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Teaching as a Masters profession; the need for continued debate

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Background

The research presented here builds on an original pilot project which reported on the introduction of PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) Masters level programmes in England. The change in validation of these programmes at Masters level was a result of the alignment of postgraduate qualifications across Europe (Bologna Agreement, 1999). This original research opened up the debate about M level study within the one year PGCE programme. However, it also, significantly, gave rise to questions concerning the whole notion of school teaching as a Masters profession and what that means in practice. What is the value and definition of Masters for the teaching profession? Stronach (2009) argues that not only have Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) got to 'juggle with economies of performance and ecologies of practice', but they also have to deal with the 'emotional chronology' of becoming a professional, 'of learning to think, act and feel as one'. Thus the 'gap between induction and initiation is where teachers invent themselves and find their identity as a teacher' (Stronach 2009:173). Does Masters level study aid these processes and contribute in a beneficial way to the teacher's ability to 'invent him or herself'?

A major finding of the pilot project was that Masters was by no means embedded as a positive perception in the minds of student teachers or indeed teacher educators. Therefore one of the recommendations was to 'continue the M level debate' (Jackson, 2009). Through ESCalate ITE (the Education Subject Centre, Initial Teacher Education) and its successor TEAN (the Teacher Education Advancement Network), a series of events have been organised to facilitate discussion and debate. This research reports on the continuing perceptions of a range of teacher educators from across the UK, sharing their experiences and working to make sense of the challenges and opportunities faced in the quest to make teaching a Masters profession.

Research Questions

The focus of the enquiry is: to go deeply into teacher educators' personal understanding of what Masters is and its relevance to the teaching profession. Therefore the questions asked at the events were drawn from the following list:

What has Masters got to do with teaching?

How do/should you teach it?

What is your definition of what Masters level is?

Should teaching be an all Masters profession?

Methods

Delegates at events were asked if they would give permission for the outcomes of the debates to be used for the research. Written data was collected from participants in three ways; individual reflection on the question 'What is your definition of what Masters is?'; focus group responses for all other questions, collated by one member of the group; plenary debate and feedback. The data is constantly analysed using a basis of elements from Participatory Action Research (PAR), as described by Wadsworth (1998) and Horton and Freire (1990). This approach suggests that all relevant parties are engaged in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it. This method allows a large group of teacher

educators to have a voice in this debate whilst actively engaged in developing/changing their approach to considering teaching as a Masters profession. There are limitations to this approach as findings are not necessarily generalisable to all teacher educators. However, its strength lies in the unique and significant body of data which has been collected which encourages conversations about teaching as a Masters profession to continue across the sector.

Frame

The chosen participants were teacher educators which could be said to form a particular 'community of practice' within teacher education institutions in the UK. Wenger (1998) describes communities of practice as members who are brought together by joining in common activities and by 'what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities'. The common activity was engagement with the notion of teaching as a Masters profession. Wenger (op. cit.) goes on to explain that the communities' joint enterprise is understood and continually renegotiated by its members; the intention to continue the debate on teaching as a Masters profession fits this definition of joint enterprise. As reflection and critical engagement are key to Masters level study, so reflection and critical engagement are the key to the process of this research as participants are invited to reflect on and critically engage with the importance of Masters level study.

The research is based upon grounded theory techniques in order to ensure that there are no preconceived ideas determined in advance. It is therefore hoped that the theories, or more especially questions, which arise from the data collection 'are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Research findings

It was discovered that it remains difficult for teacher educators to propose a definition of 'Mastersness' which satisfies them on a personal or political level. There are hints of a 'jargon' of 'Mastersness', expedience rather than conviction, assumption linked with confusion. There are challenges to the concept of a link existing between Masters and teaching and to the desirability of teaching being an all Masters profession. The debate about how to teach it, how to assess it, resulted in the findings that people were still feeling their way on this and did not have a clear idea. This has led to the main finding of the research which is that the debate on teaching as a Masters profession needs to continue.

Bologna Declaration (1999) <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf> (Accessed 11.12.09)

Jackson (2009) Perceptions of Masters level
<http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/TEAN/TeacherEducatorsStorehouse/PerceptionsofMasterslevel-finalresearchreport2009.aspx> (Accessed 11.12.09)

Wenger, E. (1998) 'Communities of Practice. Learning as a social system', Systems Thinker, <http://co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>. (Accessed 11.12.09.)