Developing research identities: effective mentoring for teacher educators

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Focus of enquiry and background
This paper focuses on the professional and academic development of teacher educators. It draws on findings from a small-scale, comparative study of teacher educators in two higher education institutions in the south of England. We set out to explore and analyse the professional and academic identities of teacher educators at varying stages of their careers in higher education and the ways in which these are enhanced or hindered by mentoring and other support mechanisms. With ongoing research assessment in higher education and the introduction of master’s level work in initial teacher education, the growing need for teacher educators to develop research identities is discussed in relation to mentoring and support in two universities (one new, the other well-established). Key factors affecting teacher educators’ experiences and identities will be identified, including personal biographies and concerns (Keltchtermans 2003).

A growing body of research on the development of teacher educators has highlighted the difficulties and tensions experienced by teacher educators who make the transition from school teaching into academic life, especially in the area of research (Murray 2008) and the need for effective induction procedures into higher education (Murray 2008, Harrison & McKeon 2008). Maguire (2000), in a study in the UK, stresses the difficulty of teacher educators performing some traditionally academic roles, such as research, because of their school background, with resulting differential status. International studies have identified the value of within-team support (Murray 2008), self-study groups (Kitchen et al 2008) and development portfolios (Koster et al 2008), but have not explored other forms of support such as mentoring.
Research methods
A case study approach was used to conduct this exploratory study (Cohen et al 2007), with the larger cases being the two universities and within these, case study teacher educators and research mentors. Three teacher educators and three mentors from each university were interviewed (9 women, 3 men) in order to identify effective mentoring practices and other forms of support, as well as any barriers or problems encountered in developing a research profile. The common factor was that they were all from a school teaching background before they came into higher education, most with extensive teaching and managerial experience in schools. The teacher educators had spent an average of five years in higher education, ranging from one to seven years, while the research mentors had been in higher education for an average of 15 years, ranging from eight to 23 years.

An innovative aspect of the methodological approach is that beginning researchers from the teacher education faculty in both universities undertook the interviewing and co-authored the article, thus enhancing their research skills. This approach is a variation on Stenhouse's (1975) model of the teacher researcher, with teachers (in this case teacher educators) working alongside researchers in order to enhance the understanding of both and enrich research project findings.

Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) was used to examine the teacher educators' own accounts of these processes, including relationships and types of support, major problems and conflicts and longer term personal, professional and academic development. The study findings are analysed within a situated learning framework (Lave & Wenger 1991), in recognition that most development and learning for teacher educators takes place within the dual workplace of higher education institutions and schools. It will be argued that Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation is particularly useful when considering the transition of teacher educators from a school-focused workplace to a higher education context. Eraut’s (2004) research on informal learning in the workplace will also be drawn on to identify key factors affecting successful transitions.

Divisions between teaching and research
In both universities, there was a perceived division between teacher education and research, which was felt by both teacher educators and mentors, but it was more marked in the older university. As one mentor there said, 'I'm sure that it's easy to feel outside the research world in teacher education.' There were many examples in the teacher educators' accounts of feeling cut off from research, as well as a perception that others lacked understanding of the teacher educators’ role. This was more evident in the older university where research had always been a priority and an expectation.

Whereas in the older university, research was perceived as the main priority, in the new university teaching was still seen as having a higher priority and value, and in both there was some separation between the activities. In the new university, the division was expressed in relation to bids for research funding. For example, one teacher educator said, 'There's a way of certain people getting them (bids) and others don't.' As in the older university, another new university mentor stressed that identities and expectations with regards to research came from the history of the institution: 'Our history is as a teacher training college and that's embedded. If they are thinking of being a university then research would be higher up on the agenda.'

A distinction was highlighted by some mentors at both universities between practitioner research and other forms of ‘hard’ research. For instance, one mentor (new university) said, 'I think reflective practitioner research is fine, but you can't live on that in a university, you've got to have a bit more than that.' Another mentor (old university) commented, 'There's a lack of valuing about people who just research their own practice.' It is interesting to contrast this ‘lack of valuing’ of practitioner researcher with Stenhouse’s (1975) view that this approach is a strong and important basis for research into education.

**Teacher educators’ strengths and skills**

A range of skills and strengths that teacher educators could bring to research were identified by both teacher educators and mentors, and were very similar across both universities. Up to date knowledge of children, schools and classrooms was the most frequently cited strength - 'first hand experience of working with children’ as one teacher educator put it - as well as subject knowledge expertise, as found in other studies (Dinkelman et al. 2006, Murray 2008). Expertise in teaching and subject pedagogy were
widely cited as one of the main reasons that teachers were appointed to teacher education posts in both universities.

However, the strengths that were cited in relation to teacher education were not always seen by mentors as potential research assets; indeed, they were sometimes seen as a disadvantage. For example, one mentor (new university) said, ‘The discourse is all about teaching,’ while another said, ‘They’re not used to justifying through academic theory.’ However, other mentors articulated very clearly what relevance this kind of expertise had for research. For instance, one (old university) said: ‘They bring very important knowledge about teachers and students which are critical to research in education, especially research on teaching and learning.’

A further key strength identified by mentors and teacher educators in both universities was teacher educators’ access to schools and ‘sensitivity to the context’, as one mentor put it, while lack of ready access was perceived as a possible problem to researchers. One teacher educator (old university) stressed that the ‘trust and confidence... make them (schools) very ready and willing to help me with the research.’

**Barriers to research**

The teacher educators from both universities talked with feeling about how hard it was for them initially moving into a university culture, as other researchers have found (e.g. Maguire 2000). Teacher educators who have taught in schools go through a dual transition (Dinkelman et al. 2006): firstly, from school to higher education, and secondly, within higher education, from teacher to researcher. This is a complex, challenging process, therefore it is hardly surprising that engaging with research can be problematic. Teacher educators, often with huge expertise and senior positions in schools, found themselves in a new environment which challenged their sense of identity and often left them feeling deskilled. As a teacher educator (old university) commented, ‘There’s sometimes an assumption that in practice teacher educators we are academics, and I didn’t see myself in this way at all when I came to work at the university.’ Many of those interviewed were still at this initial stage of peripheral participation in the university culture (Lave & Wenger 1991).
Unanimously the main barrier to research cited by both teacher educators and research mentors was time, or rather lack of time: ‘a massive issue,’ as one teacher educator put it. Teacher educators have highly intensive teaching timetables and there is very little time left over for research. This was particularly evident at the new university with its large number of teacher education programmes. One mentor said, ‘Tutors are ground down by this (teaching) and very quickly lose their ambitions,’ while a teacher educator said, ‘There’s just no time for the research and that’s very frustrating.’

In addition to the lack of time, the teacher educators saw teaching as the central and most important part of their work, therefore this tended to be put first, particularly the student teachers’ needs. As one teacher educator (old university) put it,

If you get involved with trainees, the main part of the job, things come up and that’s not accounted for in your workload calculations. And some of the problems that trainees have take a lot of time to unravel.

Commitment to the students and their needs came through strongly as a high priority (as in Harrison & McKeon 2008), which almost always took precedence over research time and created tensions and conflicts.

Another aspect of time was the lack of sustained time that would enable people to complete substantial pieces of research. One teacher educator (old university) described the problem clearly: ‘I try to keep days aside which are just for research but in practice that’s very difficult...I find it very frustrating.’ Several of the teacher educators at both universities blamed themselves for not being able to find the quality time for research. For example, one (old university) said, ‘I’ve always been bad at doing that,’ while another (new university) said, ‘I will block out time then it will get eaten away...In some ways it’s my own fault.’

The self-blame and need for an external ‘nudge’, as another teacher educator put it, indicated lack of self-confidence among the teacher educators, and lack of a research identity. As one mentor (old university) said, ‘Lack of confidence is a huge barrier and a huge challenge.’ This was confirmed by the teacher educators themselves; for example, one said, ‘I always felt that my research esteem was really low.’ Eraut (2004) stresses
that low self confidence can result from insufficient induction and support, coupled with excessive demands.

**Positive support for research**

Teacher educators mentioned a range of ways in which they either received or needed research support. For those undertaking master’s or doctoral studies, the formal research training that this provided was highly valued, particularly the role of the supervisor. For instance, a teacher educator undertaking a professional doctorate (new university) valued the ‘good written and face to face feedback’ she received from her tutor and the confidence that this engendered. Overall, the formal supervisory support was highly valued by beginning researchers, as it provided them with some research training and structured inputs.

Support from research mentors and co-ordinators outside the supervisor role was more highly valued by more experienced researchers among the teacher educators, who had begun to build confidence in their research and enjoyed discussing research plans and ‘being challenged,’ as one put it. One experienced research mentor (old university) included an update of research plans in meetings, together with focused advice on conference papers, draft journal articles or research bids, acting as a positive role model (as in Timmerman 2009).

Collaborative working on research was cited by teacher educators and research mentors alike as the most powerful research support (as in Stenhouse 1975). For example, a teacher educator (old university) described the process of working alongside an experienced researcher on some research which they co-presented at a conference:

> Working with L on the conference paper was brilliant...I suppose she was modelling and team working and that enabled me to do it myself. Someone who’s really inexperienced working with an experienced person, I probably learnt more than anything else.

The strength of descriptions such as these indicated the impact that these experiences had made: these were critical moments in teacher educators’ journeys towards
becoming researchers. Working alongside experienced colleagues is cited as a major way of professional learning in the workplace (Eraut 2004, Lave & Wenger 1991).

**Developing research identities**

Teacher educators’ accounts stressed that there were different needs depending on the stage they had reached. Few of the teacher educators we interviewed felt that they had become confident researchers, although most were aware that they were at a particular stage in the process. For example, a teacher educator (new university) felt that the move to a researcher identity was a major barrier:

> For me, it’s actually to see myself as a researcher, as an academic, cos I still see myself so much as a teacher. And if you get over that hurdle it might get easier to say, ’I can’t go to that meeting’ or ’I can’t see that student.’

For most teacher educators, getting a master’s degree or giving a conference paper were the first landmarks, with publication in a journal the next milestone.

Research mentors confirmed that becoming a researcher involved moving from a state of dependency on supervisors and mentors to greater autonomy. For instance, a mentor (new university) said, ‘They (beginning researchers) want someone to lead and take charge and give them advice and support.’ The research mentors stressed that particular characteristics were needed in order to become a researcher: motivation, passion, determination and even ‘being ruthless’ were all mentioned. They characterised becoming a researcher as hard, challenging work; as one mentor (new university) put it, ‘Research is the bit that pulls the rug from under them...(but) it opens doors...It’s about empowering.’

What comes through the accounts of both teacher educators and mentors is that becoming a researcher is not an overnight process; it involves an often slow journey, with many stages on a continuum. As we have seen, support from peers, supervisors and colleagues is crucially important in building confidence and expertise, as Eraut’s (2004) work on informal learning has shown.
Recommendations for universities
The teacher educators and mentors made numerous suggestions about how things could be improved in their respective universities in relation to research support for teacher educators. These included the need for better communication about research opportunities as well as the importance of structured induction, so that research was put on the agenda from the outset. For example, one (old university) explained:

There’s a lot of assumption that when people come to work at the university they will almost learn by osmosis how to work in a very different way. And I think there needs to be a tighter process of induction, not just into the job but how to be a researcher and what it means.

This is confirmed in other studies (e.g. Harrison & McKeon 2008, Murray 2008) where the need for appropriate induction into research for teacher educators is also stressed.

Following from induction, many teacher educators thought that ‘dedicated’ research time should be timetabled, because this would help them preserve research time and ‘give them permission’ to do it. As well as individual research time, teacher educators made several suggestions around the idea of peer support and research ‘buddying’ (as in McGee & Lawrence 2009). A teacher educator (new university) described her idea for peer research groups which could meet regularly and ‘report back at the faculty conference... a bit of stick and a bit of carrot.’

Looking at the recommendations overall, most would involve a change of culture in the university, led from the top, in order to set clear expectations of, and value for, all academics’ work, which would then impact on people’s sense of identity and self worth (as stressed by Eraut 2004).

Conclusions
This study has been highly enlightening about the attitudes and research experiences of teacher educators and research mentors working in two universities. Although the historical cultures of the two institutions are very different, the patterns of transition into higher education for teacher educators and into a researcher’s role have emerged as remarkably similar, with the same major challenges and problems. At the heart of these
lies a tension between the kinds of work involved in teacher education and research, in the time that each needs and the skills required.

From their accounts, the teacher educators achieved best when they received structured support, through supervision and research mentoring, appropriate for the stage that they had reached. However, they were most enthusiastic about being engaged in collaborative work with experienced researchers, who could then model processes in real research contexts. The research mentors found these activities rewarding too. Stenhouse’s (1975) model of the practitioner and researcher working together has been useful here, and the findings have also paralleled those of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Eraut (2004) in relation to working with and learning from more experienced colleagues.

Cultural differences between the two universities in terms of research expectations did give rise to some significant differences in the extent to which teacher educators felt valued: at the old university, the prioritisation of high status research made it especially hard for teacher educators to feel confident about embarking on research themselves. In contrast, teacher educators and mentors at the new university felt that teaching was valued more highly than research; in a different way, this also made it hard for teacher educators to develop research identities. Above all, the need for an entitlement to and protection of research time was stressed, as well as the importance of a range of supportive practices within an active research culture.

Note
A full version of this paper can be found in Griffiths, V. Hyrmiewicz. & Thompson, S. (2010) ‘Developing a research profile: mentoring and support for teacher educators,’ Professional Development in Education (special issue teacher educators) 36 (1-2) 245-262. This summary appears with kind permission of the publishers.

References

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