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Cultures of career development: senior leaders' and early career teachers' views of career

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Background

The TDA-funded NQT Quality Improvement Study is a 4 year, England-wide longitudinal, combined methods study of both SLT and early career teachers (ECT's) views of key issues in the first few years of teaching. The first two phases of the study focussed on entry into the NQT year and the NQT year itself; the third phase looked at the second year of teaching. This paper utilises data from this third phase - particularly case study interviews with teachers and SLT members - to consider the issues of ECTs' careers and career development. The topic is of particular interest, since whilst the picture in terms of teacher supply and retention in the profession overall is much improved in recent years (for example, proportions of unfilled vacancies have declined according to DCSF data, and Smithers and Robinson (2003, 2004, 2005) found that the retention issue tailed off and stabilised over the period of their studies), it is clear that schools vary widely in their ability to recruit and retain staff in their early careers. This paper aims to explore these variations in different contexts and school cultures, to illuminate these differences.

Research Questions

This focus of this paper is to examine how SLT members in different contexts and cultures manage, and view, career development for ECTs in their schools and to compare these views with those of ECTs in the same schools.

Methods

Interview data from 45 second year teachers, 43 SLT members, 32 former NQT mentors in Case Studies in 49 schools (20 primary, 22 secondary, 4 special and 3 independent schools) from across England were used, with additional data from previous case study interviews in the same schools during the teachers' NQT year. For the purposes of this paper, we utilise cross-case thematic analysis, and more in-depth case-level analyses of interview and other data from three schools. Data from the three schools each includes at least two face to face interviews with an ECT and an SLT member, at least one interview with an NQT mentor, and documentary data.

Frame

The theoretical resources we use in this paper draw - first - on the literature on organisational approaches to career, such as organisational and individual career management conceptualisations (Orpen, 1994), some of which is utilised in the context of teacher turnover by writers such as Ingersoll (2001). Second, we make use of work on teachers' work and lives, in which career is conceptualised, in particular Day et al's (2006) work highlighting the different factors that impact on teachers' careers. Finally, we will explore the usefulness of applying theories of organisational learning environments (such as Fuller and Unwin's (2004) concept of expansive and restrictive learning environments) to understanding cultural issues in relation to career.

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Orpen, C (1994) 'The Effects of Organizational and Individual Career Management on Career Success', International Journal of Manpower, 15 (1): 27-37.

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Smithers, A. and Robinson, P. (2004). Teacher Turnover, Wastage and Destinations. Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills.

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Research findings

Some key broad brush findings from our broad analysis are presented below. In the paper, we will illuminate and develop these using the theoretical resources noted above, utilising three detailed case study exemplars, with the aim of contributing to our understanding of how schools manage teacher careers in different contexts.

In this study, the key contexts that were particularly important in relation to career were individual characteristics and attitudes, school context and experience of teaching. Interviewees emphasised that individual characteristics determined the speed at which individuals were able to take on additional responsibilities or demonstrate readiness for promotion. The school context spanning school culture and organisation, together with the attitudes and capability of staff, and the nature of the student body impact in complex ways on the professional development, additional responsibility and promotion opportunities available to staff within the school. A number of other studies draw attention to the complex relationship between school factors and retention, and the negative effects on poor pupil behaviour on second year teacher morale, particularly when combined with a lack of senior leader support. We have identified a third contextual factor, the experience of teaching, which is strong determined by the school context and the individual teacher's characteristics and attitudes. The experience available to the teacher and the teacher's perceptions of the experience of teaching are fundamental to their sense of identity as a teacher and ultimately to whether or wish to continue being a teacher.

Career plans were central in the thinking of our teachers, and many were considering promotion in the short or medium term, although SLs were more circumspect about early promotion. Although some tensions emerged in relation to preparation for promotion, with schools noting that leaving for external promotion too soon could be a problem, offering additional responsibilities and promotion was seen by both teachers and SLs as key to retention of the best teachers.

At the heart of all these issues was professional development and support. The links between professional developments per se as for development as opposed to specific career related development opportunities were disputed. SLs saw these relationships more clearly, noting that development might actually lead to teachers leaving for promotion rather than retaining them, whereas teachers themselves tended to concentrate on specific career opportunities.