

## Tests without teaching for teachers

Not so long ago we heard about the introduction of renewable licences to practise for school teachers in England. They were immediately dubbed M.O.T.s by the press, after the Ministry of Transport tests for vehicle roadworthiness. This led to thoughts of the current old-car scrappage scheme whereby a car that might be about to fail its M.O.T. can be traded in at favourable rates against a shiny new one; the joke being that worn out teachers could be replaced by up-to-date (and cheaper to run) Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). Lovers of classic cars are not in favour of the scrappage scheme; and long-serving teachers that have given years of valuable service from before the days of national professional standards may have similar feelings about having to renew their licence.

Now we hear that the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA) has been asked by the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCSF) to consult on a scheme for assessing would-be teachers for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) without any training. This looks like expecting people to turn up to take a driving test after only a few lessons from members of the family.

But before we run away with motoring metaphors we should look at this proposal more closely. There are some issues and implications to do with implementation; there are also some that will be significant for institutions that are dedicated to teacher education; and probably the most significant set of issues and implications are what this proposal, alongside other ideas being mooted, will do to the professional formation and practice of teachers.

Our government likes work-based learning and, by and large, our major political parties have not shown themselves to be enthusiasts for teachers engaging with theory or critical reflection. Removing training from qualifying, even if initially only for a few applicants, will represent a further stage in the process of transforming teaching into an instrumental exercise that concentrates upon standards and targets and can easily be judged. The only questions that will need to be asked in order to find out if someone is fit to teach or fit to carry on teaching are 'have you met your standard?' and 'have you hit your target?'.

For the proposals to be seen to work at all they must produce a result similar to the present routes into teaching that, for what it is worth, receive very high praise from Ofsted. I assume that policy-makers do not wish the scheme to be seen as dumbing down to save money. That would not only hurt all of those teachers who will gain their qualifications without being taught but it would also make government appear to be anti teacher and damage public confidence. To counter any possible accusations of lowering the quality 'providers' are, therefore, being told that they must invent rigorous modes of assessment to ensure that standards will be met; which is rather like expanding an examination to

compensate for having abolished a course. But having to invent something new carries a cost. Who will bear that cost I wonder. Certainly providers will lose income if the proposed scheme grows and universities become mere testing stations. They will be asked to do more with less because they will have to be prepared for people wishing to work in, or switch to, different phases and Key Stages; and they will have to take account of qualified teachers in Further Education deciding to work in schools although they will have previously worked to different professional standards and employment regimes.

I guess that the style of assessment could resemble procedures for the accreditation of prior certificated and experiential learning (APCEL) with much use of critical professional learning journals and portfolios of evidence. It might also have elements of an open book examination. We know that there is likely to be an initial interview to assess suitability for assessment. But whatever the form of assessment the more effort put into preparing for it at an early stage the better will be the result. Leaving preparation to the last possible moment will be harmful. Providers will wish to explain to participants early and adequately the terms of the assessment process. Simply turning up for a test or even a test about the test will not do. Maybe we shall see a further revision of the Career Entry and Development Profile. And maybe we shall see universities and publishers selling 'How to pass your test' booklets.

At what point, however, does a provider accept responsibility for putting into place all of the support mechanisms so that when an applicant turns up and asks if they are fit to be assessed they will not be wasting their time? How will providers know beforehand the numbers that might be involved? Or where they are? How can the cost of resources be gauged? When will people register for the test? When, another motoring metaphor, do universities start the taxi meter running? These days university departments, schools and faculties are required to produce business plans making a case for new programmes. There will have to be one for this scheme. It could not be written yet.

No matter how good APCEL procedures are or how much care is taken over preparation, participants lose something doing things this way; and it usually costs more than you think. Part of the cost is hidden because it takes time for problems to emerge and to be dealt with. How long, for example, will it take to work out that the scheme for untrained qualified teachers may have impoverished the educational experience of children? Professional deficits must be made up at some point: the price has to be paid somehow and by someone. Does government think that continuing professional development will rectify the deficiencies?

Merely gathering the evidence to match criteria or, in this case, standards is not enough. It is only by the interchange of the classroom that confusion, misinterpretation and unexpected lack of background knowledge can emerge and be dealt with. I believe that another very valuable, though unquantifiable and

unpredictable, contribution to the learning experience of trainee teachers is the extent to which they learn from each other. It is weird to think of a professional qualifying without the benefit of this. Most teachers are gregarious and sociable and enjoy the learning process. Now it is being proposed that they can qualify without mixing with others undergoing a similar experience. I cannot see any benefit in that.

I think we are seeing a trend. The Conservative Party is now conceiving local government as a no-frills airline: you get your basics and if you want more you must put your hand in your pocket; and both major political parties have a history of being suspicious of universities (who tend to question things) and would like to increase on-the-job training. So we can look forward to no-frills teacher training. There was a time when universities could make opportunity for cross-curricular experiences for trainee teachers and provide modules on the sociology, history and philosophy of education and even comparative education but the concentration on subjects squeezed much of that out of the available time. Subjects mean tests and public examinations which provide an easy way of measuring the performance of teachers so governments cannot see the point of learning experiences that do not focus solely on results and the hitting of targets.

The proposal is also an inevitable consequence of the standards approach: if you can set out the requirements for a qualification then, the thinking goes, all you have to do is to seek out the evidence to match them. This is anti-intellectual. Doing things this way means that unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes will be disregarded and discarded. No-one will discover professional penicillin. Teachers of science do not tell children to set up experiments to prove hypotheses and to reject evidence that does not fit. That would be unscientific.

But, if we are not careful, that is how all teachers may qualify in future. They will obtain an unqualified post at a school or two, be given their set of standards, told to assemble evidence that they can meet the standards, hope to find someone who will give up their time to provide a little free coaching or go to a coaching company, request an interview to see if they have a chance of passing, book a test, turn up on the day and hope to pass. On the way home they can tear up the L plates.

Teaching to the test is normally regarded as very bad educational practice; so what do you think of testing without teaching? Would this be a good idea for children too?

To read more and contribute to the TDA's consultation on this proposal go to [www.tda.gov.uk/about/newsletter/sep2009/Articles/consultation.aspx](http://www.tda.gov.uk/about/newsletter/sep2009/Articles/consultation.aspx)

*None of the above represents an official ipda view on this proposed scheme. It is merely an opinion piece; but one of the strengths of ipda is the opportunity it provides to exchange views on important matters of policy that affect the*

*professionalism of teachers so if you have anything you wish to say about the proposal by the DCSF please share it on the website.*

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