

## **A story of transforming teacher education.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is actually a story, a story of our experiences of transforming teacher education. In this story I (Aileen) narrate a journey that led to the development of a completely new two-year initial teacher education programme: the MSc Transformative Learning and Teaching. The story traces my first intellectual connection with the concept of transformative professional learning, and charts how that understanding has grown and subsequently come to shape my work in teacher education in an explicit way. The story goes on to discuss key concepts from research on teacher education, and on assessment, that shaped the MSc programme; a programme influenced heavily by a social justice perspective. My narration, as the then programme director for the MSc programme, forms only part of the story: in an effort to gain multiperspectivity, my story is interspersed by conversations in which Lizzie (a recent graduate of the programme) and Becca (a current year 2 student) discuss their experiences with each other.

**KEYWORDS:** initial teacher education; transformative learning; activist teaching; social justice

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### **PROLOGUE IN THREE PARTS**

*Aileen*

In 1970 a little girl was born into a farming family in Perthshire. She lived a very happy 8 years on the farm with her mum, her dad and her big brother, unaware of the extent of her dad's physical and mental ill-health. Eventually, the family could no longer sustain the farming lifestyle, and they moved to a Fife town to live with their extended family. Later, when life was perhaps not quite as idyllic, she came to understand the full significance of the secure early life she had lived, its role in building her own resilience and secure attachment and how her perspective had been influenced by her exposure to non-typical gender roles between her parents resulting from her dad's ill-health. The farmers' daughter grew up and wanted to become a cellist, then a florist, but ended up being a teacher in a primary school to the west of Glasgow, as much through chance as by design. Serendipity informed her subsequent career pathway choices, as she worked for the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), and then in universities as a teacher educator, gradually realising just how politically and socially important teaching is.

In 2016 she was granted one of her career dreams, and was invited to lead the development of a brand new Masters-level ITE programme built on a solid foundation of social justice and professional activism.

### *Lizzie*

In Sheffield, a girl was born in 1995, and shortly after moved to Scotland with her mum, dad and two older sisters. She went to school in Glenrothes, Fife, and was lucky to have a loving and supportive family growing up. At the end of school, she travelled to Ghana to work in an orphanage for several months and then returned to study for a Maths degree at Edinburgh University, falling in love with the city. During her final couple of years, she tried out accountancy and finance through internships, but realised that this wouldn't be the career for her. In her final year, she undertook a Mathematics Education course and was reminded of the time she worked with and taught the children in Ghana; what a difference education can make and how it is a privilege to be able to go to school. She knew she wanted to be a teacher. When applying for ITE programmes she stumbled across a new one – the MSc Transformative Learning and Teaching (MSc TLT) – the aims of which sounded perfect. She became part of the very first cohort, and having recently graduated, is now in her induction year at Kirkcaldy High School and very much looking forward to the career ahead.

### *Becca*

In 1989 a girl was born in the Scottish Borders and grew up in Jedburgh. Her mum was an archaeologist from Manchester who had moved there to dig up Jedburgh Abbey, and then settled to have a family. The little girl and her younger brother went to a tiny village school and then on to a small high school of 400 pupils. If she and her brother were not being pushed up hills to look at standing stones with their mum, then they were roaming around outside hiding in the garden; being outdoors was massively important. She left school at 17 and embarked on a huge trip across Europe to Singapore overland – crossing Russia and Mongolia in the depths of winter. She returned after eight months to start her degree in Politics at Edinburgh University. Her love of travel has followed her throughout her life, spending considerable time in India, America and Europe. After graduating she worked in events and organising skills workshops for both children and adults. However, she really wanted to go into teaching, and was excited to discover a new course was running that called out to her passion for social justice and the unique opportunity to work across transitions between primary and secondary. She returned to the University of Edinburgh and is now in year two of the MSc Transformative Learning and Teaching: a path to teaching that has been life-changing.

## **ABOUT THIS STORY**

This is a story, first told at the Scottish Educational Research Association conference in November 2019, of our experiences of engaging in an attempt to do teacher education differently. The story is organised into four chapters and is shaped around Aileen's experience as the (then) Programme Director of an innovative new ITE programme: the MSc TLT at the University of Edinburgh. This story is illuminated by the experiences of Lizzie, a recent graduate of the

programme, and Becca, a year two student who is currently completing the programme. The story is told by Aileen, but conversations between Lizzie and Becca are interspersed throughout to reflect their perspectives on, and experiences of, the issues raised. It therefore seeks to present a multi-perspective view of the experiences of members of the programme community in travelling on a transformative teacher education journey together.

## **CHAPTER 1: TRANSFORMATIVE CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD): AN ACCIDENTAL EPISODE...**

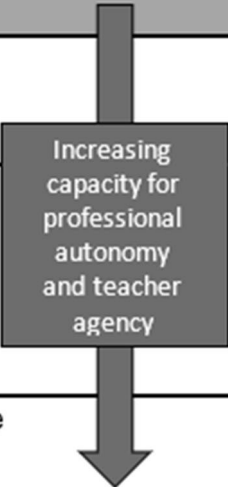
My foray into the idea of transformative learning started accidentally while working on my PhD which was entitled *Power, influence and ideology: A poststructural analysis of CPD policy for teachers in Scotland* (Kennedy, 2006). The focus for my PhD was in response to what I saw – from working both as a primary teacher and as a professional officer with the GTCS – as an increasing tension between a desire to professionalise teachers through ensuring they had access to career-long professional learning (the first ever national CPD policy for teachers in Scotland had been published in 1998), coupled with an increasing move to control teachers' work through neoliberal management approaches to measuring professional learning outputs (Mockler, 2013; Sleeter, 2008). As part of the literature review for the thesis I sought to identify how CPD was understood theoretically, to see how far it could help explain this tension in the growth of CPD. However, most of what I found was examples of particular approaches, rather than syntheses of a range of approaches, and so the chapter ended up being a synthesis of this literature which resulted in me categorising what I had found, shaped by asking the following questions:

- What types of knowledge acquisition does the CPD support, i.e. procedural or propositional?
- Is the principal focus on individual or collective development?
- To what extent is the CPD used as a form of accountability?
- What capacity does the CPD allow for supporting professional autonomy?
- Is the fundamental purpose of the CPD to provide a means of transmission or to facilitate transformative practice?

The analysis resulted in me identifying nine categories of CPD approaches, which I then organised along a spectrum ranging from 'transmissive' approaches at one end to 'transformative' at the other (Kennedy, 2005). This framework was further revised in 2014, resulting in the following categorisation (Fig. 1):

**FIGURE. 1: SPECTRUM OF CPD MODELS FROM KENNEDY, 2014, P. 693**

Purpose of Model	Examples of models of CPD which may fit within this category
Transmissive	Training models Deficit models Cascade model
Malleable	Award-bearing models Standards-based models Coaching/mentoring models Community of practice models
Transformative	Collaborative professional inquiry models



Increasing capacity for professional autonomy and teacher agency

My argument for the need for this framework was, and still is, not so much that some forms of CPD are more desirable than others, but that different approaches are likely to have different outcomes, and so we must be more careful in our choices of CPD if we want to achieve particular purposes. I confess, now, to not having thought particularly deeply about how I was defining ‘transformative’, conceptualising it as the critical capacity to critique policy, as distinct from the purpose of many CPD experiences which focused much more on ‘training’ teachers to implement policy. It seems somewhat obvious that the same concerns could be applied to initial teacher education as to post-qualification professional learning; for example, Sleeter (2008) talks of a move in the US, pushed by a global neoliberal meta-narrative, towards seeing ‘teacher education as technical support for raising student test scores’ (p. 1952), rather than as an intellectual and moral endeavour in which equity and democracy prevail.

At this point, while understanding perhaps at a more subconscious level the power of professional learning to suppress or enhance the critical capacities of teachers to exercise agency, I was not locating this understanding within the existing body of literature on transformative learning; something I have subsequently come to embrace, as the next chapter outlines.

## **CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

In 2015, I took up a post at the University of Edinburgh, and shortly thereafter was asked to lead the development of an innovative new two-year Masters ITE programme, that for various reasons, eventually came to be called ‘MSc Transformative Learning and Teaching’ (MSc TLT). This development forced me to engage with the literature on transformative learning, something I am continuing to work on now. It was fundamentally important to me to be able to explain why the

programme was called what it is, and to use this understanding to shape not only the content, but more importantly, the philosophy underpinning the programme and its pedagogical approach.

I started by looking at the work of Jack Mezirow, commonly acknowledged as the originator of the concept of transformative learning. Mezirow's high-level definition of transformative learning as the 'process by which learners become aware of and increasingly in control of habits of perception, inquiry, learning and growth that have become internalized' (1981, p. 12) served as an overarching definition of what we would be trying to do; for students, for staff (school and university-based) and, crucially, for the children and young people with whom our students would work. This process involves the transformation of meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2006), and Mezirow saw this essentially as a cognitive process, requiring 'disorienting dilemmas' to act as the stimulus for change. This view has been subject to critique on account of its narrowness, with Illeris (2014) identifying 'a tendency to stress the cognitive dimension at the expense of the emotional and social dimensions and the situatedness of learning processes' (p.149). Habermas (1972), too, had moved beyond a perceived narrow emphasis on the cognitive aspect, positioning transformative learning as primarily being in the emancipatory interest. However, while Mezirow may have drawn on the explanatory power of the cognitive, his underpinning rationale for engaging in processes of transformative learning was squarely in the emancipatory domain, having worked extensively to support 'the development of consciousness about and liberation from conditions that caused societal and personal suppression of women' (Illeris, 2014, p. 148).

For Habermas, the emancipatory purposes of transformative learning were paramount, and he sought to develop and understand more deeply how such learning could happen. He argued for critical reflection as the analytical tool that could engage learners in an archaeology of knowledge and assumptions. At this point, and particularly when thinking about how transformative learning can underpin teacher education, it is important to delineate between reflection per se, and *critical* reflection, given the often uncritical assertion that all teachers are, or at least should be, 'reflective practitioners'. Drawing on Dewey's work, Tripp & Rich (2012) describe reflection as a 'self-critical, investigative process wherein teachers consider the effects of their pedagogical decisions on their situated practice with the aim of improving these practices' (p. 678), outlining a fairly technical, procedural self-evaluation process. However, when adding the 'critical' to make *critical reflection*, this points to a need to attend to issues of power structures, and how 'power relations in the outside world reproduce themselves in the classroom' (Brookfield, 2017, p. 26). Šarić & Šteh (2017) provide a more detailed articulation, in which they describe critical reflection as a process of 'uncovering within the educational process how dominant social and economic groups impose their values and beliefs to legitimise their power and authority' (p. 72). This explanation arguably describes what Antonio Gramsci coined as 'hegemony', and Brookfield (2017) succinctly describes as 'the process by which an existing order secures the consent of people to the legitimacy of that order, even when it disadvantages them greatly.' (p. 39).

Thus, to deliberately engage in transformative learning is surely to actively commit to an understanding of education as political, and to an acknowledgement that teachers can serve either to reproduce existing structures or to identify and challenge structures which reproduce inequalities. This kind of orientation can, however, be very uncomfortable and indeed in some contexts, unwelcome; something experienced by both the students and the programme team at times. With this understanding of transformative learning in mind, it became clear that the MSc TLT programme community would have to seek to develop and share its understanding of the power of transformative learning, and the underpinning political commitment inherent in signing up to such a conception of teaching.

For me personally, some of the most morally persuasive writing around transformative learning comes from Ted Fleming. In particular, I am moved by his focus on 'the struggle for recognition'. Fleming draws on Honneth's interpretation here, arguing that recognition, for all humans, is 'a fundamental drive for survival and development' (Fleming, 2016, p. 6), and that this need for recognition drives social change. However, while Fraser (Fraser, 2000; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) suggests that social justice requires both redistribution and recognition, the conceptualisation of recognition in this sense tends to be group recognition, rather than individual. For Fleming, the struggle for recognition is a deeply personal, and interpersonal, one, and he argues, perhaps somewhat controversially, that 'teachers and leaders who have experienced this recognition themselves are in a better position to deliver this' (Fleming, 2016, pp. 10-11). In supporting the development of transformative and activist new teachers, it therefore seems crucial to support both their understanding and their experiences of recognition. Of course, if we talk of recognition, we cannot ignore misrecognition, and Honneth (2014) argues that the current neoliberal era works systematically to misrecognise people, both collectively and individually. As teachers, both recognition and misrecognition are surely central to our relationships with young people, their families and our colleagues.

Finally, I continue to be influenced by Judyth Sachs' work on activist professionalism, which she acknowledges as growing from a concept of 'new professionalism' (Hargreaves, 1994; McLaughlin, 1997) which began to frame teachers' work as essentially a collaborative endeavour rather than an individual one. Sachs (2000) conceptualises activist professionalism as being based on 'active trust' and 'generative politics'; concepts developed by Giddens (1994). Active trust involves 'trust, obligation and solidarity' (ibid., p. 81) and requires teachers to work across and beyond professional boundaries in a spirit of openness and negotiation. The other key element of activist professionalism – generative politics – entails a proactive stance to politics: 'A fundamental feature of generative politics is that it allows and encourages individuals and groups to make things happen rather than to let things happen to them' (ibid., p. 85). It seems to me, therefore, that transformative learning, as applied to teacher education, can only come about through activist professionalism. Indeed, in her 2003 book, 'The Activist Teaching Profession', Sachs goes on to equate her understanding of this form of 'new professionalism' with 'transformative professionalism', albeit without reference to the theoretical underpinnings of transformative learning; rather she sees this in terms of societal transformation, arguing that teachers need not only to

undersand themselves better, but that they also need to better understand the society in which they live and teach (Sachs, 2003, p. 14). That said, to adopt this stance is clearly a significant challenge in a policy context increasingly influenced by neoliberal politics of managerialism, and the struggle to develop and sustain spaces in which active trust and generative politics can survive is a real one. Crucially, however, is my own recognition of the personal challenges for me as a teacher educator in driving forward this kind of teacher education, for as Sachs warns, activist professionalism is not just about teachers in schools, it 'also calls for new kinds of teacher educators, new cultures in schools of education, and altered university structures for academics' (ibid., p. 92).

In taking all of this discussion on transformative learning and activist professionalism together, I suggest that a working understanding of transformative learning in/for ITE should attend to the following:

1. Cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of transformative learning are all important, but ultimately this is political.
2. Whose learning or 'meaning perspectives' are being transformed? In ITE, both the teacher and the learner should, and can, have their meaning perspectives transformed: this is a double-loop.
3. Teachers' own experiences of recognition are important in order to enable them to recognise fully all of the children, young people and families with whom they will work.
4. Transformative learning and teaching requires deliberate activist professionalism, but as Sachs (2000) warns, 'activist professionalism is not for the faint hearted' (p. 93).

**Lizzie:** *I don't know about you Becca, but I struggled to understand the concept of 'transformative learning' initially. I remember workshops discussing some of the ideas that Aileen has shared above, having little idea about what they actually meant and thinking, did I really know anything, as a lot seems to be based on assumptions.*

**Becca:** *Yes, my understanding of transformative learning has definitely progressed considerably since undertaking this path to teaching. Initially I think I fell into the trap of thinking that transformative learning would be something I could just learn to enact or facilitate in the classroom. However, I have come to understand that transformative learning and teaching is as much about transforming our own ability to critically reflect on ourselves, our perspectives and our lived experiences; and using that as a catalyst for transformative change.*

**Lizzie:** *I would agree with that. In Year 2 of the programme Aileen asked us to form our own definition for transformative learning. The two key elements I came up with were critical reflection and active dialogue with others, where for reflection to be critical, it needs to reconstruct current ideas to influence change in your own behaviour or wider social change, and active dialogue allows you to do this.*

**Becca:** *I do find it easier to make sense of it with actual examples of transformative learning in action.*

**Lizzie:** *True, here is an example. Last year, myself and some university colleagues had a 'disorientating dilemma' (as Mezirow would see it) about mental health. Health and wellbeing is a core part of the 'Curriculum for Excellence', yet there wasn't that much emphasis on mental health training for teachers or support for them, considering the*

*difficulties with teacher retention. We decided to try and make a little change to that – we organised and ran a Mental Health conference for student teachers and we wrote to the Deputy First Minister (DFM) to ask for a meeting. Since then we have had that meeting, I wrote a blog post for the 'Times Educational Supplement' to share our discussion with a wider audience and I attended another meeting recently with the DFM and other stakeholders such as Barnardos, GTCS, Teacher unions and Place2Be. I feel like this is transformative learning in action as it has made a change to my perspectives and hopefully it will make a wider social change. The dimensions of transformative learning Aileen highlighted have definitely become clearer; if you want to make a change, you have to have the emotion, the passion, 'the want' and be active, as it takes time. You also need like-minded colleagues who will do it with you. But, most of all I have discovered the political dimension, as structural change requires policy, budget and approval from others.*

**Becca:** *That is a good example of transformative learning in the wider education system: you shared a goal, you talked about it together and are being active to make a change. Thinking about transformative learning in the classroom, I have found inspiration in critical literacy and critical pedagogies that facilitate opportunities for our learners to question knowledge and understandings of the world themselves. Key to this, in my opinion, is wanting to hear them, and being open to learning from them in return. Currently I'm running a dyslexia and other learning needs study support group each week with some fellow colleagues from our programme. I undertook this thinking that we would help facilitate different learning strategies that could help pupils in the classroom. Instead **we** are learning so much from the students about how we can help them and their learning. It's providing a space for peer support and to share experiences. They are now sharing personal strategies and asking each other important questions about their learning, so we are organically shaping the direction of the sessions in response to the feedback we receive from the pupils. And these sessions are gaining interest from other staff who are also keen to hear about what the pupils would wish for in the classroom.*

**Lizzie:** *Oh that is a great example – it really shows the double/triple/quadruple loop of learning which is contributing to whole-school understanding and development. It is great you have had the space and opportunity to do this!*

### **CHAPTER 3: A NEW APPROACH TO ITE**

Armed with a deeper understanding of transformative learning, and influenced heavily by Sachs' (2003) concept of the 'activist professional', we sought to develop an ITE programme that would support students to develop as teachers with an activist and transformative disposition. From the very outset this endeavour was a collaborative project, starting with an open invitation to all stakeholders to participate in idea-generating conversations from which a programme narrative and broad structure were developed. The work of developing the detail of this structure then fell to a smaller team of university and school-based colleagues who worked iteratively on developing individual courses whilst simultaneously collaborating on how the individual courses would fit together to create a whole coherent programme structure.



The resulting MSc TLT is a two-year initial teacher education programme awarding a full Masters degree<sup>5</sup>. It also confers professional registration with the GTCS, qualifying teachers to work across the primary/secondary transition, in either Nursery-S3 as a generalist teacher or P5-S6 as a subject specialist teacher. The degree comprises 240 SCQF Level 11 credits rather than the standard 180 credits, reflecting the additional time spent learning between two sites: university and school community, and in two sectors: primary and secondary, and hence the reason it spans two full academic sessions. The desire to prepare graduates who can teach across sectors came about as a result of longstanding identification of this transition as a difficult time for many young people (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Yet most of the proposed solutions (Topping, 2011) seek to work within current structures rather than to change the structures themselves.

The programme has an explicit focus on developing knowledge, skills and dispositions that will support more inclusive and socially just teaching, and is a means of supporting beginning teachers to adopt an activist and transformative orientation to teaching. With these ambitious aims, it was clear that the degree would have to be calibrated at Masters level, which Heilbronn and Yandell (2010) argue promotes research literacy, enhances intellectual engagement and supports critical reflection.

As a brand new programme, with no precedence to follow, the development process started from first principles: we wanted to create a programme informed by cutting-edge research and practice internationally, located within our local/national context, through close partnership working with local partners. Our research engagement fell into five broad categories:

1. Research in and on teacher education
2. Context-specific preparation
3. Clinical practice
4. Assessment
5. Preparing culturally responsive teachers

For the purposes of this story, however, I will focus on ‘research in and on teacher preparation’ and ‘assessment’ as two of the areas through which we can illustrate succinctly how existing research impacted on the programme design.

### **‘RESEARCH IN AND ON TEACHER EDUCATION’**

The above discussion around transformative learning conveys the broad philosophy underpinning the programme. In developing the detail of its structure, however, it was important to us to engage with the wider literature on ‘teacher preparation’, in an attempt to design a structure which would be most likely to enable us to enact the philosophy in practice.

We were influenced heavily by Darling-Hammond’s (2006a) work on what she calls ‘powerful teacher education’: this is, quite simply, but deeply politically, ‘programs that prepare teachers to teach a wide range of students successfully,

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of Masters-level teacher education has been growing gradually since the publication of ‘Teaching Scotland’s Future’ (Donaldson, 2011), and we now see a range of partial and full Masters ITE programmes on offer in Scotland (see Kennedy & Carse, forthcoming).

including those who struggle to learn from their first days in the classroom' (p. 5). Powerful programs, argues Darling-Hammond (2006b), rely on three 'critically important pedagogical cornerstones' (p. 306): 'coherence and integration', 'extensive, well-supervised clinical experience linked to course work using pedagogies that link theory and practice', and 'new relationships with schools'.

The relationship between schools and university is clearly central to any transformative work in teacher education, and consideration of the power dynamic between these parties is paramount. To draw on Darling-Hammond (2006b) again: 'The enterprise of teacher education must venture out further and further from the university and engage ever more closely with schools in a mutual transformation agenda, with all of the struggle and messiness that implies' (p. 302). This realization meant that we would have to challenge the traditional model of a block of university learning followed by a block placement in a school to 'practice' what had been learned in university. That said, we were also very conscious of Darling-Hammond's warning about the lack of empirical evidence to support the view that simply spending more time in schools necessarily results in better teacher learning (ibid., p. 311). Rather, 'the most powerful programs require students to spend extensive time in the field throughout the entire program, examining and applying the concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their courses' (ibid., p. 307).

Engagement with this literature, and a clear philosophical standpoint, resulted in us reconceptualising the school and university-based elements as 'site-based learning' and 'university-based learning' in an attempt to acknowledge the parity of learning across these two sites, and to actively seek to avoid building a theory/practice divide into the very fabric of the programme. So we designed an integrated structure where students engage in site-based learning two days per week, with a block period in each of the four semesters, the remaining time being university-based learning. In total, this amounts to the equivalent of 30 weeks of site-based learning in school communities across the two-year programme; significantly more than is possible in the one-year PGDE, which requires 18 weeks of 'placement'. All courses on the programme contain both university and site-based learning elements, i.e. there are no separate university or 'placement' courses, and a clear recognition that students learn to teach in and between both university and school sites, with neither site being more important than the other. We also positioned the 'site' as the school cluster and its community, rather than the individual school. Thus, site-based learning includes, but goes beyond, classroom teaching in one school. In order to facilitate this, we built relationships with school clusters in our local authorities who elected to work with us on this programme. Students are placed in groups in a cluster for a whole year, spending time in different schools in that cluster and working with their peers to develop detailed knowledge of the communities where their pupils live and learn. To facilitate this, and to support a more equal relationship between school and university, each cluster appoints a 'cluster tutor' from among their staff who acts as the local tutor for site-based learning, working in partnership with a nominated 'university cluster link'. The cluster tutor is required to participate in a module on 'supporting teacher learning', designed and delivered in partnership between the university and our neighbouring local authorities. In addition, the cluster tutor's

school is paid a sum for supply cover to enable them to work with the MSc TLT students for half a day per week.

While the new terms associated with this new programme might be criticised as simply semantics, defining our terms deliberately in relation to specific and clearly articulated conceptualisations was crucial. The importance of this is recognized explicitly elsewhere, for example, in Australia Le Cornu (2015) argues for adoption of the term 'professional experience... to emphasise the view that *both* academic and practitioner knowledge are valued in developing effective professional experience' (p. 2). Our conceptualisation, however, goes beyond simply emphasising the value of both academic and practitioner knowledge in learning to teach: it also acknowledges the importance of the student teachers' personal, academic and experiential knowledge and, crucially, the importance of the knowledge of the pupils and communities with whom the students work and learn. Ultimately, in seeking to disperse the sites of learning more widely, and share responsibility for that learning more equitably, we are opening up the question posed by Zeichner et al. (2015, p. 123): 'whose knowledge should count in teacher education'?

**Lizzie:** *When I think back to the start of the programme there have been ups and downs with the site-based learning/university-based learning structure – it was natural that there would be some teething difficulties with it being new and unfamiliar. However, I think the cluster structure worked really well – being in one area for the whole year allowed me to get to know the community, for example by visiting other provision for children and young people. This ultimately helped me with fostering relationships with the learners. The cluster organisation also created a supportive and collaborative network across both school and university settings. In site-based learning, we had a cluster tutor alongside our individual mentors. At university we had a cluster-university link as well as individual course leaders and a personal tutor. This really did help connect both learning experiences together.*

**Becca:** *What I really liked about the organisation of site-based learning and university-based learning too was the encouragement to actively collaborate with our colleagues, both peers and school staff – like in the collaborative professional inquiries we undertook in year 1. I found this really helps foster a student-driven progression throughout our programme. Not only with university assignments but within our school context, we have been actively part of the process of directing our own learning against the standards. Identifying our strengths and areas for development means there is flexibility according to our needs, but we also have responsibility for driving our progression.*

**Lizzie:** *This is true, the collaborative inquiry and student-driven learning was key throughout my experience. Although it was difficult at the beginning with teacher mentors who wanted to see our 'folders' – but it really did encourage us to reflect on what we needed to learn and practice, rather than following a generic path.*

**Becca:** *True, and we also have each other. The site-based learning/university-based learning model gives us the opportunity to reflect on practice and literature concurrently. Earlier, you touched on the importance of both teachers' and student teachers' mental health. We all know that it can be challenging and tiring learning to be a teacher. For me I really value being able to come back to university after school days and talk to fellow course-mates and staff about my experiences. It really helps me process and learn from the things I am seeing, and I feel really supported which is key. I now feel I have a lot more confidence in articulating what I want to be achieving and learning, and how that will look*

*in the SBL context. My current mentor teacher has also remarked positively on that aspect and it has meant that we have quite a lot of influence on the structure of our high school placement timetables. I'm actively teaching in six areas and really enjoying it!*

***Lizzie:** That is fantastic, getting to teach so many curricular areas - I have found teaching across the curriculum and settings (with site-based learning in both primary and secondary) to be vital to my development. From this, I have a deeper understanding of the progression of the learners and how a connected approach could really benefit schools to implement Curriculum for Excellence (see [\\_c\\_](#)) and meet the 'attainment challenge' (<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/scottish-attainment-challenge/>).*

### **'ASSESSMENT'**

While the integrated structure of university and site-based learning was central to driving forward a conceptualisation of teaching being both an intellectual and a practical activity, as well as a community-located endeavour, we were also conscious of developing pedagogical approaches that supported, rather than diminished students' engagement in their own learning journeys. In particular, we were very conscious that 'assessment is the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to a course and behave as learners' (Gibbs, 1999, p. 41). Investment in developing, articulating and sharing a clear assessment philosophy therefore seemed very important.

In engaging with the literature on assessment, we identified a number of high-level principles that would drive our practices. Boud's (2000) concept of 'sustainable assessment' fitted well with our aspirations, sustainable assessment being 'assessment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (p. 151). We were therefore mindful that we should not engage in assessment practices that would further encourage students to depend on the 'teacher' to make judgements on them; rather our job is to support students to be able to judge their own strengths and identify development needs, thereby supporting them to become independent career-long learners. In seeking to develop graduates who would be well-prepared to continue a proactive career-long learning journey, we became conscious of the need to align our assessment practices as closely as we could with the kinds of expectations that graduates would meet as fully-registered teachers: professional authenticity became a priority, notwithstanding, of course, the need also to comply with university assessment regulations that we acknowledged might not permit absolute professional authenticity.

In trying to identify assessment practices that would support a transformative and activist orientation to teaching, we delved into the literature around the power dimension between the assessed and the assessor. We were particularly influenced by Tannock (2015) who asserts that 'grading undermines the sense of collective solidarity and mutual responsibility between students that democratic education seeks to foster' (p. 6). Indeed, Tannock (ibid.) goes further in calling for a new conceptualisation of the 'public university' which rejects hegemonic grading practices, instead using assessment practices which develop 'critical, independent, self-motivated, democratic thinkers' (p. 8). However, while this orientation appealed to us in terms of the underpinning philosophy and its capacity to support

critical and democratic learners, we were restricted by the need to work within university-wide regulations which were not easily in alignment with rejection of grading practices. Thus, our current practices push at the boundaries of the regulations, exploring approaches such as grading contracts (Brubaker, 2010) and group assessments, and incorporating a wide range of assessment 'products'.

Ultimately, we articulated an assessment philosophy for the programme built around the overall position that assessment should be used to support, rather than merely 'measure', learning. We agreed four key principles that would shape our assessment practices, which we would strive to make:

1. Professionally authentic
2. Sustainable
3. Collaborative
4. Student-driven

In practice this means that all assessment is student-negotiated to a greater or lesser extent, i.e. that we support the growth of student agency in developing assessment tasks, formats and criteria by gradually lessening the scaffolding we provide.

The ultimate assessment of professional competence is done through a professional viva, prior to which students submit a portfolio of evidence which they believe supports their claim to having met the General Teaching Council for Scotland's (GTCS) 'Standard for Provisional Registration' (GTCS, 2012). This provides, from the very outset of the programme, motivation for students to engage in a proactive way with the Standard, as opposed to seeing it merely as something that a tutor might use to judge their performance against in an observed lesson. Part of the transformative and activist agenda, however, is to simultaneously understand the need to comply with the Standard in a holistic way in order to be able to operate within the system, whilst also seeing beyond it. As teacher educators advocating this perspective, we are actively engaging in what Bourke et al. (2018) term 'counter discourses of resistance and reinterpretations of standards as deficit' (p. 90). This entails going beyond the binary interpretation of standards as being either developmental tools or being associated with accountability. We are encouraged and motivated by Bourke et al's (ibid.) call to action that 'Teacher educators should maintain their professionalism and have confidence to find "wriggle room" (Hoyle & Wallace, 2009) or "lived space" to use Lefebvre's (1991) term, to re-imagine how standards could be used more productively' (p. 91). This is a discussion in which both staff and students engage, actively evaluating all accountability mechanisms in relation to their capacity to support transformative learning, and looking for the productive wriggle room.

**Becca:** *You know, being asked about our opinions on our own assessments has definitely been a perspective shift.*

**Lizzie:** *I agree with you there – the assessment part of the programme was difficult to get used to, not only academic writing (after all I did come from a Maths degree!), but the choice and the discussion we had around it. Never before had I been given*

*the opportunity to have an input into the assignment question, how we would present it and even the success criteria for it.*

**Becca:** *Yes, I think it has really helped my skills as a teacher. We need to be able to create meaningful assessments for our learners, so having this experience can also help us think about our own ways of doing assessments in the classroom. Appreciating feedback ourselves highlights how important it is to give meaningful feedback to our own students as well.*

**Lizzie:** *I agree, thinking about assessment, one of my most prominent memories from the programme was our first assignment in Year 1, where one of my colleagues asked – “Do we have to be graded on it? Can we just have a pass/fail system?”. Immediately, most of us agreed – at the end of the day, the whole point in the assessment was the learning, not the grade. However, there were some barriers to this – mainly University policies – but also, persuading myself on every assignment that the grade didn’t matter, that I wasn’t competing with anyone else, it was the learning and the feedback that I needed to care more about. I have been brought up in a culture where it was the grade that seemed to matter and I needed to re-train myself to actually read the feedback and use it – not just look at the grade and move on.*

**Becca:** *I think this is probably a good example of what Mezirow calls a ‘disorientating dilemma’ after all we are products of the system we experienced and it is hard to challenge yourself to think differently, especially when getting good grades is so entrenched in our educational experiences. This doesn’t mean that it is not great to feel the validation in that way, but it is unique being able to shape some of the ways in which we are assessed.*

**Lizzie:** *Very true, I have seen the negative effects of assessment and grading, where pupils were changed classes in Maths after a test due to marks. The final mark was focused on, rather than taking time to evaluate the tests and learning with classes. The pupils now have a negative mindset towards assessment and their learning, asking ‘what class they are in, are they in the highest or lowest set and so on’. Fortunately, the decision was made not to test and move the classes in the same way again and instead place a greater emphasis on learning, formative assessment and teacher autonomy, rather than a grade.*

*Going back to thinking about site-based learning and assessment, I also think what worked for me was the organisation of coaching and feedback sessions with the university staff. They didn’t really feel like a ‘crit’ but a time for observation of practice, discussion and evaluation.*

**Becca:** *Yes, although having somebody observe you teach can be quite a nerve-racking experience – knowing that our university tutors are there to provide professional feedback to ultimately help your practice does take some of the pressure off. I have actually started to enjoy my observation and feedback sessions as it is a great opportunity to discuss your own professional learning needs and to focus on areas to work on.*

**Lizzie:** *That has also really helped me during my Probation Year – I feel much more comfortable with observations this year (and you are required to have quite a few) – I even asked my Depute to come in on a Thursday Period 7 (which is a tiring period anyway), but with my most challenging class because I was interested in her advice about how to develop my practice, motivate the learners and help them to focus at this time of day.*

**Becca:** *Absolutely, it sounds like you've totally embraced the formative assessment possibilities of observation.*

#### **CHAPTER 4: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS BASED ON COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE**

It is fair to say that the development and birth of a new programme such as the MSc TLT is an exciting but also an emotionally and practically demanding endeavour, for staff and students alike. Having to explain, justify and sometimes defend a new approach to ITE has been challenging for all of us in different ways. While we are now working with the third cohort of new students, there are still things to iron out and stabilise, as well as aspirations to be achieved. And for our graduates, there are still the challenges ahead of fitting a new way of working into a fairly (but definitely not exclusively!) conservative and siloed schooling system. So, as we continue to progress in our transformative teacher education journeys, we pause to take stock of the impact on each of us so far.

**Becca:** *Embarking on anything new can challenge and shape your understandings of the world. However, I didn't quite understand initially how much this path to ITE would encourage me to critically reflect upon my own meaning-making perspectives and transform how I saw myself and my teacher identity, in order to better support the young people I will teach. This personal journey has ultimately been scaffolded through collective reflection and collaboration that encourages us to face uncomfortable dilemmas in order to transgress into greater understanding of ourselves and our practice. The support of fellow colleagues on our programme, the staff and stakeholders has enabled opportunities for collaboration in exciting and challenging learning that has impact for both us and our students. The opportunity to experience both primary and secondary education – working with teachers across disciplines – has been invaluable in developing clearer understandings of both the impact of different pedagogies and the needs of our learners in both settings. I am very much at the early stages of my teacher journey and grateful to join a learning community that has challenged and supported me throughout. I hoped to be a teacher because I wanted to make a difference, but my ITE journey has made more of a difference to me than I ever expected.*

**Lizzie:** *I started out on this programme to become a teacher, but I had no idea how much it would make me think about both my personal and professional identity and change my perspectives. This programme has taught me to think critically and to use my passion for education to improve life outcomes for our children and young people. It has shown me how collaboration is key to everything we do, where during ITE we have not only been student teachers, but partners on the programme,*

*where our views were listened to, valued and used to make changes. This has shown me how education can be in Scotland – where every education setting works in a joined-up approach, which is the essence of Curriculum for Excellence. I am excited for my career ahead, to see how we grow together as one education system.*

## **FINAL WORDS**

In closing, it is worth going back to fundamental principles associated with the concept of the activist professional: ‘First and foremost an activist professional is concerned to reduce or eliminate exploitation, inequality and oppression’ (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002, p. 352). This overall aim is what brings everyone in the MSc TLT community together, and Sachs’ (2000) three questions then help us to identify how we might move this from aspiration to reality: ‘First, what is the best place to accomplish the project of becoming activist professionals in teaching? Second, what is the best place for ME to be? Finally, what can I do from where I am?’ (p. 78). For me, the answer to these questions is undoubtedly that the explicit subscription to an activist and transformative teaching orientation can and should begin in ITE, establishing knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be nurtured and extended career-long.

Through leading this programme, I set out to transform teacher education design locally, and maybe even policy more widely, but ended up learning more about myself as a person and a teacher than I ever could have imagined. I’ve learned that my best teaching happens when I allow myself to be vulnerable, that working in genuine partnership is a challenge, but when it works, so many unintended spin-offs happen that can enrich everyone’s practice, and finally, that recruiting the right people to ITE programmes is possibly the most important part of the whole endeavour, and something I’m keen to understand better from a research perspective. This journey has allowed me to build on my own research expertise, but has also forced me to engage with a wider range of research evidence, showing me just how much I don’t know! There have been battles to be fought in this journey – some were won, some lost, and some still ongoing. What I do know, however, is that building a programme on a very firm philosophical foundation, and actively creating pedagogical approaches that support that philosophy, is much more likely to lead to genuine transformative learning than simply tweaking existing structures every time a programme needs to be reaccredited. As Zeichner et al. (2015, p. 131) assert:

‘there is a real opportunity to establish forms of democratic professionalism in teaching and teacher education where colleges and universities, schools and communities come together in new ways to prepare professional teachers who provide everyone’s children with the same high quality of education’

This is my aspiration, and one that I know is shared by so many colleagues and students in and beyond Scotland.

Ultimately, and perhaps somewhat selfishly, this period has been the most satisfying, challenging and transformative experience of my professional life, and I am truly thankful to the students and colleagues who have joined me on this



adventure, not really knowing where it might take us. We look forward to many more chapters to come...

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