THE SELF-EFFICACY OF TRAINEE TEACHERS WHO WERE RECOMMENDED FOR QUALIFIED TEACHER STATUS (QTS) IN ENGLAND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The research investigated CoVid-19 issues related to the adoption of school closures and social distancing measures from March 2020 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-school-closures#history), as they impacted on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes leading to the recommendation for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England. A second national lockdown impacted ITE programmes from January 2021. The direct and immediate impact on the self-efficacy of ITE participants recommended for QTS in 2020 and 2021 is considered and the potential implications for their future teaching.

Friedman and Kass (2002, p684) suggested a definition of teacher self-efficacy as a "teacher's perception of his or her ability to perform required professional tasks and to regulate relations involved in the process of teaching and educating students". Pre-validated questionnaires (Friedman & Kass, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoyb, 2001) were adapted to incorporate trainee teachers' belief in their own capabilities responding to the challenges posed by disruption to ITE programmes due to anti Covid-19 measures. The research aimed to measure the impact on their ability to manage the consequences of change positively. The intended outcome was to support schools and new teachers by identifying short and long term remedial in-service training needs and successful distance learning strategies and materials for development. The findings draw on data from three on-line self-efficacy questionnaires returned by participants on ITE programmes at a large (approximately 500 students) Higher Education (HE) QTS provider in partnership with schools in the North West of England. Surveys were conducted at the end of 2019-20 ITE programmes, and both the beginning and end of the 2020-21 programmes.

The questionnaire was associated with the research question:

What are the levels of teacher self-efficacy among successful Post Graduate ITE students preparing to take up first teaching posts at schools who trained during the height of the pandemic?

Respondents reported unique training and ITE experiences and were generally confident that the pandemic had not been detrimental to their development as teachers. Some areas were identified for further future development depending upon a number of contexts.

Future phases of the research intends to follow new teachers into schools and include their mentors, line managers and colleagues, using questionnaires supported by case studies to gather data. This will further support ITE programmes leading to QTS in England and help predict long term implications for teacher recruitment, retention and potential work-force changes.

Keywords: teacher, self-efficacy, initial teacher education, Covid-19, pandemic, qualified teacher status, England

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the findings from the initial analysis of quantitative data from an investigation into the the self-efficacy of aspiring teachers whose Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes and school experience placements were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. A full consideration of the literature associated with the study and discussion of its implications will be published in a future paper that considers both the quantitative and qualitative data collected.

In March 2020, schools in England were closed [1] to all learners except the children of key workers. A second national lockdown also impacted ITE programmes from January 2021. At other times schools and colleges adopted social distancing and other anti-covid measures [1], including moving lessons online. During the lockdowns, Higher Education (HE) and school based QTS providers also moved their teaching online. When anti Covid-19 measures were reduced, schools still experienced localised and unpredictable disruption due to full and partial school closures, absences due to Covid-19, and alteration to learning, teaching and assessment to comply with the remaining measures. ITE programmes were disrupted to varying degrees between March 2020 and July 2020 and throughout the 2020-2021 academic year,

The Covid-19 pandemic rapidly generated literature regarding the ability of ITE partnerships in England and elsewhere to train and accredit new teachers, and the online andragogy needed to accomplish this whilst lockdowns or lesser restrictions and measures were in place [2][3]. The aim of this study was to focus on the perspective of the postgraduates on ITE programmes during the first eighteen months of the pandemic. Friedman and Kass [4], p684, described teacher self-efficacy as a "teacher's perception of his or her ability to perform required professional tasks and to regulate relations involved in the process of teaching and educating students". It was expected that trainees' self-efficacy would be affected during the pandemic but not equally in all areas. The research sought to answer the question: What are the levels of teacher self-efficacy among successful Post Graduate ITE students preparing to take up first teaching posts at schools who trained during the height of the pandemic? Pre-validated questionnaires [4][5] were adapted to investigate trainee teachers' belief in their own capabilities responding to the challenges posed by disruption to ITE programmes due to anti Covid-19 measures. The questionnaire sections and items utilised were not mapped directly to the Teachers' Standards [6] used in England to describe teacher competencies and professional conduct. However, the items were easily recognised by respondents as referring to or having relevance to the standards [6].

The research also aimed to identify areas that challenged the ability of the aspiring teachers participating to manage the consequences of change positively. It was intended to use this information to support schools and new teachers by responding to short and long term remedial in-service training needs and developing successful distance learning strategies and materials. The findings derive from the invited responses to three on-line self-efficacy questionnaires returned by participants on ITE programmes at a large (approximately 500 students) HE QTS provider in partnership with schools in the North West of England. Surveys were conducted at the end of 2019-20 ITE programmes, and both the beginning and end of the 2020-21 programmes.

2   METHODOLOGY

Participants were invited from all the Primary and Secondary phase Postgraduate (PG) ITE programmes at a HE QTS provider in the North West of England. This included core, non-salaried school direct and salaried school direct programmes with a potential maximum return of 500 for each of the academic years. The samples obtained were self-selecting and, as such, constituted a non-random convenience sample [7]. The study was registered with the HE QTS provider as posing minimum ethical risks. Questionnaires were launched online, and responses were anonymous. The participant information page explained the purpose of the research and that participation was voluntary. It also stated that by submitting a completed or partially completed questionnaire, participants had given informed implied consent to report responses anonymously. However, participants could withdraw their responses from the study at any time.

The 2019-20 cohort were invited to participate on the successful completion of their PG ITE programme.

The 2020-2021 cohort were invited to participate soon after the beginning of their PG ITE programme and again on their successful completion of the course.

Pre-validated teacher self-efficacy items [4][5] formed the common structure to all questionnaires, with three sets of eight items covering Pedagogy, Behaviour Management and Engagement skills. For each item, participants were asked to read a question highlighting a teacher skill and rate their confidence in their capability in that area on scale of 1-10 with scores of 1-5 indicating lower confidence and 6-10 higher confidence levels. The first sections of each questionnaire elicited anonymous demographic information and details regarding how the respondent's training had been affected. Open response questions allowed respondents to explain or expand upon the scores they had given.

3   RESULTS

This section describes some of the characteristics of the respondents to each survey and the ways that the Covid-19 pandemic affected their ITE programme school experience placements. It then reports the initial quantitative analysis of the self-efficacy scores received from participants.

3.1   The Respondents

Self-selecting, non-random convenience samples [7] cannot claim to be systematic nor representative. However, the three online surveys provide an insight into the attitudes and perceptions of many of the teachers attending ITE programmes at a HE QTS provider in the North West of England after the pandemic started, and as it continued.

The demographics for the respondents for the surveys are summarised below:

End of ITE programme survey 2019-2020

167 responses.

Primary school teachers 25%, Secondary school teachers 75%

Age 20-29 72%, 30-39 17%, 40-49 5%, 50 and over 5%, Prefer not to answer 1%

Female 64%, Male 35%, Prefer not to answer 1%

School placement contact after lockdown:

95% remained in contact with teachers and mentors at school

38% volunteered to help in school

14% physically attended school as volunteers

41% helped by contributing materials and other on-line support

Start of ITE programme survey 2020-2021

78 responses.

Primary school trainees 35%, Secondary school trainees 65%

Age 20-29 76%, 30-39 9%, 40-49 10%, 50 and over 5%, Prefer not to answer 0%

Female 73%, Male 27%, Prefer not to answer 0%

Early impact of Covid-19 on school experience placements:

Nothing more than social distancing, hygiene, and operational measures 24%

Complete school closure 6%

Mentor absence 41%

Respondent absence 51%

Online teaching experience only 3%

On site classroom experience only 54%

Blended teaching experience 30%

End of ITE programme survey 2020-2021

110 responses

Primary school 36%, Secondary school 64%

Age 20-29 77%, 30-39 13%, 40-49 6%, 50 and over 4%, Prefer not to answer 1%

Gender: Female 76%, Male 24%, Prefer not to answer 0%

Impact of Covid-19 on school experience placement during the ITE programme:

Nothing more than social distancing, hygiene, and operational measures 16%

Complete school closure 55%

Mentor absence 32%

Respondent absence 45%

Online teaching experience only 1%

On site classroom experience only 12%

Blended teaching experience 87%

The predominance of female respondents and participants from the youngest age range in all three surveys reflect a similar distribution at the point of recruitment to the various programmes. However, the programmes invited to participate in the surveys recruited similar numbers of Primary and Secondary school trainees. Respondents working in Primary schools appear to be underrepresented in all three samples. There are sufficient Primary respondents to allow further quantitative analysis.

During the first lockdown, almost trainees in the 2019-2020 cohort were able to maintain contact with their school experience placement schools until the end of their ITE programme. Many continued to provide online support for their schools as volunteers and some were able to help on-site in school.

The 2020-2021 cohort experienced varying degrees of disruption to their training throughout the programme due to Covid-19. This was often localised, and this meant that consistency of training experience within and across PG ITE programmes was not a realistic goal. Social distancing, hygiene and operational measures were the norm in schools, and some respondents (decreasing by the second survey) were able to report that this had been the only impact on their training in school. By the end of the 2020-2021 ITE programmes over half the respondents had been affected by complete school closures. Many were also affected by mentor and/or their own absence from school due to Covid-19. Staff and trainee absences reduced a little between surveys. Early in the course there was more opportunity for onsite face to face teaching experience but by the end of the programme most respondents reported that blended online and onsite teaching best described their teaching experience.

3.2   Self-efficacy scores

The 2019-2020 cohort was surveyed after they had successfully completed their ITE QTS programmes and the 2020-2021 cohort near the beginning of their programme and, once again, after its successful completion.

Table 1 indicates that self-efficacy scores linked to Pedagogy, Behaviour Management and Engagement were high in the end of programme surveys, indicating the respondents' high levels of confidence in their ability to cope with teacher competencies as they looked forward to starting their posts as newly qualified teachers (NQT).

Table 1 also indicates that the 2020-2021 cohort returned lower self-efficacy scores near the beginning of their ITE programmes, but by the end these had had increased significantly. The confidence expressed by respondents was significantly higher at the end of the 2020-2021 programmes than in the 2019-2020 survey. For all three surveys, respondents expressed least confidence when scoring their Engagement skills. There was a significant difference between mean self-efficacy scores for Engagement and both Pedagogy and Behaviour Management in survey 2 but only between Engagement and Behaviour Management in survey 3.

The quantitative analysis of differences between female and male respondents, Primary and Secondary school respondents and respondents of differing ages has been conducted but is the subject of a future paper in preparation. In that paper, open response data will also be analysed and the qualitative findings synthesized with quantitative findings.

Table 1 Mean self-efficacy scores /10 where 10 is the highest level of confidence

Survey	Section	Mean self-efficacy scores			
		n	*M*	*SD*	*95% Cl*
End of ITE Programme 2019-2020	All	166	7.7	1.2	[7.6, 7.8]
	Pedagogy	166	7.6	1.3	[7.5, 7.7]
	Behaviour management	166	7.9	1.4	[7.8, 8.0]
	Engagement	166	7.5	1.5	[7.4, 7.6]
Start of ITE Programme 2020-2021	All	78	6.7	1.8	[6.6, 6.8]
	Pedagogy	78	6.6	1.8	[6.5, 6.7]
	Behaviour management	78	7.0	1.6	[6.9, 7.1]
	Engagement	78	6.4	1.9	[6.1, 6.6]
End of ITE Programme 2020-2021	All	110	8.0	1.6	[7.9, 8.1]
	Pedagogy	110	8.1	1.4	[8.0, 8.2]
	Behaviour management	110	8.0	1.6	[7.9, 8.1]
	Engagement	110	7.9	1.7	[7.8, 8.0]

3.3   Self-efficacy questions in each category

Items in the questionnaire sections with mean scores significantly higher or lower than the relevant category means in Table1 are indicated below. These were taken to indicate areas where less or more support might be needed. The other questions demonstrated overlapping 95% confidence limits with the category mean and did not differ significantly from it.

Self-efficacy questions for pedagogy skills. (Scored 1-10 where 10 is the most confident)

l.   To what extent can you use a variety of assessment strategies?

   Lower mean score than category mean in survey 1 and 2

2.   To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?

3.   To what extent can you craft good questions for your students?

4.   How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom? **Lower in survey 1**

5.   How well can you respond to difficult questions from your students?

6.   How much can you do to adjust your lessons to the proper level for individual students?

7.   To what extent can you gauge student comprehension of what you have taught?

8.   How well can you provide appropriate challenges for very capable students?
   Lower mean score than category mean in survey 1

This could indicate the need to develop a wider toolkit of pedagogies and assessment strategies including those for stretching and challenging learners.

Self-efficacy questions for behaviour management (Scored 1-10 where 10 is the most confident)

1.   How much can you do to control disruptive behaviour in the classroom?

2.   How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?

3.   How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?

4.   How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?

5.   How well can you keep a few problem students from ruining an entire lesson?

6.   How well can you respond to defiant students?

Lower mean score than category mean in survey 2

7.   To what extent can you make your expectation clear about student behaviour?

Higher mean score than category mean in survey 1, 2 and 3

8.   How well can you establish routines to keep activities running smoothly?

This could indicate the need to support behaviour for learning strategies aimed at the inclusion of challenging learners rather than its general principles.

Self-efficacy questions for student engagement (Scored 1-10 where 10 is the most confident)

1.   How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in schoolwork?
Higher mean score than category mean in survey 1 and 2

2.   How much can you do to help your students' value learning? **Higher survey 2**

3.   How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in schoolwork?

4.   How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?
Lower mean score than category mean in survey 1 and 2

5.   How much can you do to improve the understanding of a student who is failing or falling behind?

6.   How much can you do to help your students think critically?

7.   How much can you do to foster student creativity?

Higher mean score than category mean in survey 2

8.   How much can you do to get through to the most difficult students?

This could indicate a need to aim at support in involving families in learning rather than engagement in the classroom.

4   CONCLUSIONS

This paper is very much an initial report of some of the broad quantitative data from three anonymous online questionnaire surveys returned by two cohorts of aspiring teachers following several routes into the teaching profession in England.

The extent to which the conclusions proposed can be considered valid will be only become clearer as quantitative data from separate groups in the samples are analysed and the qualitative data collected are analysed fully and integrated with the quantitative responses.

Despite the many ways Covid-19 impacted on the training of the 2019-20 and 2020-2021 cohorts of PG ITE trainees, the respondents successfully completing their ITE QTS programmes demonstrated high levels of confidence in their Pedagogy, Behaviour Management and Engagement skills. The high self-efficacy scores may have been influenced by several factors. Each trainee's experience had been different, but they may have considered the deficits in their training to have been compensated by its unique features. The confidence expressed may have derived from the success of the ITE partnerships in ensuring the ITE and QTS training was still a good preparation for teaching during the NQT year. Extra support from the HE QTS provider may have compensated for some missed elements of school experience placements. All these explanations or a combination are supported by the increase in self-efficacy scores between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 cohorts indicated by the end of programme surveys, and the increase in scores during the 2020-2021 programme.

The lowest self-efficacy scores were recorded consistently for Engagement skills, but these appear to be particularly influenced by less confidence expressed in their preparation to involve learners' families in learning. A few aspects of each self-efficacy category received significantly lower mean scores than the category mean for the 2019-2020 cohort, and the 2020-2021 cohort at the start of their programme. This was not the case for the 2020-2021 cohort end of programme survey. This is also consistent with respondents viewing the balance in their training more positively and the schools and HE QTS provider improving their ability provide support in areas disrupted by anti-covid measures as time progressed.

The possible areas identified by the surveys for development with current ITE trainees and for NQT *alumni* support were:

Developing assessment strategy toolkits

Developing subject specific pedagogy toolkits

Adaptive teaching for able learners

Behaviour for learning: challenging learners

Involving parents in their children's learning

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