RESEARCHING TENSIONS IN THE POLICY - PRACTICE INTERFACE: RESEARCHING NEW TEACHERS AND MASTERS LEVEL STUDY

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Background: Teach First is a charity which recruits high performing graduates to work in schools in challenging circumstances with the aim of reducing the gap in student achievement as well as raising the status of the teaching profession. Teach First has a strong commitment to masters level study. We are tutors and managers of the Teach First programme in a large, Russell Group University Institute of Education. Positioning our study within a reforming landscape of initial teacher education which has been characterised by a reduced role for higher education institutions, we sought to uncover what the participants on our course perceived as the benefits of masters level study. Whilst drawing on some of these findings, we also draw on our own reflections and reflexivity in order to develop the themes of this symposium.

Focus of the enquiry: Professionally, we are both familiar with the challenging contexts within which Teach First operates. We are therefore both insiders and outsiders in our relationships with our participants. In our paper, we will explore some of the tensions within this dichotomy and develop some of the advantages and disadvantages of our dual positioning.

Research methods and/or mapping of the literature: We draw on semi structured interviews with ten graduates of the Teach First (Leadership) programme as well as on our own diaries and dialogues throughout the research. We develop Pring’s (1999) ‘taken for granted assumptions’ about the value which higher education brings to the initial training of teachers. These assist us in probing our insider (?) outsider (?) beyond the binary (?) positioning.

Analytical and/or theoretical framework: we build on Apple’s roles for critical policy research which he identifies as documenting and also raising awareness of where policies and practices work against the interests of the disadvantaged. We confront uncomfortable questions concerning our positions as preparers of new teachers.

Research findings and/or contributions to knowledge: our paper concludes by defining some of our roles as tutors and as critical researchers and of where these roles overlap. We define as a key role the contribution we may make as researchers in modelling and developing the critical abilities of those on our programme. In doing this, we may develop their own critical abilities, so as to help them with the demands of their professional lives.