



*Improving education
through research*

SERA is a charity registered in
Scotland SC003928

ISSN 2752-4000 (Online)

SERA Researching Education Bulletin

Teacher Education

Network

Special Issue

Spring 2026



**SERA Teacher Education Network
Special Issue
Table of Contents**

Editorial	P3
Overcoming the dilemma of time in practitioner enquiry communities	P5
Role of a University Teacher Educator - An opinion-piece: invitation for teacher-educators to offer 'study'	P7
Curriculum improvement: the opportunity and challenge of effective subject-specific professional learning	P10
Into Headship was just the beginning: the creation of an alumni network for ongoing professional learning.	P14
Teaching without comfort.	P17
Agency and artistry – a work in progress.	P20

SERA TEN (Teacher Education Network) Special Issue: Spring 2026

SERA's Teacher Education Network is interested in both experiences in formal Initial Teacher Education but, also, it embraces Teacher Professional Development and engagement with practitioner inquiry. That is, we are interested in Teacher learning at various stages and in different aspects. We may need to consider showing the inclusive nature of our network through an amended title and I would invite members to share their views on this.

The papers in this bulletin engage with teacher learning in the broadest sense but it is important to set the scene a little in light of the dominance of particular narratives in regard to teaching and teacher learning across the globe. For many years, Teacher Education (TE) has been vilified and politicised internationally as governments have sought to generate full-proof processes for establishing the 'good teacher.' In trying to remove uncertainty and risk, it could be argued that Teacher Education has been destabilized and, in some contexts, fragmented as becoming a teacher is reduced to an apprenticeship model among others. However, supra national bodies reinforce the importance of the teacher in the success of systems and in the pursuit of a self-improving system, highlighting the complexity and potential impact of the teacher. Reflecting critically on the processes involved in building and nurturing new Teachers and their ongoing professional development as well as the richness of teacher learning more generally, this issue invited those involved in teacher education/learning to share their thoughts.

Our first paper comes from Kate Wall (Strathclyde Institute of Education) who reflects on practitioner research, its challenges and relevance for practice. She discusses the issue of time, when can research take place, as well as the intense pressures of teaching which can reduce opportunities for investigation. The solution can lay in working towards the connectedness of research to practice and in acknowledging the inherent value and status of practitioner research.

Our next paper comes from Elaine Sharpling based in Wales as she considers teacher education opportunities for disruptive thinking within highly prescribed frameworks. Generating disruption within established and constrained models may be a way to encourage a critical and subtle rebellion.

Stuart Farmer emphasises the importance of professional learning and highlights the need for networked learning communities. However, he also acknowledges the need for systemic changes and the additional resourcing needed to help these collaborations grow. Stuart is involved with IPDA – the International Professional Development Association (<https://ipda.org.uk/>) which readers may find useful as a resource and for possible collaborations and experiences.

Gillian Francis-McNeil and Nova Lauder-Scott continue to discuss professional learning but this time in relation to the kind of learning and collaborations that might continue post the Into Headship qualification. They explored the needs of those completing this work and found they were looking for, something flexible, collaborative, and inspirational within a space that would be both safe and brave (Cook-Sather, 2016). However, Francis-McNeil and Lauder-Scott also wanted to ensure that this would be a self-sustaining network and not one directed by them but owned by members. Their account of this innovation is particularly relevant within the multiple issues and challenges prevalent in education today.

Paul Hamilton next challenges us to consider the importance of not avoiding uncomfortable truths in his article Teaching without Comfort. He discusses the possible challenges teachers might face in trying to deal with these and highlights the implications for ITE, finishing with a call to action.

Finally, my own thinking around teaching as artistry is reflected on, referencing a chapter in a forthcoming edited book by Gert Biesta and Ramsey Affifi. However, the challenge of situating such a conceptualisation of teaching within ITE may be insurmountable within the highly politicised Teacher Education field nationally and internationally. This short article highlights this issue.

*Authors have provided email addresses should you wish to contact them about their individual articles.

Overcoming the dilemma of time in practitioner enquiry communities Kate Wall, Strathclyde Institute of Education

kate.wall@strath.ac.uk

Practitioner enquiry is well established as a group of approaches for professional learning. It locates the teacher as researcher with expert knowledge about their context and practice, and through cycles of enquiry facilitates critical investigation of teaching and learning within a professional community. It has strong associations with political, social and cultural character (Orland-Barak 2009) aligning with agendas such as social justice and education for democratic purpose (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009).

In Scotland practitioner enquiry is core to the GTCS professional standards and to the National Professional Learning Model, yet its implementation is patchy and inconsistent. For many teachers and schools realising a practitioner enquiry approach remains challenging. There are several key barriers that need to be overcome for practitioner enquiry to become embedded in practice as something that is useful, relevant and, importantly, manageable, but the elephant in the room is the issue of time. This blog aims to consider how the potential drain on teacher time might be managed. It draws on my own experience as a practitioner enquirer, and from leading and coaching practitioner enquiry communities across a range of settings. It reflects ideas engaged with in my regular practitioner enquiry tip of the week on LinkedIn, X and Blue Sky social media platforms.

Teaching is highly pressured, adding to a teacher's list of things to do cannot be an assumption or outcome of any initiative. If practitioner enquiry is seen as disconnected and extra, taking up precious time, then it becomes something less likely to be prioritised and indeed becomes resented. Any workable implementation of practitioner enquiry must not be based on presumptions that require teachers to use time out of working hours. It must be useful for teaching and learning and not distract from teachers' core responsibilities in regard to student learning. There are several strategies for dealing with this but core to all of them is connecting the enquiry process (the methodology) to teaching and learning (the pedagogy). This helps ensure practitioner enquiry is located within the 9-5 (within the working day). This is jokingly referred to as Dolly Parton's rule within the communities within which I work. A mnemonic which acts as a reminder to stop normalising, in regard to practitioner enquiry, or any other work practices, a premise that a significant contribution of the work is done in teacher's own time.

Time friendly connections are more likely when the intent of the enquiry addresses a real problem emerging from the teacher's classroom, targeting teaching, learners and learning within that space. The question should have relevance to the individual teacher's practice and context, with potential for useful outcomes that give

warrant for moving practice forward. Enquiry questions therefore need to be owned by the teacher and be connected into their cumulative professional learning trajectory and learner needs. Connections should also be apparent in regard the process undertaken. Yes, practitioner enquiry is a research approach (you can do it for a doctorate if you are so inclined), but assumptions about ‘scientific’ research can push enquiry into being extra. Teacher-researchers are teachers first and researchers second. If the research element takes over, then the process loses its relevance and impacts on manageability. Embedding the research language in pedagogy refined and defined towards individuals’ practice helps. Words such as evaluation, effectiveness, intervention and impact require some scepticism as they push a particular research agenda which is difficult, if not impossible, when you are embedded in the setting and without committing extra time.

Similarly, presumptions about research can push individuals towards types of evidence that may have less connection or fit with the enquiry intent and context. Traditional academic research tools (observations, interviews and surveys) are often used without criticality. They must be designed and analysed out of school time and often have less fit with the normal pedagogy of a space (Wall 2019) – they are not what children are used to, they take time to administer, and they don’t complement teaching and learning objectives. Schools and classrooms are already evidence rich and so sourcing from what is already available or that can be easily incorporated into practice can ensure connectedness, as well as a pragmatic, time friendly approach.

A move to prioritising pedagogic knowledge as equally important to research knowledge when undertaking practitioner enquiry requires a change in culture. Practitioner enquiry communities should work towards accepting different and creative approaches to research as equally valuable in providing a lens on the complexity of education practice. Over emphasis on research messaging can push teachers to lose connection with practice and as a result generate enquiry projects that eat up time within and outwith the school day. Modelling permission to privilege teacher expert knowledge about context, classroom and learners and how it can be used within practitioner enquiry is therefore paramount in upholding Dolly’s Rule.

Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (2009). *Inquiry as Stance: practitioner research for the next generation*. Teachers College Press

Orland-Barak, L. (2009). Unpacking variety in practitioner inquiry on teaching and teacher education. *Educational Action Research*, 17(1), 111–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790802667485>

Wall, K. (2019). Pedagogic appropriateness: judging quality in practitioner enquiry. BERA Blog: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/pedagogic-appropriateness-judging-quality-in-practitioner-enquiry> (accessed 20/6/2025)

Role of a University Teacher Educator

An opinion-piece: invitation for teacher-educators to offer ‘study’.

Elaine Sharpling

elaine.sharpling@uwtsd.ac.uk

(University of Wales, Trinity St David)

In this piece, I have chosen to write in the style of a contemporary essay (Dillon, 2024) and in doing so embraced the joy of writing (Magnússon *et.al.*, 2025) and moved away from the more traditional scholarly forms. The reader is invited to refrain from any reduction to a principle (Adorno, 1991) but to pause and stay awhile in a partial or unfinished space where outcomes are left uncertain (Rosa, 2020). I invite you to do this as I share my response to this question:

What is university-based Teacher Education for?

As a university teacher educator, I find it is not uncommon to encounter comments from student-teachers like, “what are we doing this for?”, “what is this to do with the classroom?” or even, “I prefer school to the university stuff”. Sometimes the response I give is accepted, sometimes it isn’t, and sometimes I dash to change things to make everyone feel happier. One of my responses might be, that “you are here to learn and through this learning, you will become a better teacher and ... if you succeed in becoming a better teacher, then the children will become better learners”. Consequently, all will be well in the classrooms of Wales and beyond. But there is a problem when we base Teacher Education solely on *learning*, and I will try to explain why I think this may be so.

Undoubtedly, we are locked into a well-documented construct of ‘learning’ on our programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). We abide by external criteria and standards, we set programme and module outcomes, we design content to meet these outcomes, and we assess all that is set out on this pre-determined path. As such, our student-teachers become a *product* of our education systems. It is probably the narrowest view of education possible. Even in models of ITE that seek to educate teachers who adopt an inquiry stance, question the status quo and who are consumers and producers of research (Cochran-Smith, 2011), known as the transformative approach, it is difficult to escape these constraining structures.

Indeed, the transformative model is a marvelous ambition, but as Magnússon and Rytzler (2022)

argue, “the transformative dimension is not always explicitly addressed and often Teacher Education fails to take responsibility for it, often driven by outcome-orientated paradigms” (p.124). There is another problem with focusing predominantly on *learning* in ITE and that is:

Who determines what should be learnt and whose voice is heard?

We know that everyone has opinions of schooling based on personal experiences and that these frame people’s views on education. This poses a unique challenge for teacher educators. We cannot, ignore or eliminate the student-teachers’ experience of being at school but we need to recognise what this means when moving from being a ‘pupil’ to becoming a ‘teacher’. Britzman (2010) comments that university educators are not good at understanding this transition and too often try to detach what the student needs to learn from the student’s own experience of school. As teacher educators, we have a unique ‘double whammy’ when we think of experience. Like our students, we have all been to school, but we also have an experience of being educated as a teacher – we are the **products** of our own ITE programmes with all of their accompanying bias.

A way forward

Instead of focusing on learning, we need to recognise that for both students and teacher educators, the impact of ‘experience’ is profound. For student-teachers the content of ITE programmes can appear to be over familiar if it is viewed through pupil-eyes. Likewise, teacher educators forget how long abstract concepts took to learn. This is frustrating all round and can lead to an unfortunate sense of mutual disappointment (Magnússon and Rytzler 2019). Britzman (2010) proposes another solution. He concludes, that to be *educated (transformed)* is to be exposed to new and unfamiliar knowledge and thinking. And therefore, we need to *think* in an *educational way* that identifies where, and when we are exposing our student-teachers to knowledge that defamiliarizes and disrupts minds. (Biesta and Säfström, 2011). If we don’t disrupt, then we run the risk of ‘boxing the students in’ and stifling their thinking, or as Rancière, (1991) puts it stultifying (deadening) the teacher within them. If we believe that education can transform lives, then there always needs to be the opportunity to be and do something different.

So, what do we need to do?

If teacher education is reduced to a matter of imparting or transmitting certain kinds of knowledge or

adapting to the prevailing social context (Säfström, 2014), this separates us and the student-teachers from the effects of experience. We need to engineer spaces in the university where we encounter new and unfamiliar knowledge together thus cultivating our scholarly culture. Perhaps we should ponder a language of teacher education that exceeds learning and fosters the unfamiliar (Magnússon and Rytzler, 2019). In a conversation with some international colleagues earlier in the year, it was suggested that what was actually needed in university-based ITE was a reaffirmation of the word **STUDY**.

In other words, we give student-teachers time to *study*, characterised by discussion, reflection and critique. And as Lipman (2003) suggests, to help us decide what *not* to believe. In this short piece I have used the form of the essay not to ask you to ‘learn’ anything but to invite you to pause awhile. Then, if you so wish, you can join in the dance of the university teacher educator. A dance that reflects the rhythms and movement...of **STUDY**.

References:

- Adorno, T. (1991) *Notes to Literature Volume One: The Essay as Form* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Biesta, G. and Säfström, C.A. (2011) ‘A manifesto for education’, *Policy Futures in Education*, 9 (5), pp.540-547. Available at: [A Manifesto for Education - Gert Biesta, Carl Anders Säfström, 2011](#)
- Britzman, D. (2010) *The very thought of education: Psychoanalysis and the impossible profession*. New York: State University of New York Press
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2011) Does Learning to Teach Ever End? *Kappa Delta Pi* 48 (1) pp.22-24.
- Dillon, B. (2024) *Essayism*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions
- Lipman, M. (2003) *Thinking in Education* (2nd ed). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Magnússon, G., and Rytzler, J. (2019) Approaching higher education with didaktik: University teaching for intellectual emancipation. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 9(2), pp. 190 -202. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2018.1515030>.
- Magnússon, G., & Rytzler, J. (2022) *Towards a pedagogy of higher education. The Bologna process, didaktik and teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Phelan, A., Magnússon, G., Heimans, S. and Unsworth, R. (2025) ‘Teacher education and its discontents An Introduction’, in G. Magnússon and A.Phelan (eds) *Teacher Education and Its Discontents*. London: Routledge pp. 1-14.
- Rancière, J. (1991) *The ignorant schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rosa, H. (2020) *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Säfström, C. A. (2014). The passion of teaching at the border of order. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 442 (4). pp. 337-346. Available at: [\(PDF\) The passion of teaching at the border of order](#)

Curriculum improvement: the opportunity and challenge of effective subject-specific professional learning

Stuart Farmer

Stuart.Farmer@iop.org

Institute of Physics Scotland and University of Stirling Centre for Research into Curriculum Making

Scotland has begun a curriculum improvement cycle. Regardless of their sector or subject this will likely result in some new, but hopefully more structured, subject matter for teachers to teach. As Stenhouse stated, ‘all curriculum development rests on teacher development’ (1975), so how can teachers be supported to best teach new subject matter and develop the necessary pedagogical content knowledge? From my experience, this was not something done well during the last two decades with Curriculum for Excellence.

Kraft and Papay (2014) have shown that, provided teachers work in supportive professional environments, pupil achievement continues to improve as their teachers gain experience providing a strong rationale for ensuring teachers work in such environments and can access high-quality professional learning. Recent surveys have shown that Scottish teachers most desire professional learning in subject pedagogy, skills progression and curriculum-making (Education Scotland, 2019, 2021, 2024), all things focused on improving the instructional core in classrooms where teachers transform subject matter into forms readily accessible to their pupils. The professional learning required to do this will have to be relevant to the context within which a teacher works, have a strong subject-specific element, and be designed to develop the teacher’s knowledge-base for teaching the subject(s) they teach (Farmer, 2024; IOP, 2024). So, what might that professional learning look like? Well, to misquote The Fun Boy Three and Bananarama, it does matter what you do, as does the way, time and place you do it, plus I will add, who you do it with – that’s what gets results!

Much of the most effective professional learning, such as instructional coaching, lesson study and learning communities, has a strong collaborative element. However, although many teachers may find themselves in large phase or departmental teams with colleagues teaching similar subject matter in the same context, many teachers are not so lucky. For example, there are many secondary teachers

who find themselves being the only teacher teaching a particular subject or course in their school, and not just in small schools in remote or rural areas. They have colleagues with whom to share general pedagogical strategies and learning but lack colleagues with the subject-based pedagogical content knowledge to help them improve the more subject-specific elements of their practice. This includes aspects of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge but also how to best apply general pedagogical knowledge in their subject.

When professional learning is too generic, and especially when time-poor teachers are not given time to work out how to transfer any new generic learning into their context, then transfer is unlikely to occur and improvements in practice are limited. That is not to say that there is not a place for good-quality generic professional learning on topics such as questioning, feedback and cognitive science, or on more administrative topics such as new IT, but time must always be built in to allow teachers to contextualise and embed in their practice as necessary.

If we are to facilitate effective subject-specific and context-based professional learning for relatively isolated teachers introducing new subject matter as part of curriculum improvement, it is important we build networked learning communities which enable teachers with similar interests and needs to come together (Hargreaves et al., 2015). In any subject-based learning community there will be innovators as well as those more sceptical of change. However, it is likely that those more sceptical will take more heed of those, who perhaps, for example, have adopted successfully a new strategy based on cognitive science research, if they hear this from someone working in the same subject and context as themselves rather than from someone further removed from them.

Networked learning communities do not just occur of their own accord. They need leadership and facilitation by those with appropriate subject and pedagogical expertise (Cobb et al., 2018), and access to knowledgeable others who can bring expertise and challenge the status quo. They also require support and resource from school and system leadership but nevertheless have clear goals and outcomes to address the bottom-up needs of the teachers involved and their desire to improve the instructional core in their classrooms and thereby the outcomes of their pupils. A networked learning community, meeting regularly every few weeks can fit into an enquiry cycle, and give time between meetings for participants to experiment with new learning in their classroom before reporting their

findings back at future meetings. Thus, participants can have multiple opportunities to learn with and from peers thereby providing professional learning exhibiting many of the features identified by Timperley (2008) and the mechanisms identified by Sims et al. (2021) for effective professional learning and avoid the pitfalls of one-off professional learning events which often have little impact.

If such networked learning communities are to be successful there must be a change in culture in much of Scottish education. The benefits of such collaborative subject-specific professional learning focused on improving the instructional core needs to be better recognised. Investment will be needed to develop and support the teacher educators required, many who may combine this role with teaching, but need to develop their teacher educator knowledge and skills (Farmer, 2024) to better lead and facilitate learning communities and the learning of adults. The curriculum improvement cycle gives us a great opportunity to improve the outcomes of our children and young people but will only be successful if we support our teachers and teacher educators to do so.

References

- Cobb, P., Jackson, K., Henrick, E., & Smith, T. M. (2018). *Systems for Instructional Improvement: Creating Coherence from the Classroom to the District Office*. Harvard Education Press.
- Education Scotland. (2019). *Professional Learning in STEM: Findings from the Annual STEM Practitioner Survey 2017/18 - Early learning and childcare, primary, secondary and ASN*.
- Education Scotland. (2021). *Professional Learning in STEM: Findings from the Annual STEM Practitioner Survey 2018/19 - Early learning and childcare, primary, secondary and ASN*.
- Education Scotland. (2024). *Professional Learning in STEM: Findings from the Annual STEM Practitioner Survey 2022/23- Early learning and childcare, primary, secondary and ASN*.
<https://education.gov.scot/media/hq5ph4wf/stem-professional-learning-survey-2022-23-findings-elc-primary-asn-secondary.docx>
- Farmer, S. (2024). A Knowledge Framework for Teachers of Physics and Physics Teacher Educators: The Genesis of a Knowledge Framework Based on the Knowledge Quartet. *Education Sciences, 14*(7), 687.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/EDUCSCI14070687>
- Hargreaves, A., Parsley, D., & Cox, E. K. (2015). Designing Rural School Improvement Networks: Aspirations and Actualities. *Peabody Journal of Education, 90*(2), 306–321.
- IOP. (2024). *Subject knowledge framework for teaching physics | IOPSpark*. IOP Spark.
<https://spark.iop.org/framework>
- Kraft, M. A., & Papay, J. P. (2014). Can Professional Environments in Schools Promote Teacher Development? Explaining Heterogeneity in Returns to Teaching Experience. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 36*(4), 476–500.

Sims, S., Fletcher-Wood, H., O'Mara-Eves, A., Cottingham, S., Stansfield, C., Van Herwegen, J., & Anders, J. (2021). *What are the Characteristics of Effective Teacher Professional Development? A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis*.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. Heinemann.

Timperley, H. (2008). *Teacher Professional Learning and Development*. IBE.

Scottish Educational Review

An International Journal of Education Research

Consider submitting an article brill.com/view/journals/ser/ser-overview.xml

The *Scottish Educational Review* is an open access, international peer reviewed journal publishing research in the field of education. The Journal has a broad interdisciplinary interest and publishes new research articles on theoretical issues and developments, reports of research in progress, and academic articles relating to policy and practice in education.

Today the journal welcomes submissions from across the global research community. The Journal was established in 1968 and its development has been emblematic of the growth and diversity of the field of research in education in Scotland and internationally. The Journal retains a unique place in the Scottish educational landscape while also serving a worldwide audience of researchers.

Into Headship was just the beginning: the creation of an alumni network for ongoing professional learning.

Gillian Francis-McNeil & Nova Lauder-Scott

Successfully completing Into Headship and being awarded the Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021), has been mandated in legislation since 2020 but we argue this should not be framed as the endpoint for learning. Whilst it is a significant accomplishment, the demands of which should not be underestimated, leadership in education is a complex landscape and developing head teachers as system leaders is a growing imperative. Within the contexts of a post-pandemic Scotland and a cost-of-living crisis, school leaders face an array of persistent problems including financial constraints, managing workload, supporting pupils' needs, and increasing accountability. These multi-faceted challenges do not have static solutions, meaning professional development for leaders cannot be a remedial notion, but rather should promote adaptive thinking, sense-making and resilience.

Our Into Headship students challenged us to create ways to keep this learning going post-qualification. As we listened to and learned from them, it became clear that while there are opportunities to continue professional learning through leadership courses offered by local authorities, national bodies and universities, the students felt that these did not match the uniqueness of their Into Headship experience. They were seeking something flexible, collaborative, and inspirational within a space that would be both safe and brave (Cook-Sather, 2016). They needed something that would enhance their busy, working lives rather than be an additional pressure or demand. Non-negotiable elements included peer support, rich discussion, time to reflect and professional challenge that would take them out their day-to-day and encourage them to challenge assumptions, stay informed and embrace diverse perspectives. The students felt that these opportunities for structured, evidence-based collaboration were key ingredients for their professional development and for helping them to tackle the persistent problems that they faced in their roles as school leaders. Interestingly, despite the demands on their time, students were keen to have meetings face to face rather than online. They felt this would ensure genuine, collaborative engagement, demonstrating their commitment to prioritising their own development.

Taking the views of the students into consideration, alongside our own critical reflections the Strathclyde Into Headship Alumni Network was created. From the outset, we were clear that this was not to be *our* network – we were not positioning ourselves as the experts who would lead and take charge of this platform. Rather, we worked in collaboration with the students to design a self-sustaining network that would meet their professional

needs. High-quality, meaningful professional development for senior leaders, is a strategic, systemic, and ethical necessity. For networks like ours, championing this agenda is not just about supporting individuals but about ensuring that the entire education system benefits from wise, reflective, and innovative leadership. There was a strong sense among the students that senior leaders must act as role models for learning and curiosity and that their own willingness to engage in professional development was an ethical imperative, signaling to colleagues, pupils, and communities the importance of lifelong professional learning.

We needed to establish a network that would accommodate the diverse responsibilities of our members. Into Headship is designed for aspiring head teachers, so our graduates work across different sectors, roles and local authorities. The network needed to offer something for them all and the first step was to establish a clear, compelling vision to guide our work. Collaborative efforts led to our agreed vision being:

The Strathclyde Into Headship Alumni Network is a brave space for peer support, rich discussion, and professional challenge. Through access to current research and opportunities for reflective practice, we empower each other to stay informed, embrace diverse perspectives and continue to grow as leaders.

To achieve this, the network is designed to be accessible, adaptive and responsive. Our meetings are planned to be a mixture of learning from others and learning together. For example, sometimes there may be a presentation from an invited, external speaker but sometimes the speaker might be from the network itself. In terms of learning together, each meeting will include the opportunity to share and discuss persistent problems from practice and use a hive-brain approach to finding a solution. Students were also keen to continue with professional reading so to support this a professional reading, online book group was established as an optional extra.

Education is a field of constant evolution and challenge. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ever-expanding role of senior school leaders, for whom transition into headship is not, and should never be, viewed as the professional endpoint. The responsibility to ensure senior leaders are supported in their professional learning journey extends well into, and beyond, their tenure in senior roles. Let us challenge every notion that senior leaders have *arrived* and instead, let us provide the structures, time, and opportunities for their continued growth, benefiting the full community of learners they serve.

References

Cook-Sather, A. (2016). Creating brave spaces within and through student-faculty pedagogical partnerships. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 1(18), 1.

General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). (2021). *The Standard for Headship*.

Teaching without comfort

Paul Hamilton (University of Edinburgh)

paul.hamilton@ed.ac.uk

The Scottish curriculum encourages us to be brave and ambitious. “Respect for others,” “values and beliefs,” and “thinking critically” are all enshrined in Curriculum for Excellence. But when it comes to teaching our most difficult histories, those involving violence, loss, injustice or trauma - many teachers are left to feel their way forward alone. That matters. Because if we avoid teaching uncomfortable truths, we create space for distortion, denial, and disengagement. And we miss powerful opportunities to help young people make sense of the world they live in.

A Curriculum Rich in Possibility (and Silence)

In the Broad General Education, many schools are innovating with thematic and inclusive approaches to the past. I have seen S1 pupils exploring identity through migration stories, and P7 classes drawing connections between Anne Frank and contemporary refugee experiences. These are encouraging signs. But as we move into the Senior Phase, the scope often narrows. History becomes defined by exam specifications and time constraints. Empire might be taught, but decolonisation rarely is. Genocide may be studied, but the uncomfortable echoes in our own society are sometimes left unspoken. And this is not the fault of teachers. It is structural. We ask them to deliver sensitive and complex content, often with minimal training, patchy resources, and the ever-present pressure of ensuring they cover all the mandatory course content.

Difficult Histories are not Optional

Why do we teach history at all, if not to examine how human beings have treated one another, and what the consequences have been? Teaching history should never be about inducing guilt or trauma. But nor should it be about comfort. Difficult histories, whether it be genocide, colonisation, sectarianism, racism, terrorism, gender-based violence, are not merely topics. They are lived realities, past forces, and ongoing legacies. For many young people, they are deeply personal. Avoiding them does not make the classroom a safe space. In fact, it may do the opposite. These topics demand sensitive and reflective pedagogy, not because they are dangerous, but because they matter. They prompt moral questioning, critical thinking, and empathy. They help young people understand how injustice happens, and how it is resisted. In a world grappling with disinformation, polarisation and rising hate, that is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

Collaboration and Context

No one teacher has all the answers. But more can be done to build confidence by working together across subjects and school communities. When history teachers collaborate with colleagues in English, RME, Modern

Studies or Drama, the classroom becomes a richer, more responsive space. Stories of conflict, migration and resistance do not live in silos, and our teaching should not either. Equally powerful are place-based approaches. Scotland's landscapes are dotted with war memorials, industrial ruins, sites of protest, and traces of empire. Local stories, about displacement, injustice, activism or reconciliation, help young people connect the past to their own communities and lived experiences. Teachers across Scotland are already doing this work. I have seen pupils give guided tours of memorial sites, record oral histories with older generations, and explore the legacy of historic trauma through creative writing and performance. These are transformative experiences, and they deserve recognition and support.

Implications for Initial Teacher Education

If we want future teachers to approach difficult histories with confidence and care, then initial teacher education (ITE) must explicitly prepare them for the challenge. Yet, across many ITE programmes, there is limited time dedicated to the pedagogical complexities of teaching topics such as empire, genocide, racism, and sectarianism. When these histories do feature, they are often framed through content knowledge rather than pedagogical practice. That is a missed opportunity. ITE must model the kinds of inclusive, interdisciplinary, and emotionally intelligent approaches we hope to see in schools. This means creating space for student teachers to reflect critically on their own positionality, biases, and historical assumptions. It means equipping them with strategies for navigating emotionally charged discussions, responding to pupil discomfort, and supporting diverse perspectives. And it means offering practical tools, through case studies, resource critique, and lesson design, to help them embed difficult histories in meaningful, age-appropriate ways. Tensions will inevitably arise. Student teachers may feel under-prepared, or unsure of how to address contested narratives in multicultural classrooms. Mentors on placement may have different views about what constitutes 'appropriate' history. And wider structural pressures, such as rigid course frameworks or risk-averse school cultures, can create hesitation. But if ITE avoids these tensions, we simply pass them on. Better, surely, to tackle them head-on within the supportive environment of teacher education. The role of ITE should be to foster critical thinking and courageous professionalism, not just in what student teachers teach, but in how they choose to teach it.

A Call to Action

We need a system that gives teachers permission, and support, to go beyond the surface. That means investment in high-quality professional learning, revised qualifications that reward critical engagement, and

Researching Education Bulletin

policy support for inclusive and anti-racist curricula. But more than that, we need a collective shift in mindset. Teaching difficult history is not about damaging young minds, it is about preparing them. It is about equipping young people to navigate a world shaped by the legacies of conflict, prejudice, and resistance. To do that well, we need to be willing to teach without comfort. Because history is not comfortable. But it is necessary.

Agency and artistry – a work in progress

Lorna Hamilton (University of Edinburgh)

Lorna.Hamilton@ed.ac.uk

Popular views of education today are often shaped by behaviouristic understandings of teaching, education policy emphasises on the need for measurement of student outcomes and the reductionist tendencies in defining and supposedly capturing teaching as a combination of competencies (Ball, 2003; Zeichner, 2014). International league tables also continue to encourage such views of teaching and learning, with the result that any teaching artistry is overlooked or ignored as it cannot be evaluated by rigid and limited accounts of competency. A more relational-humanistic approach to teaching and learning is likely to take us into the realms of fusions or syntheses of diverse qualities, relationships and purposes infused by personal-professional uniqueness. -where the teacher is both conductor, crafting, shaping rhythms, influencing pace and modulating tones (Ivie, 2020) and co-participant, focused on the building of relationships and trust. It is argued here that when unique syntheses of the above occur in classrooms and in such spaces, artistry is manifested. The challenge, however, is to explore how such uniqueness can be understood and developed during the early years of teacher development. Drawing on work from Hamilton (forthcoming 2026), I argue that although we may draw on key skills and attitudes to shape Teacher education experiences, we also need to acknowledge that the fusion of such qualities, the nature of contexts and the ambience of classroom spaces and people, creates something original and new, a form of artistry, which models and resonates for those learning to teach. I am exploring the ways in which we might build a more holistic model of teaching where preservice teachers may see, experience and manifest artistry while challenging accountability language orthodoxies and embracing teaching as a performance art.

As performativity and accountability narratives hold sway in relation to Teacher Education, there is concern that this leads systems to reduce or break down teacher learning along the lines of benchmarks or competencies with a strong skills-based or skills-focused element (Ball, 2003; Zeichner 2014). Frequently, we see a political yearning to find certainty in new teacher creation and learning as many look for a full proof means of generating the teachers of tomorrow (e.g. USA, England) and to do so as quickly as possible. Political distrust of Teacher Education and Teacher Educators can often be found in the speeches and debates of politicians, and it is possible that the use of competencies, especially restrictive ones as well as teacher testing, such as in the USA, are being used as a form of control and compliance. Within this common international approach to teacher learning there would seem to be little scope for revisiting and reconceptualising our teacher models and even if it were possible to do so, would crowded ITE programmes welcome yet another component in the process of being and becoming a teacher?

Do we dare to dream of something different? In proposing to reconceptualise teaching as a hybrid, both a science and an art, could ITE embrace and create a synthesis of a different model of teaching? Reconciling the certainty of established competencies with the uniqueness of the enactment of artistry would be our next challenge. In this approach, it would be important to challenge the political need for certainty and to acknowledge that teaching is inherently uncertain, unpredictable and a risk-taking profession. For a hybrid model of TE – we may need an emphasis on improvisation, adaptations and a critical mindset. Eisner (2002) suggests that we need the creation of artistic colonies or spaces in Teacher Education both in schools and in ITE programmes where new teachers can enact teaching as a performance art, envisaging teaching as composed and performed in subtle nuanced orchestral pieces. If we ignore the artistry of teaching, are we in danger of promoting pedagogy hampered by the loss of the very qualities and processes which help to generate a holistic, responsive and creative identity for emerging teachers?

In order to support and encourage student teachers to develop and enhance their teacher self by embracing teaching as artistry, it may be necessary to also engage with the nature of possible agency at this early career stage and to explore how this might be enacted in support of their artistry. Much work has been done with experienced teachers in relation to agentic possibilities (Priestley, et.al., 2015) but less with regard to student teachers and new teachers. The particular vulnerabilities of student teachers as they are evaluated could potentially reduce agentic opportunities and consequently restrict the enactment of artistry. Should we be encouraging a more holistic hybrid model of teaching or is this risk taking a step too far?

Ball, S. (2003), 'The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (2): 215–28

Eisner, E. (2002) *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hamilton, L. (2026 forthcoming) The Art and Artistry of Teaching: Looking beyond the Quantifiable in Initial Teacher Education. In Gert Biesta and Ramsey Affifi (Eds.) *Reclaiming the Artistry of Teaching* (pp58-71). UK: Bloomsbury Publishing

Ivie, S. (2020) The Artistry of Teaching. *Excellence in Education Journal*, 9 (2), 121-138.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. J. J., & Robinson, S. (2016). *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. London: Bloomsbury.

Sarason, S.B. (1999), *Teaching as a Performing Art*, New York: Teachers College Press.

Zeichner, K. (2014), 'The Struggle for the Soul of Teaching and Teacher Education in the USA', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 40



*Improving education
through research*

Charity no SC003928

If you are interested in joining SERA or in attending our annual conference, please go to www.sera.ac.uk

Membership details

Researching in Schools

SERA Ethics in Research

SERA Researching Education Bulletin

SERA conference

SERA Researching Education Bulletin

Are you a practitioner? Would you be interested in joining the board and helping to shape how the Bulletin develops in the future? Then please get in touch with Lorna.Hamilton@ed.ac.uk

We would also be interested in hearing from other stakeholders who might want to participate, so do consider this opportunity.

