

Steady progress? Changes in beginning teachers' pedagogical goals

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Background

International comparisons of educational achievement (e.g. OECD, 2005) prompt both widespread concern for school improvement and a desire to learn from the 'world's best performing systems'. The influential McKinsey report (2007) unsurprisingly highlighted the importance of teacher quality, emphasising both the need to recruit the best possible applicants and to develop them effectively - a process that is now recognised as extending well beyond initial training. In England the statutory induction year is now being supplemented for many teachers by two or three more years of masters-level professional education.

Recognising the importance of continued professional learning, the Developing Expertise of Beginning Teachers project was established as a longitudinal study, tracking teachers through their initial training year and first two years of professional practice. The project drew on methods and analytical categories derived from Brown & McIntyre's (1993) study of expert teachers' 'craft knowledge'. Semi-structured interviews following an observed lesson provided rich insights into the pre-active and interactive decision-making of the beginning teachers, analysed in terms of their aims and the conditions they took into account in determining how to achieve them (Burn et al., 2003).

Although the main analytical categories were derived from a study of experienced teachers' thinking (as revealed in relation to specific lessons), our interest in the beginning teachers' aims partially overlapped with the concept of 'concerns', first mapped by Fuller and Bown (1975). While the latter is obviously broader, encompassing all the preoccupations of beginning teachers, our early findings were entirely consistent with more recent research into the development over time of beginning teachers' concerns. This work, clearly summarised by Watzke (2007,) has revealed the inadequacy of models, such as that first formulated by Fuller and Bown (1975), that postulate discrete stages of development: moving from 'self' related concerns, to focus first on 'tasks' and only eventually on their 'impact' on pupils' learning. Just as Watzke's work has demonstrated the importance of impact concerns at all stages of development, so our own analysis of the beginning teachers' aims - even at very early stages of their training - showed a strong focus on pupil learning and achievement (Burn et al. 2003).

Research Questions

This more complex, nuanced picture was based on post-lesson interviews conducted with the teachers during their initial training year. This paper extends our analysis to include similar interview data from the teachers' first two years in professional practice, asking how the nature of their pedagogical goals changes from the beginning of the postgraduate training year to the end of the second year in teaching.

Methods

Thirty-six student-teachers from two well-established initial teacher education partnerships were originally recruited to the project, twelve from each of the three core subjects of the National Curriculum in England (namely English, mathematics and science). Twenty-four of the original participants were followed into their second and third years of teaching; a selection determined both by the location of their first teaching posts (excluding those working more than 100 miles away) and the willingness of their new schools to accommodate the research. Here we report on a sample of 17 for whom we have complete data sets.

Each of the participants was observed teaching on four separate occasions spread across their postgraduate training year and on six further occasions (once a term) over the course of the next two years. Each observation was followed by an interview exploring the beginning teacher's thinking in relation to the specific lesson. Our assumption, following Brown and McIntyre (1993), was that this specificity would give us the best access to the thinking that informed their practice, rather than to their espoused theories. The beginning teachers were invited to describe and evaluate the lesson in whatever terms they chose, with the interviewer's role being to probe their responses and encourage them to elaborate on their perceptions of the lesson and to offer explanations for any judgements they put forward. One important adaptation to the approach adopted by Brown and McIntyre was the inclusion of specific questions later in the interview about the teacher's planning - precisely because of the crucial role that planning is known to play in the practice of novice teachers (Clark and Yinger 1979, Mutton et al., under review).

Frame

Just as the interview schedule was adapted from Brown and McIntyre's (1993) original study, so our analytical framework (Burn et al., 2003) drew on their model of the interrelated and generalizable concepts that experienced teachers use in evaluating their teaching: the 'actions' that they take either to maintain certain 'normal desirable states of pupil activity' (NDS) or to promote particular kinds of 'progress' (all influenced in turn by the conditions impinging on teaching - most obviously the pupils themselves). The notions of 'progress' and 'NDS' informed our preliminary coding schedule and led eventually - through an iterative and more inductive analysis of the transcripts - to the identification of a series of aims: a few related to the teachers' own learning, or to their conceptions of a good lesson, but the vast majority directed towards the pupils, and focused either on their affective state, their actions/behaviour or their achievement. These achievement goals were further sub-divided to illuminate the range of conceptions that the beginning teachers held of student progress, allowing us to explore important changes in their conceptions and different priorities over time.

Research findings

The findings have implications for teacher educators, policy-makers and practitioners. In the context of the new Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) in England, a clear understanding of the aims that underpin beginning teachers' planning and classroom decision-making is of critical importance. MTL coaches need to know, for example, whether their efforts should essentially be invested in sharpening or re-directing beginning teachers' goals, or in helping them to achieve what are already highly worthwhile objectives. For the beginning teachers themselves, a strong sense of agency (Malmberg and Hagger 2009) - so critical to their effectiveness - depends as much on clarity about what it is they want to achieve, as it does on confidence in their ability to bring it about.