

## **A 'something to say' thought piece.**

### **DISCLAIMER**

*The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of TEAN*

## **Should there be a core curriculum for Initial Teacher Education in England? Five go on an epistemological adventure.**

**Mari Cruice (lead writer)**  
**University of Roehampton**

**Lorna Smith**  
**University of Bristol**

**Gabrielle Cliff Hodges**  
**(formerly) University of Cambridge**

**Rachel Roberts**  
**Institute of Education, University of Reading**

### **Abstract**

This piece of 'fiction written under oath' (Bridges, 2003) creates an imaginary online conversation between five teacher educators. The academics are developing their response to a proposal for a core curriculum in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) made in a paper by an influential, English commentator, Tom Bennett, entitled "Moving towards an evidence informed teaching profession."

The group argues against a core curriculum for ITE and highlights the need for everyone involved in discussions about research literacy in education to engage with epistemological insights from a range of writers including Dilthey, Gadamer and Biesta.

### **Keywords**

Core curriculum; Initial Teacher Education; Epistolary

### **Funding**

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Monday

Hi Al, how are you? Have you read Tom Bennett's<sup>1</sup> proposals for core curriculum for ITE (Bennett, 2017)? I'm just looking at it now. Chris x

Yes, I had a quick look when I saw it on Twitter. Al x

All that Twitters is not gold?

Exactly.

But policy makers are paying quite a lot of attention to the Twittersphere so we need to at least be aware of what's being said.

Yeah, I get that. I read the first part of Bennett's proposal -- he quotes the Carter Review (Carter, 2014)<sup>2</sup> which says that trainees aren't learning how to 'interpret educational theory and research in a critical way' (ibid., 3). And I agree that we all need to think long and hard about how to help teachers become more research literate. I'm just not quite convinced Bennett has thought long enough and hard enough about his proposal.

Well, at least he's out there asking questions and making suggestions. I'm just wondering whether to respond to his paper.

Is it worthy of a response? Remind me of his main points.

He starts off with a list of seven key aims (or what he calls aims), most of which are to do with research literacy. The first is to make sure teachers understand qualitative and quantitative research methods. The second is 'Evidence based

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Bennett was a teacher and is currently director and founder of researchEd, a teacher-led organisation working to improve the use of evidence in education. He is also a high-profile Tweeter on educational issues; the author of four books on teacher-training, behaviour management and educational research, and Chair of a Government-commissioned expert group on behaviour management in schools.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Andrew Carter was commissioned by the British Government to review the quality and effectiveness of ITE courses in England. In England there are various routes through which trainees can gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Traditionally these are University-based programmes with extensive school experience included, but the Government is currently promoting school-led 'School Direct' programmes that include University-based elements.

resources for teachers (where to find them, how to criticise them) - look at examples of high quality vs poor quality research' (Bennett, 2017, 4).

Does he give examples?

No. Some of the other seven aims are a bit anomalous -- they're about concepts that teachers may find useful, e.g. 'cognitive load'; 'working memory' (ibid., 4). Then it's got some loosely grouped secondary aims which include everything from 'a brief history of educational theory' (ibid., 4) to a list of attitudes towards research which he would wish to see teachers adopt. At the end of the section he suggests a couple of areas of core knowledge (assessment and phonics) and concludes that we need to help teachers to seek out high quality research.

Sounds like an odd mix.

Yes, I think it's been written quickly in order to prompt debate. He goes on to suggest that universities are the places where much of the content should be delivered and says that in-school provision should be avoided unless schools have 'effective and appropriate levels of expertise' (ibid., 6).

Well, it's refreshing to see someone making the case for the expertise found in universities at least. I'm not sure that it's a serious paper that we should be poring over, though.

But if we and ITE colleagues working in schools and unis don't involve ourselves in these debates, active Tweeters will be setting the agenda, even if their suggestions are rough and ready.

Fair point, I'll have another look tonight.

## **Tuesday**

Morning AI! How's things? Did you have a chance to look at the Bennett core curriculum for research literacy document again?

Yeah, it still seems very loose. There's a section from a BERA publication which is labelled by Bennett as 'clear and practical' (2017, 3) which struck me as anything but 'practical'. It was describing the holy grail of research literacy, he says: to 'get' research is to know about methods, be on top of all the latest publications and retain an intellectually rigorous, critical and sceptical approach. Simple!

Aha, I knew that you'd engage in the end! What about the rest of it?

Well, let's take the first key aim which seems to be about covering a list of terms that are mainly associated with quantitative research: 'statistical significance (p values), effect sizes... meta analysis... RCT [Randomised Control Trials]; generalisability; scalability' (ibid., 4).

Quite a long list of terminology.

And I'm not against these ideas *per se*, but ripeness is all. I can imagine some of my trainees being open to learning about these terms but I think some would engage perfunctorily and others would be actively resistant to this information in their training year.

And Bennett recognises the pressure that trainees are under. He says that 'in a dense and brief ITT period it must be questioned how much time can be spared on the abstract' (ibid., 5). He's suggesting that writers such as Freire, Dewey and Vygotsky are put to one side so that time can be spent on making trainees statistically literate.

Hmm, and as with any discussion of curriculum, the crux of the matter is: why privilege this knowledge over that? Why include Daniel Willingham and drop John Dewey? It seems to me that there are some pretty massive ontological and epistemological assumptions being made but not acknowledged. And his tone is critical when he is describing anything outside a narrow framework which supports quantitative approaches. He says, 'action research and lesson study, while possibly tangentially worthwhile post ITT, should be de-emphasised in initial teacher training, as the danger of encouraging pseudo-scientific approaches to research and analysis outweighs any potential reflective benefit' (ibid., 5). That's just an assertion that, ironically, has no evidence base.

I guess he's not really practising what he's preaching.

No: The good news is that Bennett has suggested that we should all develop a healthy scepticism and ensure criticality. Well, my scepticism is in rude health! Qualitative research is so important in education; I thought we'd got past the stage of having to defend its worth.

I know. I'm just reading Creswell's *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2013) and I like the way that he talks about the ideas that underpin qualitative choices. He says that qualitative inquirers make

certain assumptions about ‘the nature of reality (ontology), how the researcher knows what she or he knows (epistemology), the role of values in the research (axiology), the language of research (rhetoric), and the methods used in the process (methodology)’ (Creswell, 2013,16).

Yes, and quantitative researchers have an equally long list of assumptions that should be acknowledged.

Hi Al and Chris!

Hi Jo, good to see you online.

Still talking about the researchED report about having a core curriculum? Why does Bennett say that trainees need to know the basics of empirical research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, but then sum up qualitative research in just five words namely ‘Basics and (focus on) limitations’ (ibid., 4) -- whatever that means?

We were just saying that.

Sorry, but in all my years of reading about, and doing, qualitative research it’s been abundantly clear just how hugely influential and beneficial -- for teachers and researchers -- such an approach can be.

Jo, your tone is so refreshing and it reminds me of how timid I’ve become. I think experienced teachers and researchers in the University ITE community need to speak out more loudly and unapologetically as experts. I know that Gove’s term ‘the Blob’<sup>3</sup> had an invidious effect on my confidence. I confess that, for a while, I was worried that if I defended anything which went against the prevailing government orthodoxy of a knowledge-based curriculum, direct instruction or RCTs, I would just be dismissed as part of ‘the Blob’. Ben Okri recently said that censorship doesn’t only operate in tyrannies: ‘When good people cannot speak because the discourse has somehow disabled them, when writers are silent, when justice wavers, when a tide has turned so that decency no longer has a legitimate voice, then something has gone wrong in the mood of a country’ (2017). We need to make sure that we aren’t disabled.

Yep. I know how much I learnt from texts like *Achieving Literacy* by Margaret Meek (1983) which was a really interesting example of how to conduct and write up

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gove MP, former Secretary of State for Education, referred disparagingly to academics who challenged his policies as ‘The Blob’, in reference to a 1958 Steve McQueen film of the same name in which an amoeba destroys the world (Garner, 2014).

empirical qualitative research. I've also taught and supervised lots of PGCE and higher degree students who really like Helen Simons' idea about the paradox of case study research which celebrates the particular and the unique, and frequently yields outcomes that are inconclusive. Since education is far from being a cut-and-dried affair, the idea of learning to live with paradoxes and taking strength from them might offer particularly realistic ways of understanding pedagogy.

I love that phrase -- far from being a cut-and-dried affair -- but I do think that some politicians want education to be cuttable and dryable. Our current Schools Minister<sup>4</sup> seems to crave simple answers to complex questions.

Yes, and qualitative research digs into complexity. I can feel an interesting round-table discussion coming on. I wouldn't mind seeing Tom Bennett sitting next to Shirley Brice Heath and having a humdinger of an argument with her about the 'basics' of *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (1983); she would have a lot to say if readers just focused on its 'limitations'! Or what about Myra Barrs and Valerie Cork's wonderful qualitative research, which they describe in *The reader in the writer: The links between the study of literature and writing development at Key Stage 2* (2001)?

Of course, their book includes critical reflection on some of the limitations of the research – most, if not all, writers do – but what makes *The reader in the writer* memorable is the account of how teachers worked with children on a selection of wonderfully rich literature and how it informed the writing the children produced. The research methods are often replicated. So, what on earth would anyone gain from just focusing on the basics and the limitations?

I agree, I love Barrs' writing and remember how, when I first came across her work, she helped me to make sense of my practice.

Bennett could have hit out with some of the common arguments against qualitative research, for example that it's small-scale, isolated and non-generalisable. Yet he doesn't. Anyway, Lawrence Stenhouse addressed that point forty years ago in an article he published in the *British Educational Research Journal*, called 'Case study and case records: Towards a contemporary history of education' (1978).

Thanks for bringing Stenhouse, Barrs and Brice Heath to the table. It seems that we've amassed enough evidence to dismiss the idea that a core ITE curriculum should give short shrift to qualitative research.

---

<sup>4</sup> Justine Greening MP

Should we get back to the rest of the Bennett paper? What about the second aim, 'Evidence based resources for teachers, where to find them and how to criticise them -- look at examples of high quality vs poor quality research' (Bennett, 2017,4)?

Well, is this an aim? The substantive problem here is that 'good quality' research is most often found in peer reviewed journals and once teachers leave their training courses, access is denied.

I think that there are moves to change this: researchED is a powerful movement and at the last conference I went to, everyone was advocating greater access to firewalled research for teachers.

Yes, that's great -- I support any initiative which opens access. But I don't believe in pointing teachers in the direction of one or two portals and implying that these are the only routes to excellence. I'm interested in the work of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), but I don't think it has all the answers. And the bit in the Bennett proposal that says 'and how to criticise them', what does that even mean? Biesta's repeatedly made the case for 'Why "what works" won't work' (Biesta, 2007) so I hope that Biesta is at least required reading if we're going to establish some 'core' concepts.

Agreed. We do need to guard against slipping into a discourse which assumes that we are machines and that the aim of education is to increase our productivity levels. Let's move on, the third bullet point.

No, let's not, it's just a somewhat random repetition of terms which were used in the first 'core aim'.

Perhaps we should think about what we'd write if we had to design our own core curriculum for ITE?

Tomorrow I'll write to some of our colleagues and see who's interested.

**Wednesday**

Dear colleagues,

Would you be interested in sketching out a core curriculum for ITE? If you were to write a curriculum, what would it include and why?

Best wishes.

Chris

Hi all,

Good to hear from you. Can I just say that I am categorically opposed to the idea of a core curriculum in ITE. Sam

Hi Sam,

Thanks for being so clear and direct! Why such opposition? Chris.

Let me count the ways! Firstly, we pride ourselves on things which make our individual PGCE programmes special -- their Unique Selling Points, if you like. On my English PGCE, trainees have the chance to do interdisciplinary school-based projects with History and with Science trainees; they work with actors from a professional theatre company to learn how to bring Shakespeare to life in their classrooms; they can learn Latin; they can explore child psychology with world class psychologists...And I know that other PGCE programmes have their own specialist elements that will attract trainees. For a government which purports to champion a market economy, it would be a bit crazy to kill off choice to trainees who want to shop around for a PGCE programme that fits their interests.

Yes, that's a pretty powerful and obvious argument against a core curriculum.

Exactly, the problem with fixing something and saying it's 'core' means that things might get stale and irrelevant --- I think that we need to retain flexibility so that we can be responsive to changes in demographics or new research.

Precisely: externally imposed curricula can easily ossify. One thing that I value about running a PGCE is the creative autonomy I have to design the programme myself, knowing that I am trusted to curate a course that meets the needs of my trainees. And we're in touch with trainee opinion -- we survey every aspect of our course and get feedback on the minutiae; if one of my sessions strikes my cohort as irrelevant or poorly delivered, they're not slow to tell me.



Yes, the chance to be responsive and to refresh content is vital. If someone tries to persuade me to include more information about p values or to put Ben Goldacre's *Bad Science* (2008) on my reading list then I'll read their arguments and consider the strength of their case. But I will fight to retain an important part of my role as an academic, which is to use my professional judgement to decide what my trainees need.

Agreed. And seeing how hard the school sector is being hit by standardised curricula and reductive testing regimes, we need to guard against giving up our involvement in curriculum design.

Hi all!

Hey B, how are you?

Just seen this email string! I'm with Sam -- not in favour of a core curriculum. We have to retain the possibility of differentiation: if some trainees are showing an interest in the work of Freire or Dewey or Vygotsky I don't think anyone should be stepping in and telling me that I can't introduce their work until I've covered effect size and meta-analysis. People in the Department for Education or researchED are not as close to the needs of my trainees as I am: I certainly don't believe that a generic document is going to help one iota.

So for you, it's not about choice or ossification, it's about your professional autonomy which then enables you to differentiate appropriately.

Yes, and I agree that we need to watch that there isn't creeping control of content from central government or a quango.

You're arguing that nothing's broken, so the system doesn't need fixing.

I'm arguing that the current system, which offers QTS, PGCEs, Master's Degrees, PhDs or EdDs, has the capacity to train research-literate teachers. What we lack is funding.

Besides, Stephen Munday's recent report, *A framework of core content for initial teacher education* (2016), acknowledges that the case against tight prescription in ITE has been made and won: he acknowledges that 'it would be unhelpful to develop an exhaustive list of content that gives little scope for ITT providers to develop their own programme and it simply becomes a mechanical tick list for *providers to demonstrate compliance (indeed, such an approach has been tried and*

*rejected before, with the Government's prescription of a detailed curriculum for ITT in DfEE Circular 4/98)' (2016).*

But are we doing enough on research literacy with our beginning teachers? researchED has shown that there is a huge appetite out there for research. Professionals are hungry for high-quality studies which help them to improve their practice. Are our courses doing enough to help them?

The short answer is yes. On all the PGCE courses that I know of, trainees have to read, understand, respond critically to others' research – both quantitative and qualitative – and prove themselves to be research-literate and research-active. If they don't, they won't be able to complete their assignments satisfactorily or meet the Master's criteria we use to assess their work.

Yes. Trainees on my course do begin (and 'begin' is a crucial word here) to learn how to interpret and critique research. I'm proud that quite a common comment at the end of the PGCE course might be, 'I've done a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree, but I've never been so intellectually challenged as I have been during this year.'

But Bennett isn't just saying that he wants all teachers to become research literate in the way that you conceptualise research literacy. He's foregrounding a specific type of research literacy (clearly his preference) without providing any intellectually rigorous reasons for this preference. He has a hinterland and is advocating a tradition. The implication of what he is saying is that unless research has a certain effect size which has been established by RCTs then it might be duff. Scientific 'facts' are what count.

So, a concern that I have about Bennett's paper is that the concept of knowledge is being interpreted too narrowly. I'm more of the opinion that 'understanding begins when something addresses us' (Gadamer, 1960/1989, 299). Gadamer believed -- following Dilthey -- that we each interpret ideas or facts slightly differently: our journey in terms of our life experience and existing understandings to new 'knowledge' is necessarily unique; we each arrive at new 'knowledge' from a slightly different perspective.

Well put. Bennett's perspective is worryingly limiting, especially given the ideology that seems to be driving policy at the moment. We only need to glance at the current National Curriculum's focus on 'core knowledge' (DfE, 2014, 5) to see

Hirsch's influence via Gove. Bennett's recommendations are evidently taking an epistemological stance that he does not justify.

OK, so we've hit a wall with any attempt to write a core ITE curriculum for trainee English teachers. The arguments in favour of diversity, professional autonomy, differentiation and flexibility seem to have been more convincing than the case for prescription, not to mention the possible danger of an ideologically-driven approach.

Let's not stop this conversation though. As Dewey realised, 'There is no discipline in the world so severe as the discipline of experience subjected to the tests of intelligent development and direction.' (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 114).

## References

- Barrs, M., & Cork, V. (2001). *The reader in the writer*. London: Centre for Language in Primary Education.
- Bennett, T. (2017). *Moving towards an evidence informed teaching profession: A proposal for an Initial Teacher Training evidence and research curriculum*. London: researchED.
- Biesta, G. (2007). Why 'what works' won't work: Evidence based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1), 1-22.
- Brice Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bridges, D. (2003) *Fiction written under oath?* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- British Educational Research Association & Royal Society for the Arts. (2014). *Research and the teaching profession: Building the capacity for a self-improving education system*. London: BERA/RSA.
- Carter, A. (2014). *Carter review of Initial Teacher Training (ITT)*. London: Department for Education

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications.
- Daly, C. (2010). Trainee English teachers and the struggle for subject knowledge. *Changing English*, 11(2), 89-204.
- Department for Education. (2014). *The National Curriculum in England: Key stages 3 and 4 framework document*. London: Department for Education.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1998). *Experience and Education*. Indianapolis: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1960/1989). *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Gardner, R (2015) What is 'the Blob' and why is Michael Gove comparing his enemies to an unbeatable sci-fi mound of goo which once battled Steve McQueen? Available online at:  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/what-is-the-blob-and-why-is-michael-gove-comparing-his-enemies-to-an-unbeatable-sci-fi-mound-of-goo-9115600.html> [last accessed 25.05.17]
- Goldacre, B. (2008). *Bad Science*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Meek, M. (1983). *Achieving literacy: Longitudinal studies of adolescents learning to read*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Munday, S. (2016). *A framework of core content for initial teacher training (ITT)*. London: Department for Education.
- Okri, B. (30 March 2017). Brexit is Iago's paradise. *New Statesman*, 52. Retrieved from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/03/ben-okri-brexit-iagos-paradise> [last accessed 25.05.17]
- Polt, R.(1999) *Heidegger, an Introduction*. London: Routledge
- Simons, H. (1996). The paradox of case study. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(2), 225-240.
- Stenhouse, L. (1978). Case study and case records: Towards a contemporary history of education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 4(2), 21-39.