

What is teacher education in policy terms? Different imaginaries of the teacher and teacher education in England and France

By

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What is teacher education in policy terms?

Background:

- We often take what a teacher is for granted. A common view is that a teacher is a person who teaches in a school. However, in different contexts, this breaks down.
- There are diverse profiles of people who teach in the classroom, and consequently, a diversification of the very meaning of what a teacher is – both in terms of the common imaginary of what a teacher is, and through institutional redefinitions of what a teacher is shaped by changing conditions of entry into the teaching profession (Coppe, 2025; Coppe et al., 2022).
- As such, what a teacher is is fundamentally connected with how they are educated and, in turn, how they are educated is deeply entwined with the imaginary(ies) of what a teacher ought to be.

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Teacher imaginary:

- The concept of an imaginary of the teacher is rooted in the work of Anderson (2006 [1983]) on nations as imagined communities.
- We draw on his work to envision the conceptualizations of the teacher as an imaginary.
- An imaginary here refers to a socio-cultural construct of what something is in an ontological sense.
- Such an imaginary, we theorize, connects policy and policy discourse to conceptions of what is a teacher and what they ought to become.

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Goal of the research: We sought to understand the link between ITE and the related teacher imaginary to understand how the teacher is imagined, and to clarify the link (if any) between ITE policy and the teacher imaginary. Moreover, we sought to understand how global discourse influence ITE policy and practice, and thereby shape the teacher imaginary. Lastly, we looked at who determines the imaginary as seen in ITE.

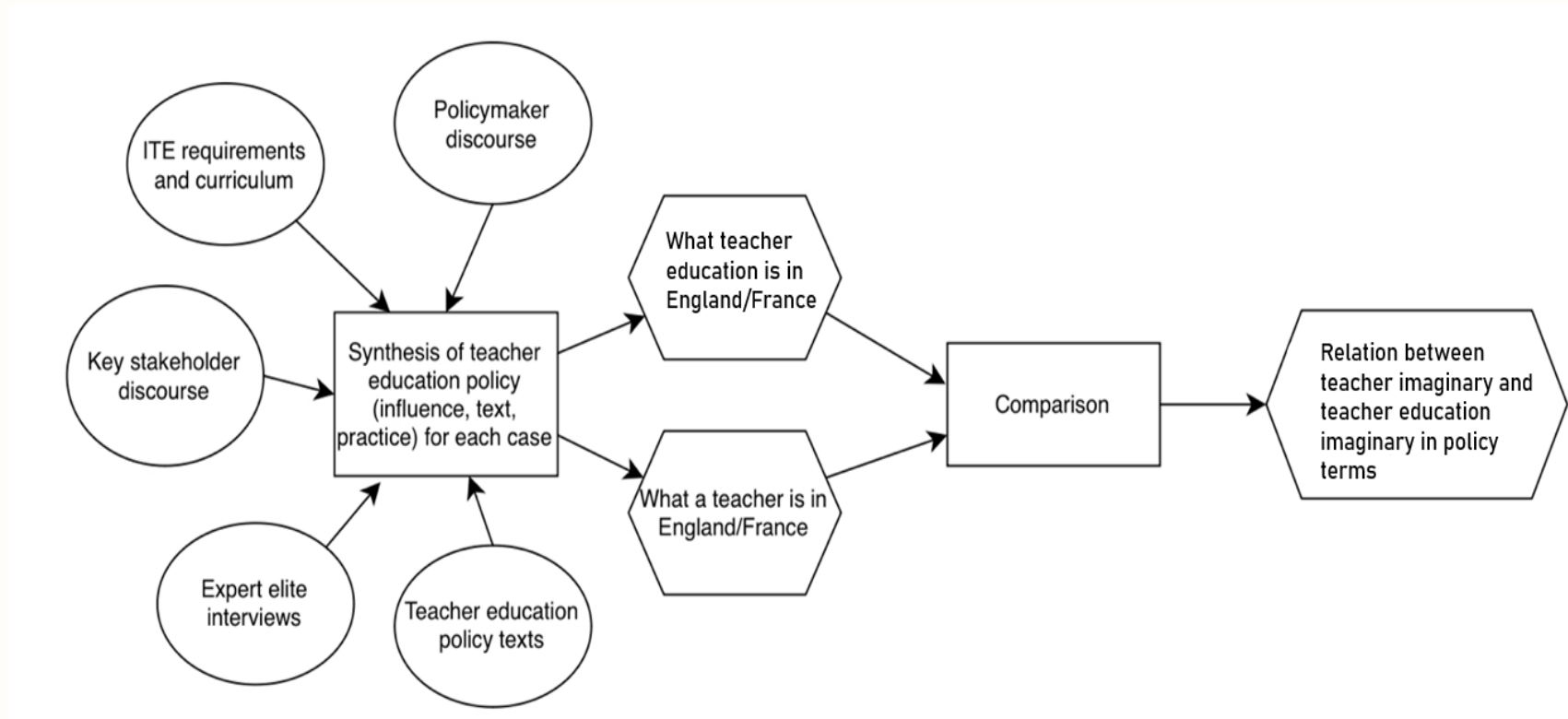
Cases: England and France between the 1980s and 2022

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- Document analysis of policy documents and national inspectorate reports on ITE (N = 44 for England and N = 47 for France)
- Analysis of ITE discourse in press releases found in the French Agence Éducation et Formation (AEF, N = 272), the British Educational Research Association (BERA) presidential addresses (N = 34)
- Publications and statements by key stakeholder organizations in teacher education (UCET, NASBTT and unions in England, unions in France)1 analysis of ITE requirements (Teachers standards/national curriculum in ITE in England and Teachers standards/maquette de formation in France).
- Expert elite interviews of actors in teacher education and teacher education policymaking in England (N = 20) and France (N = 20) to understand the policymaking process and get insider views on teacher education policy.
- All the data covered the period between the creation of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Educators (CATE3) and the QTS in England in 1983/4 and the formation of the Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM) in 1989 in France, which are respective landmark reforms that originated the current systems of ITE in England and France. Some historical documents were consulted to establish the baseline prior to 1983 (England) and 1989 (France).
- In addition, to better understand the link between teacher education and teachers' imaginary at the level of policy as practice we compared the ITE curriculum/programme focus and lecturer back grounds of three ITE providers in France (INSPE of Grenoble, INSPE of Lyon, and INSPE Paris Créteil), as well as a PGCE provider (University of Oxford), a B.Ed and PGCE provider (Sheffield Hallam), and a SCITT (South Farnham) in England.

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Analytical process



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Findings: The evolution of the teacher imaginary and ITE in England

Period	Imaginary of a teacher	Purpose of ITE	Key actors in ITE	Role of the state	Non-local influence factors
Pre – 1984	Scholar	General knowledge	Academia	Absent	Limited
Post-1984	Society builder	Specific knowledge	Academia, high performing teachers, inspectorate	Appointer of experts and certifier of teachers	Test performances, economic performance
Post – 2010	Craftsperson who is central to society	Very specific knowledge	Academia, high performing teachers, inspectorate, SCITTs, schools	Standard – setter	Ibid

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Findings: The evolution of the teacher imaginary and ITE in France

Period	Imaginary of a teacher	Purpose of ITE	Key actors in ITE	Role of the State	Non-local influence factors
1808	Nation builder	Give base knowledge to teachers	Academia, lycée (upper secondary), the disciplines	Present, bureaucratic	Revolutionary ideas in continental Europe, ideas of the Enlightenment
1881-onwards	Agent of the Republic	Primary: educate generalists steeped in Republican values. Secondary: Educate masters of their subject	Normal schools (primary), academia (secondary, still focused on the disciplines), Ministry of National Education (MEN)	Very present, bureaucratic but also value setter	Modern democratic and republican values with an origin in the Enlightenment and anti-clericalism (laïcité)
1989 – onwards	Agent of the Republic central to the performance of the nation	Harmonisation between primary and secondary teachers	Academia (both disciplinary experts and teacher educators in the IUFM), MEN	Very present, bureaucratic	Performance of France compared to other countries
2010 – onwards	Agent of the Republic central to the performance of the nation and social equality	Bridging the theory practice gap, ensure a place for academic and practical – pedagogical knowledge for all teachers	Academia, MEN	Very present, mix of bureaucratic and NPM influenced standard-setting	Bologna process and harmonisation

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Comparative remarks 1/2:

Interestingly, a lot of the same concerns over teacher education were apparent across both time and space based on our analysis.

In both cases, three strong forces are locked in competition over who should conduct ITE: Teachers themselves, academics in education (this category includes former teachers who are now researchers, and is further fragmented between psychologists, sociologists, and pedagogues), and academics in the disciplines.

Moreover, there is contention over where ITE ought to take place (teacher's colleges, in schools, in universities), which is anchored in different institutional views on what a teacher is and how where they are educated is symbolically important and goes beyond considerations of teachers' standards and ITE requirements.

These concerns and subsequent contestations lead to a lack of unity, which enables the state to arbitrate and decide the final shape of ITE and by extension, both what a teacher is and the professional identity of teacher educators in the absence of a unified academic identity. Thus, **the dominant imaginary of the teacher is in both England and France determined by state policy.**

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Comparative remarks 2/2:

Imaginations of what a teacher is are fluid and shift over time and space, but are linked as past policy and discourse feeds into the emergent imaginations.

The imaginations are held in place coercively and are open for contestation, whilst in both the diverse socio-historical systems of England and France the custodians today are a merger of government and 'high performing' teachers within the local systems.

Moreover, contestation over ITE content and who ought to educate teachers is also a question constantly asked, and its answers are always contested: **who should educate the teacher?** This is not a purely empirical question that can be answered by looking at who educates teachers in one place in time today; it is rather a dynamic question entwined with the imaginary of the teacher and the purposes of education.

The research presented here has recently been published as:

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