

Giving voice to the voiceless: suppression and censorship among lecturers

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Introduction

Our research explored the emotional experiences of Higher Education Lecturers (HELs) in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in a post-1992 UK university. It is aligned with Leutwiler, Amorim-Riberio and Grandeiro's (2024) perspective that recognising the emotional dimension is critical to understanding university educators' professional lives. We uncovered the lived perceptions of emotional labour among lecturers who prepare trainees to teach children aged 3-11. This article presents the theme of suppression encapsulating references to intellectual censorship, persistent barriers and sustained well-being concerns.

Context

Post-1992 neoliberal approaches have shifted the emphasis in HE towards commodity-driven ideologies (Desierto and De Maio 2020). Meanwhile, the ITT Market Review (DfE 2021) gave the state further control over the sector, adding to the 'catastrophic destruction' of ITT which Rowe predicted would be 'highly damaging to teacher Education in England' (2024, 111). Berry and Cassidy (2013) highlighted the emotional impact on HELs, reporting higher levels of

emotional labour than other professions. Calls were then made for projects where ‘speaking the unspoken’ would bring staff suffering into view, recognising the brutality of instrumental management approaches to academic work (Waddington and Bonaparte 2024, 5). Our research gave participants the opportunity to discuss this.

Method

Through purposive sampling we included all full time ITT tutors within the primary team. An interpretive theoretical perspective within a phenomenological methodology guided our design (Gray 2022). To collect the perspectives of their shared experiences, data were gathered through 15 questionnaires and 12 semi-structured interviews and were then thematically analysed.

The Faculty Academic Ethics Committee granted ethical approval. Participants were given the right to withdraw at any time and voluntarily participated (BERA 2024). The researchers had planned that if any unexpected sensitive information or response occurred they would signpost participants to internal and external support services. After each interview participants were provided with a well-being resource. The researchers recognised the potential for emotional distress which could be caused during a flow of consciousness. They did not involve themselves in counselling at any point. After each interview the researchers reflected as part of a de-brief not only for reflexive purposes but to support their own well-being.

Results

Behind the sense of suppression which was common to all participants, intellectual censorship, constant barriers to best practice and sustained well-being concerns created toxicity. Some participants struggled to articulate themselves because they were crying.

Intellectual censorship was exemplified through lecturer comments such as ‘I feel like I am in a straitjacket’ and ‘I don’t think I have a voice.’ A leader further asserted that ‘this isn’t communist Russia [...]. You’re not going to affect change. It doesn’t work like that. We’re not going to have a people’s uprising.’ This led to ‘disempowerment’ and ‘frustration’ for participants. The upper echelons in HE ITT echo this with: ‘When advisory boards or expert groups are constituted, the minister decides who is included. Having a critical or dissenting voice is not something that is going to be valued’ (Baird 2024, 71).

This links to our findings on the barriers to delivering best practice. Comments such as ‘You are met with a battle all the time’, ‘If I had a broom attached to my ***, I’d probably clean the floor as well’, and ‘sometimes you’re being led by agendas that are in other colleges’, emphasise the struggle to deliver best practice based on personal conflicts, workload and wider university agendas. Further to this, the pace of ITT was another barrier because ‘minute by minute, there are all sorts of scenarios unfolding all over the place.’ The knock-on effect is clear in that ‘we never have that five-year plan because everything feels so topsy-turvy.’ This is reminiscent of ‘The so-called golden thread has been wound so tightly around the sector that there is very little space left to breathe’ (Rowe 2024, 111).

Consequently, well-being concerns are evident in: ‘I want to vomit at the thought of going in’ and experiences of ‘psychological fear’ relating to task allocation. A participant explained that ‘I did reach out on several occasions to say, help, help. All I got was a piece of paper.’ There was a general feeling that ‘What we’re doing, is not sustainable’ amongst participants. Neoliberalism is indirectly critiqued through a participant’s comment that ‘often there’s a big push in university about student welfare and student experience [...] sometimes lecturer welfare is lost.’ If indeed ‘emotionality underscores the individualised experience of

learning to teach,' (Steadman 2024, 165), then it is concerning that the HELs participants felt that their well-being is suppressed.

Discussion

The complexities within our data establish the need to develop compassionate approaches in HE. Waddington and Bonaparte emphasise that compassion provides 'an antidote to neoliberal policies' in HE (2024, 1). This could be achieved by developing more respectful relationships in HE at all levels, for example by giving senior leaders time to address some of the systemic and interpersonal barriers to delivering best practice. This could counterbalance the ways in which institutional structures and ways of working fail to protect individuals (particularly those with responsibilities for ITT courses) from the damaging effects of role fulfilment which is undertaken in an isolated way. Enlisting their support in embedding psychological interventions amongst HELs for emotional regulation with self-compassion and balance to support their well-being. However, our data spotlights the unacceptable approach of policymakers, and the subsequent need for them to acknowledge the potentially damaging impact of their policy implementation on those fulfilling policy demands.

The emotional experiences of HELs in ITT in a UK university were predominantly negative and unsustainable. Whilst our findings relate to wider literature on the struggles within HE ITT (Ellis 2024), they successfully highlight the effect which wider policy and decision-making is having on experienced and committed educators in the sector. By 'humanising' the issue, the call for more compassion and self-compassion rings loud and clear.

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