

Are the best teachers born or taught? How to identify potential for success in trainee primary school teachers

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This paper argues that while anyone can learn the basics of being a teacher – the pedagogic strategies and the content knowledge – how easy this is and how successful the future teacher will be is dependent on the non-academic attributes of an individual. Admission on to teacher education courses (BA Education with QTS and PGCE) are changing to reflect government priorities and better understanding of the limitations of traditional methods. However, they could be even better informed by focusing on the non-academic characteristics of successful teachers.

Selecting the best possible teachers to join the teaching workforce presents an international challenge: UNESCO predicts a worldwide need for almost 70 million new teachers by 2030 (UIS, 2016). As individuals, teachers have considerable impact on their pupils' wellbeing and learning (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). Being able to spot who will develop into a successful teacher is not an exact science. However, a combination of changing regulations, improved

understanding of a teacher's role and an expanding range of selection strategies mean that we are better placed to achieve this than in the past. Traditional teacher selection methods such as subject knowledge aptitude tests (English and Maths) plus interview (usually involving a head teacher and an academic), had two main problems. First, they were both expensive and resource intensive. The second, they were prone to distortion through unconscious bias (Kausel, Culbertson & Madrid, 2016).

For a long time, this ad hoc approach ran contrary to developments in other professions where there was a move to standardization and rigor in selection processes.

The current selection landscape in England:

The latest government guidance on eligibility criteria still requires that entrants to primary teacher training courses have a degree or equivalent and at least a grade 4 (equivalent to an old grade C) GCSE in English,



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Mathematics and Science. However, the additional assessments in literacy and numeracy were abandoned in 2020.

As the statutory entry requirements for teaching have changed, so too have university selection processes. The explicit guidance that a lack of school experience should not be a barrier to entry to the profession has rendered the traditional interview format even less relevant. Suitability to teach has to be decided from a wide range of information including application forms, ability tests, interviews, referees statements and background checks.

This need to blend a range of sources had led to an adoption of a wider range of selection approaches:

- Teaching tasks – where applicants are asked to present or micro-teach on a particular topic.
- Group discussion tasks- assessing communication and collaboration skills.
- Artefact based interviews – inviting applicants to use improvisation and imagination to explore non-standard learning opportunities for primary children
- Psychometric or other audits of academic or non-academic abilities.

However, there is more work still to do so that selection processes identify the potential of future candidates in a way that minimizes waste of human and financial resources and maximizes the learning outcomes for children.

A first step to understanding this is to explore two fundamental and contrasting hypotheses about who should be a teacher.

Teachers: born or made?

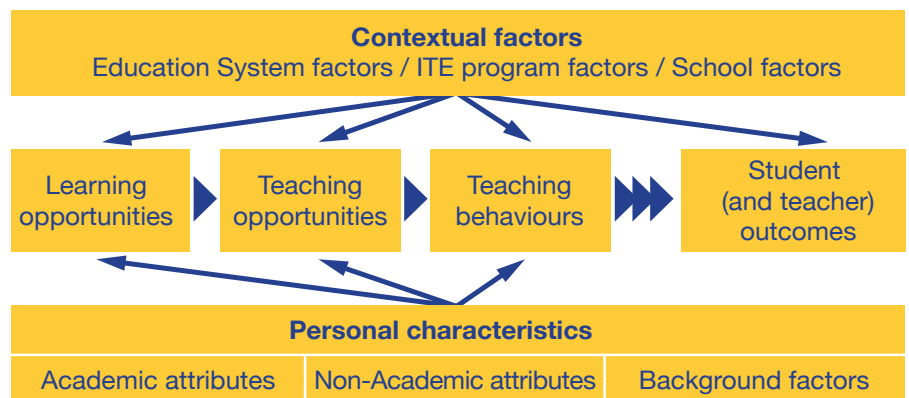
There are deeply held beliefs in society about the teachability of teaching. The ‘Bright Person Hypothesis’ holds that “*The best teachers are Bright, Well Educated people who are smart enough and thoughtful enough to figure out the nuances of teaching in the process of doing it.*” (Kennedy, Ahn & Choi, 2008, p.3). Good teachers are individuals who possessed certain gifts which enabled them to teach where others could not (Baumert & Kunter, 2013). Cognitive ability is important but it is not a question of this alone. Key personal characteristics are also a factor. Selection of the best teachers requires the design of assessments that identify these cognitive and key personal competencies (Kunter et al. 2013).

A second hypothesis is based on the belief that teacher effectiveness stems from their mastery of different pedagogical and content knowledge domains. Any trainee primary teacher can be taught how best to select and deploy this knowledge in a given situation. Mastery in these knowledge domains is the central task of initial primary teacher training. Although, it remains an open question as to exactly what skills or content should

be prioritized (Shulman, 1986). If anyone can be taught, then we should not be too concerned about a narrow evaluation of cognitive ability. Selectors should judge the potential of a candidate as holistically as possible. Anything less would be a waste of the talents of a potentially successful teacher (Shulman, 2011).

The COACTIVE model of professional competence attempts to resolve the contradictions between the Bright Person and the ‘Mastery’ hypotheses of teacher development (Kunter et al. 2013). Teacher competencies as learnable by anyone. However, everyone will learn in different ways depending on our personalities and the circumstances we find ourselves in. The context leads us to learning opportunities. Our personalities determine how we use these opportunities to develop as professionals.

Identifying what personal characteristics will give trainee primary teachers the best chance of making good use of the learning opportunities in a given situation becomes crucial to supporting their development (Klassen & Kim, 2019).



Based on realistic scenarios developed by experienced serving teachers and education researchers, they challenge applicants to judge the best course of action in difficult situations.

Universal but unique to the situation: What are the qualities of a successful teacher?

The Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework sets eight key standards that all trainee primary teachers in England must meet and demonstrate this with a portfolio of evidence (HM Government, 2019). From these, it is possible to infer the non-academic qualities which the government believes that a successful teacher will demonstrate:

- Understands and is responsive to pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds
- Is empathetic and a good listener
- Is creative and innovative
- Upholds British values
- Is analytical and consistent
- Is versatile and flexible
- Is a self-reflective and self-motivating learner
- Is open to new ideas and can learn from others

However, whilst many attributes on this list would be shared widely around the world, there are variations in the perceived importance of some non-academic characteristics depending on that cultural or physical context.

Klassen et al. (2018) studied four countries: England, Finland, Malawi and Oman. They found some etic (cross-cultural) competencies, universally shared among all four countries: Empathy and Communication, Organization and Planning, Resilience and Adaptability. Yet there were also significant emic (culturally distinct) variations. In Finland, the importance of cooperation in learning and education fostering

Voiceover and text:

Your pupils are sitting on the carpet as you are teaching a lesson. One pupil, Jess, makes a silly comment with the deliberate intention of making other pupils laugh. While the comment was not rude or offensive, the pupils are now distracted and are laughing uncontrollably. Jess frequently behaves in this manner.



- A** - Use your school behaviour management system to give Jess a warning
- B** - Raise your voice to Jess and ask her to be quiet
- C** - Send Jess into another class
- D** - Discuss with your mentor whether a different approach should be used with Jess

community were both very valued. In Malawi, collectivism was tempered with an emphasis on the need for teacher autonomy to enable them to prosper in rural settings. In Oman, where commitment to shared religious and national identity were closely associated with the education system, professional ethics were especially valued. These culturally specific, emic, differences were predominantly additional to the universal, etic, beliefs rather than replacing them.

Situational Judgement Tests and Scenario Based Learning:

If Teacher-Education programmes are to improve how they assess holistically the potential of an applicant to a teacher education course, then they would do well to look at new tools to help them make balanced decisions.

Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs) such as those developed by Prof. Rob Klassen at the University of York (<https://www.teacherselect.org/>) can probe an applicant's potential in greater depth and breadth than other available selection methods. Based on realistic scenarios developed by experienced serving teachers and education researchers, they challenge applicants to judge the best course of action in difficult situations.

The example above (taken from Klassen et al. 2021) was designed to test the classroom readiness of trainee primary teacher prior to a school placement but could just as easily be applied to applicant recruitment. The participant is asked to reflect on the situation and say how appropriate a suggested course of action might be, giving a rationale for their decision.



Scenarios require the applicant to draw upon their non-academic qualities – in this case fairness and good communication. Taken in conjunction with other scenarios an SJT develops a profile of candidate responses which can then be compared to those of already successful teachers.

Cheap, efficient and regular, SJTs are another emerging tool which selectors at universities are beginning to use. In the UK they are already being used by some of the largest ITE providers: York, York St John, Liverpool Hope, London Metropolitan, Strathclyde and Teach First.

SJTs are also being used to recruit potential applicants, encouraging applications from those who might feel they are not sufficiently 'bright' or 'well-educated'. Realistic scenarios can help them realize that they already possess the non-academic qualities for success and that academic mastery can come over time.

Tests, such as the one the example above, are also being tested as tools to support learning for those already on primary teacher training courses. SJTs can help identify where their non-academic qualities

are strong and where they might need support. Through a process of guided reflection over time, they can nurture their awareness of their non-academic qualities improving classroom readiness and teacher effectiveness.

Conclusion

The successful teacher is not merely a 'bright, well-educated person', nor are they simply the sum of the knowledge domains they have mastered. Rather they are reflective actors developing in a context and deploying all the qualities, knowledge and skills they have acquired to bring about positive learning outcomes for the children in their care.

SJTs are not a standalone solution, rather they are a powerful new tool that can address some of the deficiencies inherent in older and costly or intensive methods. There is still a need to assess applicants face-to-face and as people, not profiles. However, the information an SJT provides to a university selector is broader, quicker, more cost-effective and more reliable, than they have previously had at their disposal. Their application may well expand in the future with a greater role in teacher recruitment or indeed in identifying serving teachers with potential for leadership positions.

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Pen Portrait

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