor at KU Leuven Kulak (Belgium). She is a former Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the University of East London (United Kingdom) and assistant

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Theoretically and methodologically, she considers educational practices as discursive practices, mediated through language. She employs qualitative research methods and interdisciplinary theories from both psychology and social sciences (a.o. frame analysis,

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# The (not so) curious case of English teacher education

## An outsider looking in

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INTRODUCTION

On 27 January 2017, I received a decisive e-mail from the European Commission. Half a year prior to that e-mail, I had applied for a Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA) fellowship under Horizon Europe, with the support of Jean Murray at the University of East London (UEL). Given the single-digit success rates for MSCA fellowships, I did not expect much, apart from the comfort of knowing that I had actively explored all opportunities to stay in academia after completing my dissertation and spending a few years in short-term and insecure postdoctoral positions. The e-mail from the European Commission, though arriving unexpectedly,

delivered everything you might typically expect from an e-mail from a pan-European policy institution: no words were wasted, no flowers were thrown and no reference was made to the excitement and challenges of relocating abroad. It was a simple, straightforward communication that my proposal 'had reached the stage of Grant Agreement preparation'. That distant e-mail marked the beginning of an immensely valuable journey, enriching me professionally, intellectually and personally.

My postdoctoral study revolved around teacher educators' professionalism. It adopted a view of enacted professionalism, considering professionalism not as a decontextualised list of competencies and behaviours, but as 'that which

manifests itself and constantly develops in and through practice' (Vanassche & Berry, 2020, p. 2; Vanassche, 2022). As a result of this conceptual stance, I spent most of the fellowship in schools, shadowing teacher educators on the job, as they visited their students on placement and held post-lesson observation debriefs together with school-based mentors. The research took me from Ipswich to Stratford, from large academy trusts to locally maintained schools, from prestigious Victorian schools in affluent neighbourhoods to schools where most students qualify for free meals, from bat-and-rounders to mathematics lessons, and from early childhood to upper secondary education. I never unpacked the meaning of these experiences, apart from the – in many ways, fragmented

– understandings published in separate articles addressing the specific objectives of the research project. This is a disheartening observation for someone whose academic tagline has always been that practices and meaning only exist in context. I never had a writing space to accommodate such thinking, until I was invited to contribute an article for *Research in Teacher Education* as a guest writer. I finally took the plunge. What follows is a first, incomplete attempt to unpack what I understand teacher education in England is (not) about.

In this article, I adopt what could be described as a sociocultural anthropologist's gaze (Geertz, 1973; Bernard & Gravlee, 2014). I intend to study the reality of English teacher education in its extraordinary history, diversity and complexities. I am particularly concerned to understand the ways in which English teacher educators interact, practise and make sense of their professional lives within their specific contexts. My methodology can be explained as ethnological fieldwork. Part of this fieldwork was intentionally planned for in the MSCA fellowship, but a lot of it happened in the wings of the formal study through spending time with teachers over lunch in the staffroom, being invited to teacher education team meetings or talking to teacher educators on the Underground while travelling to schools. I do not claim to know all there is to know about English teacher education as that would be a savage claim to make as a Belgian who barely spent two years in England. Still, I am convinced that my 'em-etic' perspective can help to explain something of the universal and the specific of English teacher education.

The 'findings' shared in this brief piece are disparate, offering insights into teacher education in England and beyond. They not only reflect what (I think) is, but also consider what can and should be. While these findings address a variety of topics, my intention is for them to collectively provide some insights on the (not so)

curious case of English teacher education.

## THE (NOT SO) CURIOUS CASE OF ENGLISH TEACHER EDUCATION

### HOW DO YOU FEEL THAT LESSON WENT?

Almost every debrief I observed started from some form of the following question: 'How do you feel that lesson went?'. This practice is not unique to the English context. I encountered the same question during fieldwork in Flanders, the Netherlands and Norway, despite the significant differences in institutional settings, programmes and cultural contexts. The question carries substantial expectations. It serves as a conversational and non-threatening way to initiate the discussion, empowering student teachers to express their initial thoughts, and signalling a commitment to growth and learning rather than criticism. However, if we are honest, we know that this question often falls short. It is a generic question that typically garners generic responses from student teachers (Vanassche, 2023a). They confess a few limitations and offer some reflections on what they might have done differently as they 'wait for the teacher educator to initiate the feedback', as one student mentioned during an interview. In many ways, the question 'How do you feel that lesson went?' represents a form of no-man's talk because no one really owns the question or fully engages with it in the debrief. While it seems to position the student teacher as an active participant in the debrief, our individual and collective memories of past debrief practice quickly remind us that this question merely serves as a temporary placeholder until the teacher educator and mentor provide their feedback (Copland, 2011; Vanassche *et al.*, 2018; Donaghue, 2020).

This observation made me realise that talk plays a far more crucial role in the process of learning to teach than we think it does. I pursued this further in a recent analysis of the patterns of discursive interaction

enacted in debriefs (see Vanassche, 2023a). The notion 'patterns of discursive interaction' refers to recurring ways of doing talk in debriefs. In-depth analysis of a large sample of lesson debriefs revealed five debrief discourse patterns: (1) directive discourse offers student teachers clear and actionable directives for future performance; (2) normalising discourse provides reassurance by defining an expressed problem as normal or endemic to the work of teaching; (3) analytic discourse inquires what happened in the classroom, why and with what consequences; (4) justificatory discourse is concerned with the reasons and rationales underpinning actions; and (5) evaluative discourse evaluates student teachers' actions and the reasons for those actions (given through justificatory discourse) (Vanassche, 2023a, pp. 8–9). While these discourse patterns are based on data from the MSCA fellowship in the English setting, the feedback I received on recent conference presentations in the United States and Italy (that is, 'this is me!') demonstrates their broader resonance. This shows the need to be more aware of our talk, and how we engage and interact with each other in the triad. Talk is not just talk. What is said and remains unsaid shapes relationships and influences learning as it mediates the cultural, cognitive and social spaces between the mentor, teacher educator and student teacher (Vanassche, 2023a; Becher & Orland-Barak, 2018).

As a side note, there is a place for 'telling it like it is' in debriefs. During my time in English schools, I observed a lot of mitigation talk, hedging and ambivalent utterances, such as 'I noticed you tried to incorporate some of the feedback,' which could convey praise but also criticism, or a blend of both. Criticism often came clothed in metaphorical white gloves, used to handle delicate, sensitive subjects without leaving a trace. The reasons behind such practices are not entirely clear to me. Perhaps it shows teacher educators and mentors being troubled by the contradictions in their role (that is,

providing moral support and challenging students, supporting and assessing them). It could also be influenced by an awareness of my presence as a researcher, or what Kate Fox (2004) humorously describes as the English reserve or social dis-ease. Most likely, it is a combination of all these factors. However, there are risks involved with ‘telling it like it isn’t’ in debriefs (Wajnryb, 1998). It potentially fuels misconceptions and increases the likelihood of trainees downplaying feedback or failing to understand what we truly mean. Asking critical questions and providing constructive criticism may, in fact, be a more genuine expression of care for student teachers than sugar-coating our messages.

### **NINE MONTHS IS AN EXCEEDINGLY BRIEF PERIOD TO EDUCATE TEACHERS**

English teacher education left me with the impression of a perpetual rush. Teacher educators were racing to get the mandatory placement visits in for students, they were rushing to cover the content they had planned during return days at university, *etc.* In short, they were struggling to deliver what they felt were necessary components of initial training on a 60-credit course. A common route to becoming a teacher in England is a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which combines academic study of pedagogical theory with subject specialisation and hands-on experience in schools through extended placements. It recommends students for Qualified Teacher Status, which means they should be able to meet the same set of teacher standards that their more experienced colleagues are held accountable to. Nine months can produce utterly beautiful things in life, yet it is an exceedingly brief period to deliver good teachers.

Let me clarify how I define good teachers, as this serves as the frame of reference here. Good teachers can accommodate a diverse set of learners (in terms of interests, sociocultural backgrounds, language abilities, *etc.*) in a setting

mostly geared towards collective needs and goals. They maintain open and transparent communication with parents and are prepared to navigate the fragile speech event of delivering difficult news. Furthermore, teachers are critically aware of the meso- and macro-level contexts in which their teaching occurs. The latter aspect is often compromised in tight teacher education programmes. Priority is given to making sure that graduates stay afloat in their classrooms, neglecting the important role teachers play as colleagues, as curriculum developers, as teacher leaders and as advocates of equity and diversity in the microcosms of schools and local communities. School-led training routes such as School Direct only add to the challenge as they further limit exposure to a diverse range of teaching methods and theory to complement practical experience. These student teachers are, typically, well versed in the methods and practices employed in their training school. However, they often struggle when placed in a different school setting as they have not learned about the basic condition of being a teacher: each educational setting is unique. This means that teachers cannot but make countless informed decisions about how to proceed, with no reassurance that what worked well in one context will yield similar results in another (Kelchtermans, 2009).

Defining what constitutes a ‘good teacher’ is a highly tenuous issue, and your perspective might not align with my contribution from my experience in the field. Yet, if we agree that a well-informed decision-maker is preferable to someone who simply acts as taught, then we are not realising the full potential of teacher education in England. Developing what Biesta (2015) calls ‘virtuosity’ in making judgements about what methods to employ, and for what purposes, requires time. It develops, through careful study of examples of highly adept – and less adept – teachers, ‘trying to see how it functions, how it is embodied, where it is done explicitly, where it is held back precisely for educational reasons, and

so on’ (*ibid.*, p. 21). Such a difficult study should proceed from a position of being a ‘student of teaching’ rather than a ‘fellow colleague’. Student teachers are entitled to the opportunity to fail, and deserve to be able to take a second, third and even fourth look, as their initial perception of something may change when they revisit it. There is little opportunity for such in-depth study if students are formally hired and trained on the job.

My argument that English teacher education is not reaching its potential is not intended as a veiled critique of what teacher educators, including those working in schools, do and often do well. I was deeply humbled by their work with students, in what I believe to be adverse conditions. Strong cases are made against teacher education in England, which find backing in policy discourses around teaching as a craft or a vocation best learned in practice (Gove, 2010). My intention is rather to make a case for teacher education – a case for more teacher education, more resources and deeper and more comprehensive programmes. It is, following Greenberg (1983), ‘a case buttressed by the increasing complexity and difficulty of the teacher’s charge, the growing knowledge base, and the apparent trend toward erosion of the professional teacher’s role in favor of something approaching the role of industrial worker’ (p. 4). While Greenberg wrote these words four decades ago, in a different time and space, they prophesied many of the challenges that the current landscape of teacher education in England faces. If teacher education is done with too much haste, it will be done through unexamined experience, ‘hear–say’ or ‘see–do’, or left to chance.

### **DEAR POLICY-MAKERS, PLEASE RELAX!**

Teacher education policy in England has been described as hyperactive, ‘reflecting a belief that the creation of policy in and of itself suggests order, authority and expertise’ (Clarke & Phelan, 2015, p. 258). Before my time in England, I had used

Clarke and Phelan's work to characterise the evolving policy landscape in Flanders during the early 2010s. I observed how government intervention was increasingly shaped by global influencers such as the OECD's large-scale student assessments. Furthermore, I noticed the construction of an increasing urgency to reform, driven by the purportedly new and unprecedented challenges associated with the globalised world (for example, migration, digitalisation and economic inequality). However, I must admit that I was entirely mistaken in describing Flanders as a hyperactive policy environment. In comparison to policy-makers in England, Flemish policy-makers are considerably more relaxed – some might even argue complacent – with major reforms happening every decade rather than every two years.

From an outsider's perspective, it appears that there is a significant degree of trust, perhaps even faith, placed in teacher education in England. The education of students and the future generation of teachers is perceived as the solution to a myriad of societal challenges, ranging from boosting the nation's productivity and preparing a globally competitive workforce, to addressing race inequality, promoting healthier lifestyles, and instilling core values and cultural norms in students. Paradoxically, teacher education and education in general are also heavily mistrusted and framed as part of the problem. The overall sentiment is that education is failing students and society. That should perhaps not come as a surprise. If education is pushed 'to expand its scope well beyond both what it should do and what it can do' (Labaree, 2008, p. 448), failure becomes almost inevitable. However, that is not my main point here. What I want to emphasise is that the combined discourses of trust and mistrust trigger intense policy activity and an increased focus on regulation. In such circumstances, reform and control become twin necessities. Numerous accountability measures are introduced in schools and teacher education

institutions, including Ofsted inspections, testing, standards, and new metrics like the 'Teaching Excellence Framework'. Such measures estrange teachers and teacher educators from what lies at the heart of teaching, that is, the uncertainty and virtuous judgement described above. Furthermore, policy that is constantly adjusted and easily disposed of loses credibility and reliability in their eyes (Murray & Mutton, 2016).

Surely, the growing politicisation of teacher education is an international trend, evident in many global contexts, including Europe, North America and Australia (for an in-depth analysis, see Vanassche, 2023b). Nevertheless, I would contend that this trend is notably more pronounced in the English context. I have only hypotheses as to why this might be the case, not substantiated by rigorous research. However, they may still offer food for thought and help to calm things down. One hypothesis I have is that the English education system may be more strongly oriented to the outside world and the international playing field of education policy compared to other systems. Morris (2012), for example, contributed an analysis of the 2010 White Paper on Education in England, examining 'the sources and nature of the evidence for reform' (p. 89). He identified a strong comparative turn in which changes are proposed and justified because they are a feature of successful education systems elsewhere. The prevailing logic seems to be that 'if it works there, why wouldn't it work here?'

Another unsubstantiated hypothesis is that English policy-makers may be overly ambitious and potentially overconfident in their capacity to shape practice. During my fieldwork for the MSCA, for example, new programme guidance was introduced, emphasising that mentors should lead the debrief, while teacher educators' role shifts towards quality-assuring the teaching experience and mentors' support through the placement. This guidance represents a specific

interpretation of a series of system-level reforms that have made schools far more influential stakeholders in initial teacher education (Vanassche *et al.*, 2019). Despite the clear programme guidance, I have observed wildly different debrief practices. Some teacher educators barely spoke a word, while others engaged wholeheartedly in the debrief with the mentor, even though they were operating under the same curricular framework. This shows that the relationship between policy and practice, both in the meso- and the macro-level context, is much more complex than anticipated. Policy, instead of being viewed as 'a structuring given' (Decuyper & Simons, 2016, p. 373), is better understood as relationally negotiated. The policy and the curriculum exist within a specific arrangement of internal and external documents, websites, protocols, instruments and other actors that relationally shape what can and cannot be done. In this sense, the relationship between a teacher educator and policy is not necessarily one of instruction but can also involve opposition, neglect or modification (Decuyper & Simons, 2016). Again, this realisation might help policy-makers to relax, take a deep breath, and allow teacher educators and teachers on the front lines to do the same.

### **THE RESISTANCE OF TEACHER EDUCATORS NEEDS TO BE CHERISHED RATHER THAN STIFLED**

The final observation I want to share directly relates to the previous point regarding the loose coupling between teacher education policy and practice. In simple terms, teacher educators often deviate from what they are instructed or expected to do. During my fieldwork, I observed distinct responses to the new curricular guidance described above. A small group of teacher educators openly voiced their objections during team meetings, while most shared their concerns exclusively with like-minded colleagues or within the secure environment of the interviews that were part of my study. Many resorted



to highly creative forms of ‘window dressing’, publicly professing adherence to the guidance while, in practice, doing something very different with mentors and students. The key question that emerges is how we interpret and understand this resistance. From the perspective of line managers and policy-makers operating at the macro-level, this resistance represents a problem that needs to be addressed, whether it is seen as a system error or a personal deficit. From the perspective of the outsider looking in, resistance may well be seen as a form of ‘good sense’ in a policy environment that increasingly regulates and standardises work (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006).

The resistance of the teacher educators I worked with stems from a high level of commitment. They were all deeply committed to the subjects they teach, their student teachers, and particular conceptions of teaching and professionalism in which they aim to educate teachers who set high expectations for themselves and their students, foster inclusive learning environments, have discretion to select methods and learning materials tailored to the needs of their students, and engage in critical dialogue about their practice with colleagues. This commitment was a major source of motivation as they willingly sacrificed personal and family time in favour of their students. They assumed personal responsibility when a student fell short of the demands during placement, and they felt that their professionalism was at stake when their marking decisions were subjected to review or overruled to safeguard future enrolments. Their commitment transcended the boundaries of their university classrooms as they were acutely aware of the generations of children that will be impacted by their graduates and the messages about the world that they will convey through their teaching. These strong professional beliefs led to active resistance when a demand did not match with the realities of their practices, or if they anticipated

negative consequences for their students due to reform agendas.

However, in the interviews, I noticed echoes of previous work on the double-edged sword of commitment (see Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016). While strong moral commitment and purposes help to productively cope with a challenging environment and are motivating factors for some teacher educators to remain in the profession, for others they were the very reason they chose to exit. For example, one participant decided to resign from the programme during the study. Upon listening again to his interview recordings, I was struck by the emotional toll of resisting the prevailing norms and practices evident in his story. He shared his various – failed – attempts to forsake his beliefs and try to learn to work within the system. In the end, his decision to leave was the only way to preserve his beliefs and identity as a teacher educator.

This prompts us to think seriously about the kind of environment we desire for teacher educators, how we define their professionalism and how we treat teacher educators with ‘deviant’ views. In essence, what constitutes high-quality teacher education and how we should we define it? Some would argue that better teacher education requires holding teacher educators accountable to specific outcomes, standardising practices and tightening control. Others, including myself, contend that it is rather about establishing conditions in which teacher educators can enact their professional autonomy and beliefs, engage in critical thinking, and debate and question their practice among colleagues. Is professionalism something that can be mapped and checked (eg through engagement with standards)? Is it something that can or should be externally imposed on teacher educators, or should we rather trust that they have sound reasons for their actions and these reasons are what require support through policy? Are we prepared to acknowledge

that good teacher education does not solely depend on individual competence that can be controlled and maintained, but rather, it is a dynamic and unpredictable convergence of individuals within a specific time and space? These are pivotal questions to address in relation to both teacher educator and teacher professionalism. Resistance rooted in strong professional beliefs should perhaps be nurtured, rather than stifled, in teacher education, carefully balancing the personal costs of such resistance with the collective cost of a standardised environment that quells professional autonomy and the commitment to enhancing practice.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In many respects, the landscapes of initial teacher education in England and Flanders could not be more dissimilar. In England, teacher education exists in highly regulated and fragmented forms due to a series of reforms that have ‘opened up the “market” of ITE [initial teacher education] to new “providers”’ (Vanassche *et al.*, 2019: 480) beyond higher education. Conversely, Flemish teacher education policy seems to be a delicate exercise in balance. It balances autonomy with accountability, and emphasises the necessary contributions of higher education in initial teacher education while also providing opportunities for teachers with minimal or no professional training, in the face of teacher shortages. Despite the differences between the two systems, I learned about an overwhelming degree of commonality, and this commonality is perhaps what makes the difference for students, both student teachers and the students they will teach in their future classrooms. If you were to abstract from language, it would be challenging to distinguish between a lesson debrief in England and Flanders, for example. In both contexts, I have seen individuals deeply committed to their work, consistently achieving high standards for themselves

and the students they engage with. In both contexts, I have also seen people resist reform agendas, often at significant personal cost but with a collective gain in mind. In many ways, the experience of contributing this short piece provided an antithesis to my own work. Context does indeed matter, but it matters perhaps less, or at least differently, than I – and, by extension, the research community – had previously thought. Hence, my final piece of advice to my teacher-educator colleagues in England: 'Be yourself no matter what they say Oh, I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien' Sting, 'Englishman in New York' ■

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