

Student perceptions of learning to teach the foundation subjects

by Emma Whewell

How do pre-service teachers in England perceive the curriculum subjects in primary schools – and are foundations secure?

Our study examined the development of student expertise in teaching the primary foundation subjects. In the English primary national curriculum these include, art, design technology, history, geography, art, physical education, music, modern foreign languages and computing. The perceived marginalisation of foundation subjects is an ongoing concern across the sector, particularly for the arts and humanities. Since September 2019, English schools have been working to [a new Ofsted inspection framework](#), which requires considering their curriculum in terms of both breadth and depth. It seemed timely to explore how Initial Teacher Education (ITE), in collaboration with the schools that support primary ITE students on teaching practice, can better facilitate opportunities for students in the foundation subjects.

Whilst acknowledging that there are many routes into teaching, our research focussed upon a university-based training route. We explored the ITE student voice in order to understand the opportunities presented in schools and at university to teach and learn about foundation subjects. Data came from a final year cohort of 126 ITE students on a three-year undergraduate BA Primary Education with qualified teacher status. ITE student perceptions provide a starting point to reflect on these issues and present a challenge for how we respond to their voice.



Source: [Stockvault](#)

The objectives of our study

1. To investigate opportunities for ITE students to teach the foundation subjects of geography, history, art, computing and physical education.
2. To examine ITE student perceptions of their opportunities to teach foundation subjects.
3. To evaluate the impact of these opportunities and perceptions in relation to broader contexts.

On preparing primary school teachers.

Since the implementation of the [English National Curriculum](#) in the United Kingdom in 1988, primary school teachers have been called upon to deliver over ten different subjects. Within each school setting, individual teachers typically take responsibility for leading one or more subject areas.

After the introduction of primary league tables in 1996, the three ‘core’ subjects of Mathematics, English and Science gained significance, whereas that of ‘foundation’ subjects diminished. While foundation subject expertise was affected by the phasing out of requirements for ITE students to have a subject specialism in addition to their general training. As a result, the gap between the foundation and the core subjects widened, leaving foundation subjects with a low and marginal status. And a reduced time allocation within pre- and in-service-training.

Meanwhile, an increased focus on partnerships occurred between universities and schools, as well as on the place of school-based expertise. This included the assumption that school mentors, as well as university lecturers, provide subject content and pedagogical knowledge. In attempting to meet both imperatives, questions arise as to the structure and scope of what is provided for the development of foundation subject expertise – both at university and on school placement. At the same time, there has been [pressure on both universities and schools](#) to emphasise core subjects through utilitarian measures, such as teaching towards improved assessment scores and teaching with practicality concerns in mind – such as cost, resource and space saving – all at the expense of the foundation curriculum. However, this may soon alter given Ofsted’s revised focus on the overall quality of education and the importance of a broad, rich and balanced curriculum

Current debates in the teaching of foundation subjects

[Ofsted’s new education inspection framework](#) came into effect in September 2020. One of the main purposes of the revisions was to tackle social justice issues relating to attainment. The framework seeks to make judgements based on overall effectiveness by using “all the available evidence to evaluate what it is like to be a learner in the provision”. Through this approach it hopes to afford all pupils, regardless of background,

with the opportunity to succeed. It also aims to address concerns regarding what has become an increasingly narrow curriculum, with too much focus upon test and exam results, and insufficient breadth and balance.

This narrowing of curriculum opportunities gives precedence to the core subjects of Mathematics, English and Science at the expense of foundation subjects. The Ofsted inspection framework plans to judge schools on a coherently planned curriculum that consists of a “full range of subjects for as long as possible, specialising only when necessary” and suggests that teachers have “good knowledge of the subjects they teach”.

We deemed it timely to consider the role of ITE and school partnerships in shaping curricula and driving change in the field. Our study debated the scope, role, and status of foundation subjects in primary schools through attention to ITE students’ voice. We examined undergraduate ITE student teachers’ experiences and perceptions of teaching the foundation subjects, in terms of opportunities provided in schools and at university. We also report the reflections of ITE student teachers on their preparedness to teach the foundation subjects based upon these experiences.

What we did

Our research offers an interpretive case study of final year BA (QTS) Primary Education 5–11 students graduating in 2019. The focus was on ITE student perceptions of their developing subject expertise and their teaching opportunities in art, physical education, computing, geography and history.

Data referred to here was drawn from semi-structured interviews with five individual students and one focus group interview of five additional students. It was triangulated with our initial data from student subject tracking records that indicated school placement provision was greater for core subjects in 2016/17. We sought to capture student voice. We considered this seminal to the redevelopment of curricular practices and to determining the opportunities and barriers which the students faced in developing their subject expertise in the university and school contexts.

Participants were guaranteed anonymity and had full withdrawal rights. Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed through an iterative process of open inductive coding by the six members of the research team. The coding resulted in a set of overarching concepts describing students’ positive and negative perceptions of their developing foundation subject expertise at school and at university, as well as the opportunities they had to teach the selected foundation subjects.

What did we find out?

The findings revealed a complex range of issues contributing to variability in confidence, application and understanding as related to the selected foundation subjects. The overarching concepts identified were variability of experience, restricted curricula, practical experience, cross-curricular teaching, and confidence.

Our findings highlight the need to address the imbalance of foundation and core subjects in teacher education. Understandably, ITE students displayed more confidence in teaching their specialist subjects and in the core subjects that received more university time. To overcome this, we suggest increasing our university provision to achieve a better *balance* across the full range of subjects. Findings from [research conducted by Ofsted](#) also point to a need to redress a narrowing of the curriculum – both at university and in schools – that restricts the amount of time given to foundation subjects.

Our research provides a mixed picture as to the preparedness of students to undertake cross-curricular teaching. The foundation subject focus may not be evident in cross-curricular planning, and our students felt insufficiently prepared to teach in an interdisciplinary way. Based on the findings of this study, university provision can be adapted to reflect a healthier balance between the core and foundation subjects. The introduction of the [Early Career Framework](#) (ECF) in September 2020 offers a further layer of complexity regarding where the responsibility lies for providing ITE students with adequate coverage of the curriculum.

A more difficult task to address is the variability seen across school placements in both the quality and amount of foundation subject teaching. Our research demonstrates that, even within the foundation subjects, there are some subjects that will receive disproportionately more time than others. This requires sensitive and methodical work with partner schools because schools will approach teaching and learning differently through their own ethos, values, and individual philosophies. They will deploy their workforce in a way that best suits their setting and the children and staff who work there, and it is therefore unrealistic to expect uniformity.

Mentor training and sharing expertise offer means to address the theory-to-practice gap and develop the confidence of mentors in supporting ITE students with subject, pedagogical and policy knowledge in the foundation subjects. What is evident is that those ITE students who are self-directed and who recognise the limitations that ITE can offer them are the ones who will develop the skills to adapt and learn from changes to curricula, pedagogies, and policies. Universities therefore need to work closely with schools to make sure that their teaching and advocacy reflects local needs, whilst maintaining awareness of international developments.

Looking forward

We anticipate the new ITE inspection framework to align with schools' inspection framework, and we welcome the introduction of the ECF in September 2021. These national initiatives, together with our own university philosophy and agency, will guide the future direction of our ITE provision. Universities are well placed to build capacity: communities of practice based upon self-sustaining groups of individuals and subject leaders provide the subject and curricular expertise to work with schools in supporting the early career framework.

At the University of Northampton we have used our own agency to influence course content and design: a university provision that embeds changemaker philosophy and aims to empower our ITE students to be confident agents of change in their teaching contexts. Students are encouraged to adopt a 'can do' attitude and develop the disposition to take responsibility for developing their own expertise in the transition from ITT to their NQT years and beyond. Findings from our study reflect the need for universities and schools to work more closely together to ensure that they are moving towards the same outcomes and have shared aims and philosophies regarding ITE.

Opportunities to teach foundation subjects in schools have been sparse and varied in comparison to core subjects. Our ITE students expressed positive views about the benefits and importance of practical teaching experience in schools and in university. Students were also clear that this should be distributed across foundation and core subjects, so that they have opportunities to acquire the skills required to future-proof success in their teaching career. Many students recognised the need to become proactive, adaptable and well-disposed to change.



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