

0494

Beginning teaching and learning at Masters level: addressing tensions between student teachers' pedagogic and academic concerns

Wasył Cajkler, [Sue Dymoke](#)

University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom

Background

Teaching as a 'Masters' profession is the policy aim of the Training and Development Agency (TDA) and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF). In 'Being the Best for our Children' DCSF (2008) express the expectation that teaching become a Masters-level profession. M level requirements in initial teacher education programmes in England have become the norm since 2007, when there began a national move to upgrade the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) to a Masters level qualification. This occurred even though the PGCE is a professionally demanding congested and intensive programme lasting only 40 weeks.

Research Questions

This paper reports on research carried out at the University of Leicester following the introduction of two Masters level modules for primary and secondary trainee teachers in 2007. It investigates student teachers' choices of assignment topics and their methods of enquiry. The paper explores the reasons for the choices they made and questions what the beginning teachers' choices of focus for research reveal about their pedagogical concerns within Primary and Secondary teaching at key points in their initial teacher education. In addition, we report on the perceived impact of Masters level assignments on classroom practice, on teacher development and on workload. There was conflicting evidence about the value of Masters level work for the development of both reflective and pedagogic skills, with responses in focus group interviewees more positive than in questionnaires. Conclusions are drawn for future practice.

Methods

The paper draws on data collected over the two year period immediately following the inception of the programme. It includes surveys (from 234 respondents) collected at the two assignment submission points and semi-structured focus group interview data (collected from 20 secondary trainees representing a range of subject specialisms) together with the written assignments themselves.

Previous studies of teacher education programmes have often criticised them for their failure to enable students to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Darling Hammond 2000; Good et al 2006; Allen 2009). Other recent studies have explored beginning teachers' perceptions of Masters level (for example Jackson and Eady 2009 investigate the extent to which student teachers share similar perceptions of what Masters level study means in relation to enhancing classroom practice).

Frame

Questionnaire responses were first independently coded and then shared and analysed using SPSS for frequencies and correlations across the two cohorts, primary and secondary trainees, in relation to phase and gender. Responses were analysed using categories linked to our original research questions. The focus group interviews were analysed thematically using the same categories. Participants have been anonymised and at each stage of the data collection and coding process we were careful to adhere to ethical guidelines. Analysis of data focuses on trainees' conceptualisation of what we have termed 'M-levelness' and their reflections on how they managed the resulting assignment demands, while also seeking to meet the 33 professional teaching standards (TDA 2008) required for qualified teacher status.

Research findings

Many tensions and contradictions were revealed in the research which we believe could make a significant contribution to research in this newly developing field and to PGCE M level course planning. Unsurprisingly, Masters level study during a QTS training year was seen to present undue challenges in terms of workload and time pressures. Many of the cohort welcomed the opportunity for Masters study and identified some of its benefits. For some students, teaching itself was perceived to be not academically stimulating but the additionality of Masters level work has made it so and helped them to look critically at aspects of their practice such as development of questioning skills, use of group work, supporting EAL learners and the planning and teaching of specific topics within their subject curricula. Overall, however, the beginning teachers were by no means all convinced of the relevance or value of working at M-level at this stage in their professional development as teachers. They indicated that Masters work needed to be more fully embraced and supported by the qualified teachers (often their mentors) working in their ITE partnership schools if it were to become embedded as a key experience during the pre-service year.