

# Rigour in teacher education revisited:

a Freirean mark of creative freedom

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University teachers teaching on courses leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England encounter an ideological clash between compliance-driven practice-based models of ‘teacher training’, favoured by the Department for Education (DfE), and critical approaches to curriculum, assessment, teacher identity and pedagogy essential to educating teachers who can challenge, develop and contribute to the educational system they are teaching in. This paper explores the ideological clash around a single issue – educational rigour – using Paulo Freire’s concepts of freedom, dialogue and identity in teaching and learning to re-evaluate the idea of rigour in initial teacher education (ITE) in England. In the face of curriculum frameworks and market-led reviews of ITE, this paper offers ways of reformulating teacher education around outcomes that will deepen student teacher identity and freedom and their ability to critique effectively the system of which they will soon be a part.

## INTRODUCTION

In my work as teacher educator, the cultural process that Freire (1970) termed ‘conditioning by the dominant ideology’ is alive and well. This conditioning, deriving from government expectations and university departmental responses to those expectations, is a constant factor in teaching, frustrating and spurring us to think better about the purpose of teacher education. It creates unfortunate consequences for teacher educators, whether acknowledged or not. Whilst we can ‘discover how we are conditioned by the dominant

ideology’ even though it lives within us and controls the society beyond us, it is clear that ‘transformation is possible because consciousness is not [simply] a mirror of reality, but is reflexive and reflective of reality’ (Freire & Shor, 1987: 13). Freeing teacher educators from that conditioning is part of the task of this article.

One consequence of attaining freedom from conditioning is the ability to function fluently in two different modes as teacher educators: a ‘neoliberal’ mode, in which we manage the expectations of the Department for Education (England)

## KEYWORDS

EDUCATIONAL RIGOUR

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(DfE) though its Initial Teacher Training Core Curriculum Framework, the Initial Teacher Education Framework for Inspection and associated documents (DfE, 2019, 2021; Ofsted, 2020); and what we might term a ‘liberatory’ mode (Freire & Shor, 1987: 79; Freire, 1998: 32) rooted in a progressive philosophy of the teacher educator’s task utilising a critical pedagogy and seeking to develop the ability to think about the work of the teacher as a moral, social and ethical pursuit. Undergraduate and postgraduate degrees leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) face this bimodality particularly strongly. We want students

to become effective teachers – critical thinkers with a pedagogical approach that leads to self-reflection, imagination and ‘the unconditional freedom to question... the purpose of public schooling and higher education’ (Giroux, 2010: 717). In contrast, the national legislation governing QTS is rooted in an instrumental, ‘pupil-progress-driven’ view of the teacher’s task (Coe *et al.*, 2018) which student teachers will frequently encounter in schools. A freedom from conditioning will help us – and them – use both ‘languages’ with a growing degree of fluency.

The DfE’s ‘teacher ideology’ has become more determined since 2016, through compliance expectations in standardised curricular frameworks used for the preparation of teachers in England (DfE, 2016, 2019, 2020), the mooting of an Institute of Teaching as a government-sponsored centre for the ‘training’ of teachers, and the publication of the ITT Market Review from the Department for Education (DfE, 2021). All see teachers as a compliant workforce committed to ‘delivery’ of a state-sponsored curriculum, supported by a selective evidence base (DfE, 2020). Reasoned argument offered by, amongst others, the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT, 2021) and the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET, 2021) to the ITT Market Review consultation was simply disregarded. This led to both intellectual struggle and begrudging compliance in the sector, as teacher educators attempted to make their voice heard in the face of the requirement to seek reaccreditation of their institutions as providers of initial teacher education (ITE) in response to the ITT Market Review (DfE, 2021).

This paper explores this ongoing struggle in an area in which both the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the DfE and its predecessors maintain opposing understandings of educational rigour.

Key Freirean texts here are *Pedagogy for liberation*, where Freire and Ira Shor (1987: 75ff.) discuss how structure and

rigour find a home within ‘liberating education’, and *Pedagogy of freedom* (Freire, 1998: 33ff.). A fuller discussion of Freire’s writing on structure and rigour in education is found in Roberts (1996).

In opposition to Freirean understandings of a liberating education are political and conceptual forces busy ‘legislating the individual teacher out of knowledge-making’ (Freire & Shor, 1987: 75). These forces in England were represented by an instrumental conception of ‘education as delivery’ under the Thatcher and Blair/Brown governments (Barber, 2008; Coudry, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Ball, 2017) and by more traditional and ‘academic’ views of education since 2010. Both teacher educators and those leading schools lead, work and teach within this instrumental, ‘neoliberal’ discourse (Clarke & Moore, 2013; Helgetun & Menter, 2020).

Whilst the term ‘neoliberal’ is debated, partly because it was a ‘movement’ that refused to define itself, seeing itself as a historical direction to which ‘there is no alternative’ (Mirowski, 2009), and partly because of inherent contradictions between the market-led and policy-forming aspects of neoliberal thinking (Dean, 2014: 151), I use it here to define the individualist, anti-welfare-state, marketised, anti-social aspects of this ‘thought collective’ (Mirowski, 2009: 428–9) that have survived in both language and practice within education. As Giroux (2010) asserts, this has led to less interest in the ‘pedagogical foundations of higher education as a deeply civic, political and moral practice’ (p. 715) and led to higher education seen more as a private rather than a public good.

The precise overlap between state- and market-led discourses within neoliberalism is less important than the way that together they sit in opposition to student teachers’ perspectives on what drew them into the profession in the first place (Murray & Male, 2005). Whether as school leader or teacher educator, I

have never heard a teacher articulate their motivation for entering teaching as fulfilment of the requirements of the DfE’s Teacher Standards (DfE, 2011). They source their motivation in love for children, desire to see them grow and learn, acquiring the abilities to lead and help them be ‘better versions of themselves’ or repaying and strengthening their own communities.

However, this ‘legislating the individual teacher out of knowledge-making’ functions in a number of ways in ITE in England, starting with seeing teaching students as trainees. This is reflected in the acronym ITT (initial teacher training) found in DfE teacher education documentation (DfE, 2016, 2019), in the inspection system (see text of Ofsted, 2020) and, surprisingly, within university ITE curricula and the language of teacher educators. Certainly, there are elements of training (intentional, repeated practice towards mastery) fundamental to becoming a teacher, as there are for any artist, athlete or programmer. Within the acquisition of skills and dispositions, intentional training is essential, but it fails to describe the whole, omitting domains of critical thought, political identity, human compassion, care/affection and imagination essential to a teacher’s identity, cultural purpose and work.

Secondly, as teacher educators, we make – then strengthen – the assumption, that teachers have no real control over what they teach. They stand outside, not within, the curriculum, and are expected not to explore, make or invent new knowledge with their children, but to deliver lessons, packages of information into children, ensuring understanding through a range of ‘evidence-based’ strategies.

Thirdly, this ‘legislating-out’ of the teacher from the curriculum is strengthened in the academy by a curriculum narrowed towards that demanded by legislation. Our own institution’s curriculum talks about forming a teacher identity, but we find ourselves unwilling to be

compromised in any inspection outcome: we thus adopt a government view of success (and of teacher identity), rather than offer education that we know to be transformative of teachers, the children and classrooms they will go on to teach, and the communities they will influence.

And so, to rigour...

## RIGOUR AS FREEDOM?

Rigour is a word beloved of inspectors, politicians and high-expectation parents, betokening a 'seriousness' about high standards, depth of education, and being 'fundamental to effective academic preparation' (Jorgenson & Abram, 2021: 1). It invokes academically challenging, content-focused education that places the learner 'outside' the curriculum, taught by 'experts'. In 2010, David Cameron vowed he would bring more 'rigour in education' if elected (Woodcock, 2010). Three years later, a former secretary of state for education criticised her successor's view of a lack of educational rigour by asserting it was there already (Morris, 2013). Rigour thus became a political touchstone, standing for rising academic standards, teaching pace and progress, and lessons characterised by 'effectiveness' and 'productivity'. It was linked later to data-led expectations (Ball, 2012/21), and then to the kind of curriculum that schools are asked to offer to their children (Allen *et al.*, 2021). 'Rigour' in the classroom stood for predictable productive progression, emphasising what Freire & Shor (1987: 77) call its 'authoritarian dimensions'. This view of rigour has to do with clear learning objectives, effective use of time and boundaries of compliance that apply to pupil conduct, curricular shape and pedagogical/didactical method, and can be seen underlying the Teacher Toolkits (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021), 'Visible Learning' (Hattie, 2008), the 'what works movement' (Biesta, 2007; Torrance, 2019) and the 'rigorous' reliance on Randomised Controlled Trials in education (Cartwright, 2019). It tends to a positivist view of reality, where 'interpretation' or 'dialogic' discussion is

distrusted: what counts is 'instruction', an 'elite transfer-pedagogy' that supports the status quo and its power structure (Freire & Shor, 1987: 76). Once we relativise education, once hermeneutic comes into play, once knowledge becomes interpretable or contestable, and authority rendered questionable – then you lose rigour, these forces would maintain. Further, this concept of rigour in education pertains to individual learners. Relationality and dialogue within education are denied (Pendenza & Lamattina, 2019: 104). Instead, 'far from being described as relational... individuals are considered as independent beings, capable of providing for themselves without the help of others' so that both the social system and its ethical underpinnings begin to crumble, so that 'being responsible is no longer a duty, and in some cases, is no longer even possible' (p. 105).

For Freire, rigour is an adjunct of freedom, especially the freedom for teachers to 'be responsible for their own formation' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 76), and is fundamental to teaching that is both dialogic and social. 'The very fact of being rigorous... is not just an individual attitude. It is a social activity. I am knowing something in reality, in communication with others' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 82). This collaborative freedom, because it contrasts so starkly with the top-down, individualised compliance structure that Western governments have ordained education to be, initially feels chaotic. Teachers schooled within the neoliberal educational discourse cannot conceive of a rigour situated within freedom. Freire argues that this rigour starts, like all true freedom starts, with taking responsibility for the kind of teacher you want to be.

To Freire & Shor (1987: 78) 'the extent [that] what has been said to be rigorous means precisely the distance from being responsible' indicates that rigour veers towards rigidity. 'Rigour lives with... needs, freedom. I cannot understand how it is possible to be rigorous without

being creative.' The artist is rigorous, with herself, her time, her materials and her development, because this rigour, practised in the world of freedom created by the artist, is necessary for the beauty or perfection of what she eventually creates. Thus we might present rigour's true fruit in education to be creative, collaborative teaching, with a rigorous shared responsibility to (and by) self and students. Freirean rigour in the higher education classroom has very different characteristics to those implied by the compliance-led model, because teleologically it points students in the opposite direction. Teaching, he asserts, 'cannot be reduced to the superficial... but extends to the production of the conditions in which critical learning is possible' (Freire, 1998: 33). Freire sees education as 'part of a project of freedom, and eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and particular notions of critical agency' (Giroux, 2010: 716).

## WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A FREIREAN RIGOUR?

Discussing Freire's approach to rigour in education, Roberts (1996) insists that we follow him away from the false dichotomy of 'authoritarian' or 'progressive' education to a threefold view of education as authoritarian, laissez-faire or liberating. A laissez-faire pedagogy, with the teacher as 'facilitator', is a 'distortion of reality... in which the teacher-turned-facilitator maintains the power institutionally created in the position' (Freire & Macedo, 1995: 378), requiring no rigour at all. For Freire, the teacher must always have 'a plan, a program, a goal for the study' demanded by 'education's directive nature' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 172) and offer a liberating education that is 'structured, purposeful and rigorous' (Roberts, 1996: 299).

A liberating teacher must accept that political neutrality is impossible; she must be open about her political beliefs

and the transformative urges that drive her, and how they influence her content and pedagogy. She will have dreams of the society she is teaching for but be willing to engage in debate with differing views, not as imposition but as dialogue. 'My role is not to be silent. I have to convince students of my dreams but not conquer them for my own plans' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 157). As teachers we become authoritative whilst shunning authoritarianism. A teacher's 'authority is necessary for freedom to develop' (Roberts, 1996: 300) within the liberating classroom. This contrasts with neoliberal concepts of a teacher standing outside the political sphere. Since 'there is no alternative,' what role can the teacher have in transforming society? The locus of societal transformation is sited beyond the classroom. Freire, however, sees teachers as primary agents of transformation. If you are 'apolitical', your default is supportive of compliance. 'We have', asserts Freire, 'been allowed to know only one definition of rigour, the authoritarian, traditional one... [which has] discouraged us from the responsibility of recreating ourselves in society' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 77).

This rigour extends, therefore, to a dialogic pedagogy. We are not 'training teachers', but educating students into the freedom to take responsibility for their identity and social impact in their educational contexts. This can only be done through dialogue, allowing students full freedom to find expression in our classrooms, seeking to liberate and humanise those who have been taught to see themselves as less than human. All of this must be done with a high degree of attention to detail in both the pedagogical/dialogical process and the taught content. The dialogue that drives such a political transformation does not exist in vacuo, but 'within a kind of program and context... creat[ing] tension in achieving goals that we set for dialogic education. To achieve the goals of transformation, dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 102) – in

short, rigour.

True rigour, Freire maintains, can only find a home within a dialogic 'problem-posing education'. It was his contention that 'banking education' (schooling traditionally taught in an authoritarian way) impedes true rigour because a disciplinarian approach to education systematically deprived students of room to think and critique (Freire, 1998: 32).

### HOW DO WE DEMONSTRATE FREIREAN RIGOUR IN OUR TEACHING?

A common answer to this question in the English ITE sector is to return to the DfE canon – the Teacher Standards (DfE, 2011), the ITT Core Curriculum Framework (DfE, 2019) and their bastard child, the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2020) – rather than towards a freer and responsibility-imparting understanding of rigour, creativity and teacher identity. We rightly refuse the idea of a DfE-defined 'identikit teacher' emerging from our work, but then paradoxically use the tools provided by the DfE with which to outline the contours of a teacher identity!

Freire, instead, settles firstly on a form of hermeneutic rigour. Rejecting positivist stances, he argues that a creative rigour must result in change: 'if you don't change as you know the object of study, you are not rigorous.' In doing so, we become more and different because we learn. 'I have another way of being rigorous, precisely the one in which you do more than observe: you try to interpret reality' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 82). This dialectical relationship with that studied must result in some interpretation of reality. Going beyond description or observation to an interpretation takes us to a 'stage in which I begin to know the *raison d'être* which explains the object, the more I am rigorous' (p. 82). This interpretive stance has to an extent informed our work as teacher educators: there is much talk about shifting teacher identity as we progress teaching students through cycles

of pedagogic understanding, research-focused assignments, operant legislative constraints on publicly funded teacher education, and our own ITE curriculum. The disjunction between the philosophy of dialogical teacher formation through engagement with and interpretation of the teaching task (on the one hand) and (on the other) externally imposed teacher standards may be too wide to create anything other than confusion for student teachers. Are we progressive or are we not? Are we 'de-conditioned' enough to be fluent in both 'progressive' and 'neoliberal'? Certainly, motivating for a progressive voice among school-based mentors is becoming virtually impossible because they are either conditioned (at best) or coerced (at worst) into the dominant ideology by school leaders, senior colleagues or cultural inertia.

Beyond the interpretive task of teachers, rigour is found in the type of reading necessary to foster critical teachers. Freire sees rigour within the type of reading he insisted on with his students, so that they actually learnt how to read: 'it has to develop the habit of intellectual seriousness in a cultural field that discourages students from being critical... we have to develop critical rigour in a pedagogy that asks students to assume [responsibility for] their own direction' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 85). The key for Freire in using reading rigorously is, rather than the rigour of memory and submitting to a large number of texts in a compliant way, to adopt the rigour of hermeneutic, rewriting what they read in order that 'students fight with the text, even while loving it' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 11). Reading must change students if the text has been read well. The ability to critique text (and thus society) is something that must be taught rigorously to teachers.

Beyond rigour as depth and change in those seeking to be rigorous, Freire asks what the 'end products' are of this creative rigour. What would convince teachers, enough to abandon the dominant ideology's false understanding of rigour?

Freire is clear that it is unquantifiable, but its impact is seen, firstly, in the acquisition of a critical understanding of motive and purpose: true rigour is shown in the overcoming of 'opinionating, by grasping the *raison d'être* of the facts' (p. 87). A critical interpretation of the reality behind the surface would thus be necessary to judge the presence of rigour. This is where close, critical, contextualised reading comes into its own.

Secondly, there would be an 'inventing of knowledge, in the class, with the students, the habit of study... itself being developed while studying' so that 'critical relationships of the seminar to society' would be established (p. 88). Evidence here would be clarity among students and teachers that the learning acquired, the 'new invention', had application to their society or community.

## FINAL THOUGHTS AND A WAY FORWARD

Critical pedagogy remains a big challenge to teacher educators in England. Those coming from a school background need our heads turning from a neoliberal understanding of rigour to be able to see more clearly, so we can enact 'critical relationships of the seminar to society' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 88). Rigour suffers from shortage of time or resource, so our default is to seek safety in the established, compliant, legitimised and inspected. It takes time to envisage rigour as a collaborative, creative education-toward-freedom as important to our life as a local, socially aware and justice-seeking university, and to gain or practise the confidence needed to make the intended difference. In an ITE world where the relationships between partner schools and mentors assume critical importance to our practical pedagogical approaches (Ayres, 2014: 10, 13), it becomes harder to assert the need for critical pedagogies with those same partners, lest we be seen to be biting the hand that feeds us, or undermining a political inertia that schools have assumed in deference to the dominant ideology.

It thus remains for university-based ITE provision to teach student teachers 'in both languages' so that those entering the workforce for the first time will be skilfully able to engage with the language and outcomes-driven aspects of the neoliberal discourse, whilst practising a dialogic, collaborative rigorous critique about the deeper societal, justice-seeking and moral purposes of the teaching task.

Curricular implications, including those 'mentor curricula' in which we teach and deepen the ability of school-based mentors to work with student teachers, will be the most deeply affected. Somehow, in revising and reviewing our taught curricula and pedagogies, we must assign the 'neoliberal' approach to ITE to the status of 'second language' – only taught coherently once a practised fluency in a justice-seeking curriculum and its ability to influence and critique the basis of the teaching profession has been thoroughly mastered. The confident 'why' must always precede the competent 'what' and 'how'. ■

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