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The Interpretive Approach and Bridging the "Theory-Practice Gap": Action Research with Student Teachers of Religious Education in England

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This article presents action research conducted with student teachers of religious education in England, using theoretical propositions from Robert Jackson's interpretive approach to religious education. In the context of developing a master's-level initial teacher training course and international debate about the role of academic study in teacher education, the research investigated possibilities for using students' exploration of theory to promote their professional development. Using a theoretical framework influenced by the work of Yrjo Engestrom, the article highlights the importance of peer group exploration in enabling student teachers to use received theory as a stimulus to their own theorizing and of university-based courses in providing opportunities for this.

KEYWORDS action research, activity theory, initial teacher training, interpretive approach, religious education, theoretical expansion, theory-practice

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BACKGROUND

Between 2006 and 2009 a major European research project on religion, education, dialogue, and conflict—the REDCo project—was conducted across eight European countries.[1] In addition to large-scale studies of young people's attitudes and classroom interaction there were a number of national subprojects, one of which was conducted by members of the U.K. REDCo team, working as a community of practice. Participants shared an interest in Robert Jackson's interpretive approach to religious education (RE), in exploring its use and potential through individual action research studies and in reflecting as a group on overarching theoretical and methodological issues. As individual researchers, participants undertook their studies in the schools or universities in which they worked and addressed issues that were viewed as important within these contexts.[2] The research presented below was one of two studies focusing on initial teacher education.

The motivation to undertake the study arose from new government policy in the UK aimed at encouraging all teachers to aspire to a master's-level qualification and providing student teachers with access to initial teacher training (ITT) courses that would offer opportunities to work at master's level. By 2008, university-based providers of 1-year Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses had committed to converting these to master's level; however, since the 1990s, PGCE courses had become increasingly practice-oriented and the key challenge for teacher educators lay in creating opportunities for master's-level study that would not be "bolted on," thereby creating an actual or perceived gap between theory and practice. The research presented below was undertaken to meet this challenge. It concluded that the exploration of theory can be highly effective in promoting student teachers' professional development if it is undertaken over time, with the kind of tutor input, sequenced learning route, and supportive group situation that a university-based course can provide.

In 2010, a change of government signaled changes to teacher education policy and the emphasis switched from raising the academic level and status of ITT courses to pursuing a wholly school-based approach. The justification for this made reference to the importance of increasing "on the job" opportunities to acquire professional skills and "some evidence" that student teachers view their university based training as "too theoretical."[3] At the time of writing the government's policy and rationale are meeting with strong opposition.[4] This is giving new impetus to the long-standing and international debate about effective teacher training and the role of academic study and theory within this.[5] Thus the research has new relevance and will be presented below in its original context and in relation to more recent developments and debates.

INTRODUCING MASTER'S-LEVEL STUDY
FOR STUDENT TEACHERS

In Europe and the United States, the value of master's-level study for teachers has been the subject of debate and research for decades,[6] and governments currently adopt differing positions. Whereas in Finland all teachers undertake a master's degree as part of ITT,[7] North American states differ in their expectations of teachers' involvement in graduate study, and although many have offered incentives, there has been extensive debate about the nature and value of such study. In this context, research has raised concerns about both the academic quality of master's-level courses and their disconnectedness from classroom practice.[8]

In 2006, the UK government took a first step toward realizing its new vision of the teaching profession by encouraging ITT providers to raise their existing PGCE courses to master's level. This required opportunities for student teachers to demonstrate an understanding of current research and theoretical developments within their fields and to offer critical, at best original, responses to these.[9] The new vision followed a decade in which teacher educators had been required to work within the constraints of a competence-based model of teacher training that determined that a majority of the training year would be spent in school and that student teachers would be primarily assessed in relation to a set of practice-related criteria.[10] The opportunity to break free of constraints was welcomed by many and within the field of RE, Michael Grimmitt had already presented a strong case against the limitations of the competence model and for enabling beginning teachers to engage with the rich theoretical dimension of RE pedagogy and debates over differing theoretical positions;[11] however, it became clear that the government had no intention of abandoning existing requirements, and the challenge of integrating differing models of teacher development, whilst avoiding the dangers of academic "dumbing down" and a theory-practice gap, was left to teacher educators.

PLANNING THE RESEARCH

As the leader of a PGCE in RE course for secondary school teachers, I had begun to reflect on ways of introducing a master's-level dimension when I was invited to join the U.K. REDCo community of practice. This provided an opportunity to explore the potential of the interpretive approach for teacher education and to develop the course through an action research study.

A key concern, from the planning stage onwards, was that master's-level work should be fully integrated into the course and make a genuine

contribution to the students' development as teachers. More difficult was the question of what kind of learning experience would enable them to recognise the value of theory and research for their professional development, especially because earlier empirical research had shown evidence that student teachers tend to view theory with suspicion or indifference and that their encounters with it do not affect their practice.[12] More recent research, raising issues about students' perceptions of a "theory-practice gap,"[13] has been drawn on in the current government's efforts to promote a wholly school-based training.

One solution to bridging the theory-practice gap has been to require student teachers to undertake school-based action research studies. Typically, these involve testing out an academic theory by applying it to a classroom-based problem identified by the student;[14] however, rather than focusing students' attention back on to classroom strategies, I wanted to explore possibilities for using theory to challenge and develop their thinking about the nature of RE, and to encourage the kind of visioning that would counterbalance the course time devoted to preparing for "existing conditions."[15]

Having introduced the interpretive approach to undergraduate students and worked with teachers on combining ethnographic studies and the concepts of the interpretive approach to create pedagogical material,[16] I was aware of its potential to challenge teachers' thinking. In its theoretical propositions there are challenges to many of the long-standing assumptions made within the RE that most student teachers have encountered during their own schooling and many will encounter as beginning teachers. I believed that engagement with, and evaluation of, the approach would challenge the students academically, but it was not clear how this kind of challenge could contribute to their professional development within a 1-year PGCE course. It seemed that the methods used to encourage and support students' engagement with the theoretical dimension of the approach would be crucial and my research was designed to investigate this.[17]

RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of the study was to investigate how opportunities to explore and evaluate the interpretive approach could contribute to the students' professional development. The research questions focused on discovering how they would initially respond to the theoretical propositions, how I might work with their responses to create tailored opportunities for them to further engage with and evaluate theory, and what they would gain from the interpretive approach through such opportunities. As the study progressed I became increasingly interested in wider questions about the role of theory in teacher development and the relationship between practitioner and academic theorizing. The research design evolved to take account of emerging issues.

The Interpretive Approach

The decision was taken to focus on four key propositions and their theoretical bases, as introduced in Jackson's 1997 work and developed in later writing.[18] In summary, the propositions are (1) religions should be represented in the classroom as internally diverse, contested, and changing (rather than as clearly demarcated and essentialized systems of belief and practice); (2) representing internal diversity should include representing the relationship between individuals, their membership groups, and the wider tradition; (3) pupils should be enabled to interpret religious material (rather than simply understand it); and (4) the interpretive process should provide opportunities for reflexivity and edification—the process of reassessing one's understanding of one's own way of life in the course of interpreting that of another. As the aim was to enable students to explore and evaluate these propositions, from the design stage onwards I was conscious of my position as both researcher and tutor,[19] and concerned to avoid giving the impression that I expected the students to accept the propositions or adopt the interpretive approach in their teaching. In Lacey's terms,[20] I wanted to avoid the possibility of "strategic compliance."

The Student Teachers

In the study group there were 16 students: (according to their self-designation) four Sikhs and one Hindu-Sikh; three committed Christians; two atheists; and six who described themselves as agnostics or as "still exploring." Four had degrees in religious studies and/or theology, four had philosophy degrees, and there were eight with social science degrees. Such diversity is usual, reflecting a national recruitment policy,[21] although the relatively high number of students with a Sikh background was unusual.

The Action Research Method

This was a one-cycle action research study, involving four phases over 10 months, undertaken as an individual tutor-researcher.[22] The method used was based on an action research model developed by Kevin O' Grady, a member of the REDco community of practice.[23] Devised originally in the context of researching his own pupils and practice and developing the latter through iterative cycles, O'Grady's model offered a valuable guide to members of the community, most of whom were teacher/tutor-researchers investigating ways of enhancing their pupils'/students' learning. In my case, O'Grady's experience of using a "compressed," one-cycle form of iterativity was particularly helpful given that the 1-year PGCE course provided relatively little time for whole group teaching and interaction.[24]

The first phase of my study involved collecting data on the students' personal and professional beliefs, views, and experiences. Data were obtained from application forms and autobiographical accounts, group sessions prior to the first school placement and discussions with individuals during this. The intention was to gain sufficient understanding of students' personal and professional experiences and views to build learning opportunities around these. The data were used to draft six group sessions on the theoretical propositions and requirements for a master's-level essay on the interpretive approach.[25]

In the second phase, the students returned from their 6-week placement to participate in the group sessions. Participant observation notes were taken and after each session, the students' verbal and written responses were analyzed and used to recreate the following session. In this way, there could be several iterations, albeit within a much tighter time-scale than is usual in much action research. At their conclusion, the students evaluated all six sessions and their impact, and completed their essays.

The third phase involved analyzing the evaluations and essays and undertaking interviews with four selected students. The fourth phase took place after the students' second school placement and began with a group evaluation of the impact of the sessions and individual written evaluations. This was followed by a first-stage analysis of new data in relation to all existing data, and then by a second-stage analysis using a theoretical framework based on Engestrom's concept of theoretical expansion. A research journal was maintained throughout the study.

Provisional Session Plans

The research method required the creation of provisional session plans, and although the intention was to change or develop these in light of students' responses, they had to be created with some idea of what professional development might mean. Here, the concept of extended professionality was used.[26] Thus, the six sessions were planned with the intention of exploring the potential of the interpretive approach to broaden and deepen students' thinking about the nature and aims of RE; enable them to reflect critically and constructively on their own practice and that of others; and promote confidence in experimenting with and developing new approaches to teaching and learning. The sessions were designed to include as much discussion and active learning as possible and minimize tutor input. A key planning principle was that they should build on and encourage sharing of the students' own experiences, beliefs, and ideas. In this respect, planning was in line with the constructivist, inductive approach promoted by Wubbels, Korthagen, and Brekelmans.[27] That is, it was based on the view that the students would construct any new understandings using existing frameworks formed from their previous life experiences and learning. Working

from existing interpretive frameworks should maximize the potential for understanding and promote motivation. Moreover, by encouraging students to work inductively from their recent school-based experiences toward the theoretical propositions, there were possibilities for bridging the theory-practice gap.

Thus, the first session began with a discussion of students' experiences during their school placement and the distilling of common concerns. These were related to issues addressed in the theoretical works that have been most influential in the development of English RE, including the interpretive approach. The group was encouraged to identify the questions that they would wish a theoretical study to answer. The second session was designed to focus on the interpretive approach and enable students to discuss and respond to an overview of its theoretical propositions in relation to their own questions and concerns.

Further sessions were planned to include opportunities to explore each of the propositions through tutor input, discussion, and activities. In the last of these, the students were to use the propositions to create a series of lessons. Within the sessions, I planned to minimize my presentation time and act primarily as a facilitator who would direct activities and chair discussions. When the sessions took place, the planned sequence was maintained, but some activities were abandoned or replaced while several were extended to allow more discussion time.

KEY FINDINGS

Responses During the Sessions

The students responded to the theoretical propositions in different ways at different stages in their engagement with these, indicating the importance of viewing responses to theory as a process that cannot be captured in conventional end-of-course evaluations. Their first response was to object to the propositions, in some cases strongly. Although this initially appeared to be evidence of resistance to theory, the opportunity to object engaged the students' interest and led to heated discussions that continued after the sessions. Significantly, objecting to "outsider," abstract propositions drew out some deeply held personal and professional views that might not have been expressed, or even recognized, in a general invitation to share ideas.[28] These ranged from a passionate defense of less able pupils who would be confused by complex representations of religions, to quieter, personal objections. As Christine explained in a second-phase written reflection:[29]

> When first examining the interpretive approach I did not think it was representative of religions to promote conflicting views as equal and not to focus on a core set of values that make a religion what it is...

> My commitment to my faith and my experience of the Christian tradition often leads me to believe ... that there are core values that would make one person a Christian and another not (even if they referred to themselves as one).

It quickly became apparent that objecting had been a first, although valuable, stage in a learning and development process and, in the course of the following sessions, responses became increasingly constructive. Some students began to counter objections with suggestions for adapting the theoretical propositions to reflect the circumstances and needs they had encountered during their teaching placement. Discussion of the problems and possibilities of the propositions stimulated some creative ideas for teaching strategies and, as ideas were exchanged, the group began to take charge of the sessions in the manner of a community of practice.[30]

Engaging with the propositions also led the students to raise some important teaching and learning issues of their own choosing and to begin to theorize about these. Typically, discussion of a proposition would lead an individual to offer an example of a problematic teaching experience and a tentative personal theory. This would lead to a process of group theorizing in which participants responded negatively and positively to each other's ideas, finally arriving at some kind of agreement. An example of this was a discussion of the implications of the interpretive approach for teaching about Islam. One student raised a concern that the attempt to represent differing groups within Islam would require teaching about groups that support terrorist activities. Some argued that pupils should be shielded from such interpretations because the teacher's primary concern should be to promote respect and counter Islamophobia. Others argued that pupils should be presented with the "truth" in RE whatever the consequences. This led to a heated discussion about what "truth" might mean and involve in RE. Arguments were presented from academic perspectives—philosophical and social scientific—and from various insider religious perspectives, indicating that the diversity within the group was an important factor in the richness of their dialogue. Eventually, the group agreed that "truth" was an issue that needed to be explored with pupils, especially when teaching Islam.

As a tutor-researcher, I became aware that such discussions were not to be curtailed as digressions. They were an important indication of how the introduction of theoretical propositions could stimulate the students' recognition of and desire to address the kind of teaching and learning issues that had been given little chance to "surface." As it was clear that they were enjoying and gaining from their dialogue, plans for following sessions were adapted to provide more opportunities for this.

By the fifth session, it had become apparent that the students were not just responding to the theoretical propositions as teachers focused on classroom practice or as specialists in particular academic disciplines. Some

had begun to experience a form of personal learning from, and response to, the propositions and concepts. This was most apparent in relation to the representation of religions and the concept of edification. A striking example of this occurred when an agnostic with a degree in sociology was asked for his reflections on the relationship between individuals, groups, and wider religious traditions. After a pause, he announced that he had just experienced "a moment of edification." He went on to describe what he referred to in a third phase interview as:

> a "lightbulb" moment' . . . it was in that moment that I realised that I was at once the same as everyone else in the world and yet I was different and still me. It is without exaggeration one of the most powerful experiences I have had in education. (Peter)

Although this was a very individual response, it appeared that the group had begun to adopt the concept of edification as a means of understanding their own experiences of learning and change. The term *edification* was used not only in group sessions, but also in the students' jokey social conversations. In the same and following term, individuals also used it quite naturally in tutorials about their general progress. It seemed that the students had drawn this concept into their own lives and that it had ceased to be an outsider's academic theory and become a shared term that reflected an ingroup experience.

In the final session, the students used the theoretical propositions to create a sequence of lesson plans. In later (second and fourth phase) written evaluations, many reported that it was not until they had undertaken this task that they had really understood the theory; however, when examined shortly after their completion, most plans did not appear to reflect the theory as presented to the group. This was too widespread to indicate simple misunderstanding and closer reading suggested that the students had created their own "versions" of the interpretive approach. In their essays, a number reflected that they had come to see the theoretical propositions "in a new light" following the group discussions and lesson planning exercise. Some were direct in arguing that the strength of the approach was that it lent itself to different interpretations, or that it needed to be interpreted in different ways to be effective.

POST-SESSION EVALUATIONS

The students' evaluations of the sessions and their impact were gathered from evaluation tasks, essays, group discussions, and individual interviews. When collated and analyzed, the data indicated that all of the students had viewed the sessions as enjoyable and valuable.

They had particularly valued the opportunity to engage in dialogue with, and to learn with and from each other. Many felt that the greatest gain had been the opportunity to develop their own ideas about teaching and learning and to learn from their colleagues' ideas. A number had also felt affirmed by the opportunity to share and explore their concerns in a collaborative atmosphere.

Some described the value of acquiring new concepts that had explained and confirmed existing but vague ideas, what John referred to as his "intuitive beliefs about what RE should be." In this and other evaluations, there is further evidence that some students had experienced a closing of the first session "gap" between theory and self. In the following comment it seems that Sarah had no retrospective sense of having been required to "learn" a theory:

> Prior to this I thought that teaching was teaching and deviated only by individual styles. I was ignorant of most of the work of educational theorists. Now I feel somewhat enlightened...What has been pleasing is the amount of knowledge and understanding I now have that I previously lacked. Furthermore this was gained, for the most part, *unwittingly*. (Italics added for emphasis).

It seems likely that the constructivist, inductive approach used had helped the students to incorporate the new ideas into their existing interpretive frameworks and to build new understandings from this base; however, most did recognize that they had been professionally challenged by the theoretical propositions and a number had felt personally challenged and changed by their engagement with these. Some of their comments indicate that the transformational power of some concepts had led to a sense that these had been "internalized."

The following quotation, from a fourth-phase written reflection, indicates that the concept of reflexivity had been personally and professionally significant;

> Through exploring this approach, I was forced to examine my own influences including my faith...At first it acted towards undermining my confidence as a teacher as I did not want my own beliefs to influence what I was teaching...However, through practically implementing the approach, I can see its value...it has led me to evaluate my teaching methods, use more effective tools and be critical about how my faith is influencing what I teach. (Rebecca)

For Peter, writing at the same stage, representation issues had been particularly influential:

> Religion for me, as someone who is agnostic and secular, was dead, unchanging; I could never understand why "they" were all different but all essentially the same in my eyes...There has been a recognition that religion is not about facts or even truth, or at least not truth as I had previously understood the word. Religion is alive in people and it affects to a greater or lesser extent how they live today and how they will live tomorrow.

Providing a tutor-researcher's perspective, the research journal recorded my satisfaction in observing how the group situation empowered individuals to 'take on academia' with a confidence that is rarely seen in students' academic writing. A response that I had not predicted was my own sense of rediscovering the interpretive approach and finding new understandings of this through the students' comments and interpretations. Although I had planned my in-session role to be primarily that of a facilitator and observer, I had found myself increasingly drawn in to students' discussions of the approach as a co-explorer.

FIRST-STAGE FINDINGS AND THE ANALYSIS

First-stage analysis of the data provided substantial evidence that opportunities to explore and evaluate the interpretive approach had contributed to the students' professional development, as I had initially defined this. Their thinking about RE had clearly been broadened and deepened, and engagement with the theoretical propositions had encouraged and enabled them to reflect critically and constructively on their own practice and that of others. There was also evidence that their confidence to experiment with, and develop new approaches to, teaching and learning had grown. The pedagogical approach that I had used had been successful, although I had gained a greater understanding of the importance of allowing the group to take charge of sessions and extending opportunities for dialogue.

However, in reaching these conclusions, I had not completed the study. I had become aware during the sessions and their analysis that the research raised questions that I had not foreseen at the design stage. These were related to 'bigger' issues about the role of theory in initial teacher education and, in particular, the relationship between academic theory/theoretician, teacher educator, and student teacher. Thus, I embarked on second stage analysis of the data.

SECOND STAGE ANALYSIS

The aims of the second stage analysis were to gain a deeper understanding of what had been happening during the sessions and what had been gained

from them. The work of the Norwegian researcher and teacher educator, Geir Afdal, influenced by Yjro Engestrom's ideas on activity systems and theoretical expansion, provided a theoretical framework.

In my study, students had particularly valued the opportunity to explore their own concerns and ideas with each other and believed that they had learned most from their discussions. An established body of research indicates that student teachers benefit from participation in a learning group or "community."[31] It appears that my group had discovered that "deliberation within a learning community is more powerful than individual reflection as a means of generating the necessary insights to deal with many educational problems."[32] However, in addition to their own questions and concerns, the students were engaged in exploring the interpretive approach. In doing so, they did not simply reject or accept the theory, but arrived at their own group and individual interpretations of it. Afdal[33] offered an explanation of the role of the group in this process, deriving from Engestrom the view that the content of learning and the process of learning will be constituted and transformed by the activity system. This means that externally defined concepts and theories, such as those of the interpretive approach, cannot be simply transmitted to a student group. They will be interpreted in the light of participants' prior history, the language in which they are understood, and the significance that they have in the local situation. The development of understanding occurs dialectically with participation in the learning community and is negotiated forth in relation to all of these factors.

Participation in the learning community appeared to play an important role in the students' responses to their own concerns and to the interpretive approach, but it also enabled them to benefit from an interplay between the two areas of exploration. The introduction of the theory stimulated reflection on the students' own views and experiences, and these were then used to suggest ways of adapting the theoretical propositions. Discussion of how to adapt the propositions led to the creation of new ideas for teaching and to theorizing about teaching and learning issues of the students' own choosing. When they created their lesson plans and essays, they brought together their own ideas and the theoretical propositions to create original work.

Drawing on Afdal's interpretation of Engestrom's work, it is possible to view the interplay described above as a process leading toward theoretical expansion. Such expansion occurs when perspectives on practice are broadened by crossing conceptual borders. This can be done by reconfiguring old concepts, bringing in new ones or understanding the relationship between concepts in a new way. Afdal suggested that this can be achieved when academic theorizing meets teacher theorizing and that it is at the intersection between teachers' interpretations of teaching RE and academic theorists' interpretations of this, that possibilities for expansion are found. In his examination of the relationship between academic and teacher theorizing, Afdal referred to two kinds of theoretical expansion, vertical and horizontal.

Vertical expansion may occur when teachers encounter an academic theory, such as that of the interpretive approach, that expands their thinking and their own theorizing about their own practice. That is, they analyze, reflect on, and view their own teaching in a new way as a result of the stimulus of the theory. In my study, the students used words such as *enlightenment* and *awakening* to describe the experience, which for some was personal as well as professional.

Although in this sense the academic theory has a top–down effect, this is not a one-way process. The teacher theorizing that is done in response to the stimulus of the academic theory can be relayed back to the academic theory, so that this is influenced by, or developed through, the theorizing of the teachers. In this way, there can be a creative interplay between the theorizing that is done by academics and the theorizing that is done by teachers, so that theoretical expansion occurs for both. In my study, attempts to expand the theoretical propositions of the interpretive approach were made in the students' discussions, lesson planning, and essays. Afdal recognized that valid teacher theorizing may be expressed in "teacher language" and this was the case for most of my students, although some presented strong academic justifications of their "expanded" theories in their essays. For my part, participant observation of the students' developing responses to the interpretive approach led to new ways of understanding the concepts and theory and to my own sense of expansion. As an academic tutor-researcher, I am now presenting this experience of expansion to other academics.

Horizontal expansion can take place between teachers who have a common awareness of an academic theory but, in the course of exploring this, identify together their own questions and needs and begin to develop their own theoretical and practical responses. That is, there may be a common starting point set by the academic theory, but the group dialogue creates new lines of thinking. Afdal argued that, for academics, this is an opportunity to recognize new theoretical questions and areas for development.[34] In my study, I found that the introduction of the interpretive approach led students to identify and discuss questions and issues that they felt needed to be addressed if they were to find a place for the approach within the "bigger picture" of the RE that they were encountering in school and, more significantly, wanted to develop. Their discussions enabled me to identify new questions and issues for inclusion in my training program and for future research.

CONCLUSION

This article began by outlining the challenges of creating a master's-level ITT course, focusing on some of the potential problems of introducing student teachers to theory. The dangers of losing academic rigor, allowing theoretical

matters to dominate and become detached from practice, and students' unwillingness to engage with theory were identified as key issues. The conclusion of the study was that these dangers had been avoided and some of the key factors that contributed to this outcome are summarized below:

1. A "good theory": the experience of introducing the students to the interpretive approach and their willingness to engage with it indicates that it offers a "good theory." It is challenging at an intellectual level and as it requires a reconsideration of fundamental assumptions about religion, education, and learning, it provokes an academic and professional response. However, it also has the potential to engage at a personal level, offering new ways of looking at the world and oneself and prompting new questions. As one of the students (Peter) wrote in relation to the impact of the approach on himself as well as pupils: "By learning about others and realising how we view and judge others, we are actually turning the mirror towards ourselves and examining how we create our self and how others may perceive and judge us."
2. Opportunities to explore and respond: Key factors in the students' ability to engage with and benefit from theory included the opportunity to explore and respond over a continuous, extended period with a small group of peers, from differing personal and academic backgrounds but with shared interests and an established, supportive relationship.
3. The role of the teacher educator: The research indicated that given time and opportunity, an experienced teacher educator can tailor an introduction to theory to individual students' prior knowledge and experience and the dynamics of the group and, by working from their responses, can provide learning opportunities that maximise engagement and the potential for professional development and theoretical expansion.

Although the research indicates that many of the challenges of introducing master's-level study to student teachers can be met, the factors identified above suggest that such study will be most effective if it is undertaken in the context of a university-based course. Thus, the research lends support to the arguments of those within the teacher education profession, in England and internationally,[35] who oppose government plans to remove teacher training from the universities and replace seminars with more "on the job" opportunities to acquire professional skills.

Although school-based training does not prevent teachers from embarking on MA programs during their careers, there are good grounds for arguing that this level of study should be introduced during an initial training course.[36] In the research reported here, the opportunity to engage with theory in a supportive group situation provided students with the confidence to "take on academia" and use their critical encounters with research and theory to develop their own theories and approaches. Building this kind of

confidence, I suggest, is crucial at the stage when beginners are developing a teacher identity and an understanding of their role. On the basis of his research, Afdal presents a strong case for encouraging collaboration between teachers and academics to codevelop theories that reflect the insights of and "speak to" both.[37] Others have called, more generally, for teachers to view themselves as active participants and critical partners in education research and development.[38] My research indicates that student teachers will begin to develop this view of their identity and role during initial training if the experiences they are offered are empowering.

In his critique of the English government's failure to see beyond outdated or crudely instrumental models of master's courses for teachers, Cliff Jones offers an alternative socially critical model. This sums up the kind of aspirations, learning experiences, and outcomes that I believe are needed to ensure that initial training offers teachers more than a set of skills and policy directives and enables them to develop as professionals:

> (This model) acknowledges the experience, expertise, values, interests and concerns of teachers and engages with and constructs theory... Anyone who believes in democracy should welcome a socially critical teaching profession: one that can challenge and be challenged by theory; examine its own practice from different perspectives; engage with and help to construct public policy rather than simply implement it; take some risks; and learn from mistakes.[39]

NOTES

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16. See Judith Everington, "A Question of Authenticity: The Relationship between Educators and Practitioners in the Representation of Religious Traditions," *British Journal of Religious Education* 18, no. 2 (1996): 69–77.

17. Hugh Munby, Tom Russell, and Andrea K. Martin "Teachers Knowledge and how it Develops," in *Handbook on Research in Teaching,* 4th ed., ed. Virginia Richardson (Washington DC: American Educational Research Association, 2001), 877–904.

18. Robert Jackson, *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997); Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2004).

19. For a discussion of the complications of the teacher-researcher role see Ipgrave, Jackson, and O'Grady, eds., *Religious Education Research through a Community of Practice*, 173–177.

20. Colin Lacey, *The Socialisation of Teachers* (London: Methuen, 1977).

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22. Although acting as an individual researcher, the method used was not 'self-study' but reflected that view of action research that focuses on "the challenges and problems of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way," Herbert Altrichter, Peter Posch, and Bridget Somekh, *Teachers Investigate Their Work: An Introduction to the Methods of Action Research* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

23. Kevin O Grady, "Researching Religious Education Pedagogy through an Action Research Community of Practice," *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no. 2 (2010): 119–131.

24. Kevin O Grady "Brainwashing? An Example of Dialogue and Conflict from Religious Education in England," in *Dialogue and Conflict on Religion: Studies of Classroom Interaction in European Countries,* eds. Ina ter Avest, Dan-Paul Jozsa, Thorsten Knauth, John Roson, and Geir Skeie (Münster, Germany: Waxmann, 2009), 39–59.

25. The research was undertaken in the year prior to the formal introduction of assessment at master's level so that students would not be disadvantaged by the trial.

26. Eric Hoyle, *Professional Knowledge and Professional Practice* (London: Cassell, 1995).

27. Theo Wubbels, Fred Korthagen, and John Brekelmans, "Developing Theory from Practice in Teacher Education," *Teacher Education Quarterly* (Summer 1997): 75–90. See also Julie R. Dangel and Edi Guyton, "An Emerging Picture of Constructivist Teacher Education," *The Constructivist* 15, no. 1 (2004): 1–18.

28. Annette Ejsing "Power and Caution: The Ethics of Self Disclosure," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10, no.4 (2007): 238.

29. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

30. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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32. Anthony Clarke and Gaalen Erickson, "Self-Study: The Fifth Commonplace," *Australian Journal of Education* 48, no. 2 (2004): 199–211, 204.

33. The following summary of Afdal's work is taken from: Geir Afdal, *Researching Religious Education as Social Practice* (Münster: Waxmann, 2011), with particular reference to pp. 127–133. Here he draws on Yrjo Engestrom, "Expansive Learning at Work: toward an Activity Theoretical Conceptualization," *Journal of Education and Work* 14, no. 1 (2001): 133-156; and Yrjo Engestrom, *Developmental Work Research: Expanding Activity Theory in Practice* (Berlin: Lehmanns Media, 2005).

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35. See Marilyn Cochran-Smith, "Learning to Teach Against the Grain," *Journal of Teacher Education* 52, no. 1 (2001): 3–4.

36. As argued by the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers in the "UCET Response to Education White Paper" as above.

37. Afdal, *Researching Religious Education as Social Practice*.

38. See Cliff Jones, "M-Level Degrees: What Can Teachers Expect?" *Teaching Expertise*, CPD Update March 2008, accessed September 15, 2011, http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/m-level-degrees-what-can-teachers-expect-3228.

39. Ibid.