



Perspectives on the roller-coaster of becoming a teacher: Surfacing pre-service teacher voice through poetry

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in Scotland as they undertake a 1-year post-graduate teaching qualification (PGDE). Part of the work in this intensive qualification year is to reconcile shifting understandings of what it means to become and be a teacher. The aim was to surface authentic descriptions of the experience of student teachers as they reflect on and develop their expectations, identities and values in relation to being a teacher. Data collection was in the form of original poems created by the students at the end of their year of study. This approach was chosen to allow for emotionally honest responses, making use of the immediacy and inherent economy of language that poetry offers. Thematic analysis was applied to the data. Areas for teacher educator reflection are identified. These include recognising the challenges that come with navigating shifting understandings of both the practice and the purpose of the job as well as the consequent emotional work the qualification year entails.

Keywords: Initial Teacher Education, pre-service teacher, poetry, identity

Introduction

Becoming a teacher

Becoming a teacher is a complex, multi-faceted process (e.g. Beattie, 2000; Beltman et al., 2015; Browning & Korthagen, 2023; Caires et al., 2012). As well as the development of the skills of the craft, lesson planning, classroom management, deepening both subject and subject pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and so on, is the parallel development of professional and teacher identity (e.g. Anspal et al., 2011; Korthagen, 2004; Rushton et al., 2023). Student teachers at the start of their one-year post-graduate initial teacher education (ITE) qualification often hold idealistic and perhaps simplistic views of what being a teacher entails (e.g. Anspal et al., 2011; Malderez et al., 2007; Younger et al., 2007). Part of the work of the ITE year, then, is undertaking the journey to a more nuanced, informed, and far-reaching understanding that shapes both attitudes and practice (Korthagen, 2004). This is challenging work, requiring “negotiating within shifting conceptions of what teaching is or should be...” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p.185). It follows that part of the work of the teacher educator in developing ITE programmes is to recognise and plan for the complexities of this negotiation and the barriers it can present to successful progression. We need to create space and structures within our teaching for meaningful and productive exploration of the self that allows for and takes into account this dynamic nature (Beattie, 2000; Rushton et al., 2023). Given concerns about teacher health and wellbeing and recruitment/retention issues (Kelchtermans, 2017; Long and Danechi, 2022), there is increasingly a need for teacher educators to seek to understand the experiences of this transition.

Becoming a teacher in Scotland

In Scotland the most usual qualification route for Secondary subject specialist teachers is to undertake a one-year postgraduate course (PGDE). The course is a roughly 50/50 mix of university-based academic study, and practice-based study on school placements. All teachers in Scotland must be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). Successful completion of the PGDE enables Provisional Registration. Newly qualified teachers must then complete a period of probationary service (usually one year) to demonstrate that they meet the Standard for Full Registration.

Poetry as data

Much has been written about the various methodological approaches to using poetry in inquiry across varied disciplines (e.g. Galvin & Prendergast, 2016; Lupton, 2021; Owton, 2017). Owton (2017, p.xi) describes poetic inquiry as a way of “seeking to reveal something of the essence of people’s key experiences”. Participant-created poetry, as used in this study, has the potential to give us real, personal and immediate responses to the lived experience. Poems can provide a “collection of rich, illustrative portrayals” (Wietlisbach et al., 2022, p.428). Poems “condense human experience” (Brown et al, 2021, p.258). The intention in this study was that poetry writing would allow student teachers to reflect honestly, personally and freely on their experiences and expectations, their shifting understandings and emotional responses. Whereas the presence of an interviewer, who would be a tutor known to them, would inevitably (consciously or unconsciously) encourage participants to give a perceived right answer, the inherently personal nature of poetry creation (Illingworth & Radhakrishnan, 2023) would be less constraining. Contrasted with more formalised pieces of writing, poetry can be messier, fragmented, a pulling together of potentially disparate strands of thinking or memories. It can be an instinctive distillation of ideas and key words, freed from the structure and grammar of prose writing.

This study aimed to provide insight into the lived experience of the 1-year initial teacher education PGDE pathway, with the intention of us as teacher educators developing a better understanding of the specific complexities and challenges of the transition year and of the barriers to successful completion.

Methodology

Participants

The participant group was our cohort of postgraduate student secondary school teachers. We offer maths, English, physics, chemistry and biology pathways. Participants were a mix of genders, a range of ages from early 20s to 50s, and were mostly Scottish domiciled students but with a significant minority of international students. Data was gathered at the end of the programme. The majority of the students were progressing to a probationary year. Most would join the Teacher Induction Scheme (TIS), a Scottish Government scheme which provides a one-year probationary placement (GTCS). A few students would be using the Flexible Route (GTCS) either for eligibility or personal reasons, and a small number of students who had not yet successfully met the Standard for Provisional Registration (GTCS), and were therefore not yet ready to graduate, would be undertaking an additional school placement.

Procedure

Data collection was in the form of original poems created by the students during a single in-person workshop. The intention was that the workshop and opportunity to engage in deeper reflection of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) experience and their current sense of being a teacher would be of value in and of itself. In planning the workshop, we were cognisant of the potential for poetry and poetry writing to feel intimidating, othering, elitist, something only real poets do (Owton, 2017). We aimed to mitigate this by carefully structuring the first half of the workshop through a series of activities so that the students felt comfortable, freed, and ready to consolidate their personal reflection through creating a poem. The whole cohort was expected to participate in the workshop, as part of the programme. The focus was very much on the reflecting, not on the quality of writing. The reflection/writing did not link to any assessment processes. Contributing the completed poem to the study was voluntary.

The data discussed in this article comes from two successive cohorts, who contributed a total of 53 poems (25 in year one, 28 in year two). Participants' contributions are anonymised, and poems are identified here by a number.

The responses were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Responses were initially coded for similarities. The iterative process involved revisiting the data multiple times over the research period, including discussion with a colleague, allowing for review and development of the initial themes as the author became increasingly familiar with the data set.

Results

The results are organised around four high-level themes:

- i) Readjusting perceptions of the job
- ii) Examining the purpose of the job
- iii) Do I have the qualities of a teacher?
- iv) The emotional journey

i) Readjusting perceptions of the job

There were many descriptions of a shifting understanding of the realities and nature of the job. An experienced teacher appears to just teach, the planning and preparation are unseen and despite the university-based study, many student teachers are taken aback by school placement.

Who knew that teaching required so much time
that teachers don't just walk in a room + teach.
That making humans better people
requires planning + structure. – Poem 23

These suggest a newly formed recognition that there is an amount of work that is not solely standing in front of a class teaching. Several poems reference the mental busyness of the job "*the number of simultaneous thoughts*". This busyness of thinking and responding is echoed in this next poem excerpt evoking the metaphor of a duck paddling furiously to stay afloat:

Being a teacher is like being a duck on the water.
On the surface the students see a calm, and collected person
Underneath, the cogs are turning the feet are paddling and that is how we stay afloat
– Poem 51

A major contributing factor to the sense of busyness is of course not just the myriad demands in the classroom itself, but the accompanying workload of planning and preparing. For many there was a sense that workload becomes overwhelming: “The workload is too large to mention” – Poem 8.

Quite a number referenced struggling to manage and/or mental health issues in relation to workload.

7am lying in bed, eyes tightly closed & mind racing
dreading the workload I will be facing – Poem 28

A number described having to explicitly learn to manage workload. For some this was perhaps through setting and managing rules:

Setting boundaries it can take over all of your time.
No nights out, no family time,
No socialising or having fun
New rule – know when to switch off the laptop. – Poem 21

For others it was by now knowing that workload is possible to manage: “You know now that you can have a life” – Poem 18. And for another group it was related to learning to manage perfectionism: “To remember that good is good enough” – Poem 42.

For some students this is an ongoing concern with anticipation that workload will continue to be a struggle and a juggle in the upcoming probationary year.

Most of the poems that express surprise at the busyness and complexities of the job also describe the joy of the job. The student teacher may be surprised by the challenges, and often recognise that there is still a way to go to achieve their vision of calm confidence in the classroom, but they are still overall positive about the job.

Expected to be easy
Expected to be fun
All sunshine and rainbows
[three verses describing lessons not going as planned and being pushed to their limit]
Sometimes it is thunder
But sometimes
It is all sunshine and rainbows – Poem 43

In general, the poems give a sense of a pervasive expectation that it will get easier. The poem about the duck paddling frantically finishes:

Just now it may feel as though I am swimming against the current
But one day the tides will change and the calm of the surface may also occur underneath
– Poem 51

A minority of the cohort, however, expressed deep frustrations with this new understanding.

Aims and objectives
Targets
Reflective diary entries...
Late night marking
Assessment
Data collection
...
this is not teaching – Poem 50

And:

I am a teacher
I want to do perfectly for all
But I get distracted by lesson planning,
test preparing, sleep deprivation, broken
down slaughtered and I forget ... – Poem 35

ii) Examining the purpose of the job

The majority of the poems gave the sense of a compelling moral vision giving purpose and meaning to the job. The anticipation, and for some the early experiences, of impacting children and young people positively was strongly motivating.

Working with people is very hard,
But change someone's life or thinking is fantastic.
If you have just 1 student/class, who you
Influenced, the work was no longer in vain. – Poem 2

There were descriptions of the kinds of inclusive spaces the student teachers aspired for their classrooms to be: "Seeing the quiet pupils thrive is inspiring" – Poem 31. And:

I am the one who juggles being firm and fair,
To ensure everyone has a positive experience with my classroom – Poem 4

Success for some is defined as meeting the children's needs. Quite a number of poems represented this by focusing their reflections on memories of interactions with one particular pupil. This next poem remembers a pupil who was initially unengaged in lessons. The beginning and end of the poem read:

He sat and stared every lesson
Umning and Awing when asked a question

Never lifting a pencil ...
[...]
I looked up to see, a pencil to paper and eyes focused
I realised I made it being his teacher – Poem 13

Some poems reference the challenges of keeping that focus on meeting the needs of all children:

the energy required to be approachable
to all kids, even the ones that
have annoyed you all week – Poem 23

As described above, most poems represented the purpose of the job as being about impact on pupils and building relationships, however a few focused on a product as emblematic of the job done:

And as I held in my hands a neatly stapled pile of
28 essays.
I felt I could burst with pride.
The fruits of my labours – Poem 26

And a few focused on the subject and inspiring pupils in relation to that subject:

The highlight of the year ...
“Sir I like science now” – Poem 25

iii) Do I have the qualities of a teacher?

A lot of the students made reference to the kinds of personal qualities they felt they brought to the role and felt were necessary and desirable within the role. There was a lot of consistency in the words chosen: words such as fair, consistent, kind, patient.

Fair, consistent, reliable
Fun, creative, inspiring
Approachable, kind, helpful – Poem 19

Firm but fair and patient
Cheery, friendly, kind
Encouraging, inspiring
A knowledgeable mind – Poem 42

Some students alongside referencing the qualities they felt were important noted that those qualities in themselves are not enough:

I knew I was kind, I knew I was empathetic
I didn't realise how hard it would be – Poem 47

Allied to this were a few students who seemed to be working hard to keep their sense of self, and to hold onto the idea that they were 'enough'.

The biggest lesson of all
is to never forget to be me – Poem 30

There were several poems with references to having to present a professional teacher persona in the classroom irrespective of what might be happening in one's personal life.

Has his/her own problems, family, but when
She/he steps inside the school these have to be left behind.
Nice even if angry or cries inside. – Poem 2

iv) The emotional journey

Reference to and descriptions of struggle permeated the poems. A significant proportion of the students referenced the challenges of the PGDE year either explicitly or implicitly.

Some poems question whether the struggle is worth it.

Why am I doing this? I thought I knew, I'm not sure.
Always working, treading water, am I good enough? Who even knows?
When did I last have time for myself, to relax.
Who needs a work-life balance? Instead I've got
Constant pressure, deadlines, anxiety, stress, fatigue, burn out – Poem 16

Several poems describe a chronology of ups and downs. Feeling excitement, then exhaustion, then a sense that things are getting better, then things going awry again. The next poem describes the ups and downs from the start of the academic year to the end. These excerpts give a sense of the roller-coaster of emotion:

Christmas Break, OMG
Exhaustion
Stress
Braindead
Constant blank mind
[...]
March, marching forward the mind has
clicked, the marbles are lined up.
April, the marbles are lined up, but some are beginning to roll... – Poem 33

Alongside poems that are primarily focused on the struggle, are many that are overall positive and upbeat, and yet also contain clearly remembered, still vivid moments of despair:

At certain points I wanted to quit
Many points – Poem 29

Many, amidst the struggle, contain a sense of determination to continue. Alongside the struggle, a number of students noted that while they had not recognised the complexities of the job, they perhaps also had not quite anticipated the depth of the *warm fuzzy* feeling when relationships evolve positively:

Warm fuzzy feeling when the troublesome
pupil now wants to please you – Poem 21

Contributing to the struggle for several students was the perception that others were managing more easily. More than one poem made explicit reference to feeling like an imposter. This next excerpt is from a poem starkly titled ‘The Imposter’:

What am I doing? I think to myself
the very first day of this journey.
The people around me
seem so sure, but
not me.
Not good, not smart, not brave
Enough – Poem 1

Even after a successful set of experiences, doubts can linger:

I start placement 2, it's a new school
What if placement 1 was a fluke
[The poem later continues ...]
I have finished placement 2/3
It was OK
IMPOSTER!
How could you be a teacher, you have tricked everyone! – Poem 9

Looking forward again, this sense of being less qualified and able than those around does not end with successful completion of the PGDE programme. A few poems anticipate the probationary year with ongoing anxiety.

There was also a thread of feeling that learning had taken place as a result of meeting and working through the struggle. A poem titled ‘Period 6 on a Wednesday’ focuses on the experience of one lesson. It starts positively, with a description of feeling ready and planned at the start of the lesson; things start to go wrong “*They talk and speak and shout*”; things escalate “*The pupils are not following*”; but it finishes with the sentiment that this was where growth happened.

Although I was beat
And the lesson was in the Air
In the Air, I learned and found my feet
Because on a period 6 on a Wednesday
I grew – Poem 44

Similarly, in a poem that starts ‘Stepping through a dark tunnel’ where the dark tunnel is a metaphor for this student’s experience of learning to teach, there is “*no light yet up ahead*” early in the poem. There then comes a sense of the value in making mistakes, learning from those mistakes and the learning lighting the way.

A false step is not the end
But activates a hidden switch
Which shines a beam of light – Poem 34

In other poems there is a general sense of the learning and development over the year:

My improvement has been gradual, measurable only at the end.
Perhaps these are the key moments
Viewable only once round the bend – Poem 7

A final thought from the data is to note that despite all the challenges, for the majority of participating students there was a sense (at the end of the programme) of being pleased that they had chosen to embark on a career in teaching, and that they had successfully completed their ITE year:

I am a teacher. I did it – Poem 26

Discussion

These findings are drawn from two cohorts at one ITE institution. No claims are made that the sample is more broadly representative or that the findings generalise to the wider population of student teachers in Scotland or further afield. Further, the data was gathered at a single point in time, a snapshot at the moment between the end of one stage and the beginning of the next.

Poetry as research method

Taken together, the poems offer a rich, evocative, at times raw, often humorous, insight into the considerations of student teachers at a particular point in their transition into the profession. As will be discussed below the findings chime with and support the wider literature on this transition suggesting that the generation of original poetry gives valid and serviceable data (Illingworth & Radhakrishnan 2023). In purely practical terms it engendered a high response rate (Wietlisbach et al, 2022) compared to likely returns from invitations to participate in more traditional methodologies. The reflexive, creative, fragmentary nature of poetry writing allowed what mattered most to the authors (students) in that moment to surface, distilled to its essence (Owton, 2017), but still holding complexities (Lupton, 2021). Many of the poems held a plurality of ideas woven into the short pieces of writing. Strands linking to revised understandings of the job, managing the competing demands of the job, holding onto a moral vision, holding onto a sense of self. There is a depth and an abundance in this complexity. From a teacher educator perspective, the poems carried an emotional power that would be hard to replicate in dialogic methodologies. The form allowed an immediacy and connection between writers and researchers that is authentic and hard to obtain through more traditional methods (Wietlisbach et al, 2022). The data provided a stimulus and vehicle for teacher educator reflection. The poems, by their nature, are full of personal

details of the lived experience which provide vivid context (Caires et al., 2012; Lupton, 2021; Wietlisbach et al., 2022). The ready preservation of participant voice whilst interrogating and talking about the data, means that context is retained more faithfully (Brown et al, 2021). Deep engagement with this form of qualitative data might drive empathetic and responsive ITE programmes.

Value to the students

It was intended that the workshop would be of value in itself. It was planned as one element amongst several in the programme aimed at enabling, provoking and habituating reflective practice as a core competency of developing teachers, as is the norm across Western ITE programmes (e.g. Collin et al., 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002) and expected by Scotland's accrediting body (GTCS). A variety of approaches, structures, rationales and triggers for reflection is necessary (Collin et al., 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002) for both developing practice and for noticing, and responding to, the refining conceptions of teacher identity (e.g. Beattie, 2000; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Browning & Korthagen, 2023, Malderez et al., 2007). Alongside more operationalised requirements focusing on the pragmatic development of tangible skills, this space would give an opportunity for a holistic drawing attention to the journey (Collin et al., 2013, Rushton et al., 2023). Beattie (2000) describes the importance of professional knowledge making through storytelling, enabled here through scaffolding the remembering, telling, retelling, and writing about key moments. The students responded positively to the exercise as a whole, and to the specific invitation to create an original poem. They wrote, in silence, in the moment, with a focus, and created a variety of forms with a range of ideas, emotions and vocabulary. Most of our students have a maths/science background and would not necessarily have been predicted to relish this invitation to write creatively, and to do it on the spot. But relish they did, at least to outward appearances. They were responsive, creative, and during the peer-peer dialogic aspects of the workshop had plenty to discuss. Anecdotally they appreciated the opportunity for expression and the format of creative outlet.

Journey of the ITE year

Threaded through the poems is a strong sense of shock (Squires et al., 2022) and questions about continuing with many references to 'quitting' and 'will I make it?'. Some of this is revealed as an expectation that the job would be inherently fun and rewarding, that they would enjoy teaching, that pupils would be pleased to be in their classrooms. There is an inevitable jarring between expectations of purely positive experiences and embarking on an emotionally challenging journey (Beltman et al., 2015; Browning & Korthagen, 2023). There are descriptions of the shock at the busyness in the moment: the number of concurrent thoughts in the classroom, the decisions, the uncertainties. This is especially true at the beginning of one's career, when everything is new, routines have not yet become automated, and you are finding *your* way of doing things. How do I respond to this situation? To this child? My lesson is going awry (marbles are rolling), what do I do? On top of that, there is the unseen underpinning workload. Teaching isn't just teaching, and it has been well documented (e.g. Beltman et al., 2015; Caires et al., 2012; Younger et al., 2007) that it is hard, if not impossible, to anticipate the amount of planning and preparation that will be required. Students described, often in highly emotive language, the anxiety induced by what feels like an overwhelming, never-ending workload. For some this perception of never-ending-ness stretches beyond the now and is anticipated into the next stages of their careers. Many described actively learning how to manage their workload. Some of this learning is practical: learning how to recognise when enough is enough, learning how to manage perfectionism and learning when to shut the laptop. However, there is

also the workload and emotional struggle that comes with holding on to and trying to meet exceedingly high (self-)imposed standards (Younger et al, 2007). Students described an aspiration to be inspiring in the classroom whilst also, at all times, responding to and meeting the needs of everyone in the classroom. Their commendable desire to be the teacher they aspire to be, to meet their moral purpose, needs to find a way to exist alongside a realistic interpretation of, and managing of, workload.

Weaving into this was a vulnerability, doubts about ability to continue and evocations of imposter syndrome. The students who attended the workshop and contributed a poem to the data set had experienced sufficient success both academically and on school placements that they were (mostly) progressing to their probationary year, or (for a few) moving to an additional school placement. They were feeling sufficiently confident and positive about teaching that they were choosing to embark on that next step. And yet they were very clearly remembering real doubt, and in some cases, those doubts were projecting into their probationary period. Imposter syndrome still lurks, concerns about workload are still rife. It is easy for us as teacher educators to see the successes and not look deeper. We need to remember that a student who appears confident, on top of things, one moment, may not feel like that, in the next moment. We need to recognise the frustration of working hard to corral unruly marbles only to watch some roll away, whilst peers' marbles are perceived as staying in place.

For the majority of these students, this repositioning of expectations (the job is not as easy as expected and is not just the visible work of standing in front of a class) may have come as a shock but is tempered with a presumption that the job will get easier and in addition, that the job is worth it. There is a strong sense in the poems of perceived purpose and rewards of the job. Most of the poems referenced purpose in terms of impact on pupils, with a minority referencing love of the subject, and desire to pass on a love of the subject. There is a pervasive sense of most of the students being still strongly motivated towards a career in teaching (Younger et al., 2007) and being attracted to teaching for largely intrinsic reasons of personal fulfilment.

It is perhaps noteworthy that in terms of relationships the vast majority focused on self and/or on relations with pupils, with very few commenting on or referring to relations with colleagues in schools or with schools themselves as entities. The relationships described are almost all either internal or towards the pupils, and the impact on pupils. This lack of reference to core professional relations perhaps implies that the students do not yet, for the most part, see themselves as belonging within a profession or within an institution (Beltman et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2017). This may reflect the need for a focus on the self as being a necessary stage in the construction of a professional self (Malderez et al., 2007). However, perhaps it also relates to the student on placement being in a kind of limbo. They are caught between being a professional, standing in front of the class, having responsibility, presenting as a teacher, and yet, on the other hand, being observed, being critiqued, needing to pass assessments. They are not yet wholly regarded by self, or by colleagues, as professionals.

Descriptions of highly aspirational values relating to the moral purpose of the job sit alongside descriptions of students' perceptions of their own core qualities (Korthagen, 2004). Attributes were mostly in terms of generic positive personal qualities (fair, consistent, kind, patient etc) rather than perhaps more active qualities like inter-personal skills, or professional skills such as classroom management, effective lesson planning and so on (Younger et al., 2007). This suggests most feel they (still) possess the qualities they already conceived of as being important to being a teacher and that the work now is to build on those existing strengths (Malderez et al., 2007). For some students this is perhaps also seen in the expressed challenges of needing to compartmentalise one's personal versus professional self (Korthagen, 2004). This

sense of being oneself needs to be tempered with a more nuanced understanding of the expectations and realities of how one presents within the role. Teaching is a very public job. The nature of being observed by and receiving feedback from several different teachers, feedback that might be conflicting, makes holding onto self-concept difficult.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the descriptions of shock relate to the experiences on placement in schools. The one-year ITE pathway is an intense year and it needs supportive and positive experiences in schools (Anspal et al., 2011; Caires et al., 2012; Malderez et al., 2007). In addition, perhaps during the university-based study, we need to discuss school placement as being generally experienced as a steep learning curve, that there will likely be ups and downs, and provide opportunities for students to begin to anticipate this and to pro-actively develop strategies to be drawn on when needed (Squires et al., 2022).

The findings, then, confirm the findings of others (e.g. Anspal et al., 2011) of a general pattern of moving from idealism to reality and to consolidation. For a notable minority in this study, however, there is no ready reconciliation of early expectations with this new conceptualisation. Some of these students expressed anger and used highly emotive language in their frustrations. Some of the poems were hard to read. Yet, these poems were written by the students who were still in the room. In line with national patterns, some of our students every year conclude that teaching is not for them and choose to leave the programme. It must take significant resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016) to overcome the deep sense of burn-out evoked in some of the poems. For some students of course the resilient response may be to leave (Mansfield et al., 2016) and concern with attrition should be focused on wanting to prevent good teachers from leaving for the wrong reasons (Kelchtermans, 2017). That said, for these continuing students the depictions of ongoing anxieties are concerning from both a mental health and a retention perspective. Part of the ITE role is to encourage and support pre-service teachers to develop ways and strategies to maintain balance now and as they progress through the early stages of their careers and beyond (Rushton et al., 2023; Squires et al., 2022). Some of the challenges of the one-year programme is that there isn't much flexibility in timescales. For students with added, external, barriers e.g. financial circumstances, caring responsibilities, health issues, there might not be sufficient time or spare emotional capacity to make the necessary shifts.

Conclusions

This study used participant-created original poetry to examine the lived experience of pre-service teachers at the end of their 1-year ITE programme. The poems were evocative and contained highly emotional language and imagery, both positive and negative, reaffirming that becoming a teacher is challenging and emotionally demanding (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Malderez et al., 2007). The poems give evidence of some lingering naivety (Younger et al., 2007) about becoming a professional and the attributes required.

As well as providing rich insights for us as teacher educators, the poetry writing as a stimulus for reflection appeared to be of value to the students, enabling them to pause and crystallise their thoughts of who they are in relation to their profession at the end of an intense year, before moving into their next step. As referenced above, a central role of teacher education programmes is to provoke, enable and smooth the shifting understanding of teaching as a profession. For teacher educators, there is perhaps also a need to more explicitly work with students to reframe overcoming struggle as a positive. To face a challenge and work through it is something to be proud of, not evidence of short-comings and a source of self-blame.

Finally, this haiku gives a succinct summary of the journey from idealism via challenge and struggle to a new understanding (Anspal et al., 2011):

Noble intentions
Shock, tears, reflection, shift, focus
Lesson has been learned – Poem 48

Ethical approval

The project was subject to scrutiny and approval by Edinburgh Napier University School of Applied Sciences Ethics and Research Integrity Committee. Participants gave informed consent to participate and for publication. Verbal briefing and agreements were supported by a written participant information sheet and a signed consent form prior to data collection.

Biography

Heather Earnshaw is an Associate Professor in Teacher Education at Edinburgh Napier University. She has worked in physics/STEM education for over 20 years in a variety of roles at local and national level.

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