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Landmarks in the professional and academic development of mid-career teacher educators

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Background

Teacher educators in the UK are facing increasing and varied demands, on top of already heavy teaching loads. These include heavy regulatory and inspection requirements (Furlong 2005) and the need to develop research skills alongside pedagogical expertise (Murray et al 2009). The latter arises for a mixture of reasons: the continuing assessment of research in higher education; the inclusion of master's level work on Post Graduate Certificates in Education; and the current move towards teaching as a master's level profession (Gilroy & McNamara 2009). All these lead to an increasing imperative for teacher educators to re-conceptualise their roles and extend their expertise. It is therefore important to research into these changes in teacher educators' professional and academic identities.

Research Questions

This paper builds on an initial study of the professional and academic development of early-career teacher educators in two universities in the UK (Griffiths et al 2010). It draws on findings from case studies of mid-career teacher educators in the same two higher education institutions. The objectives of the study are to analyse and compare the career experiences of teacher educators in the two contexts; in particular, to identify stages of development, landmark events and contextual factors affecting professional learning and academic identities.

Research questions are:

1. What are key features of, and landmarks in, the mid-career experiences of teacher educators, and to what extent are they similar and different in the two contexts?
2. What are the major factors affecting the professional and academic development of teacher educators in each university?
3. What strategies for professional learning are particularly useful and do these differ in the two institutions?

Methods

A case study approach (Yin 2002) was adopted, with purposive sampling used to identify a representative sample of 12 teacher educators, representing a range of age, gender, prior experience and current responsibilities. Six mid-career teacher educators from each university were interviewed in order to map personal biographies, academic career experiences and landmarks, forms of support and learning strategies, as well as any barriers or problems encountered in developing academic and professional identities. Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) was used to examine the teacher educators' own accounts of these processes, including longer term perspectives. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of interaction, continuity and situation are also strongly linked to the theoretical framework and therefore particularly pertinent for investigating individual and collective experiences, contexts and learning processes over time.

Frame

The study findings are analysed within the theoretical framework of situated learning, in recognition that the specific context in which teacher educators work is of vital importance in the process of learning (Wenger 1998). Akerlind (2008) provides a useful categorization of understanding an academic identity which we will draw on in the analysis. Eraut's (2007) research on contextual and

learning factors in the workplace will also be used to identify key factors affecting teacher educators' professional learning and differences between formal and informal learning opportunities. In addition, the complex relationships between learning, identity and practice, agency and contextual support, are usefully explored by Billett et al (2005).

Research findings

Key contextual features of each university will be highlighted in relation to teacher education and the professional development of teacher educators, foregrounding the perspectives of the teacher educators. Positive aspects of individual and collective practices and landmark events or processes will be identified, as well as barriers to development arising from teacher educators' professional and academic roles. Because of the different university contexts, cultures, organisational frameworks and practices, it is expected that individual needs, institutional demands, strategies and forms of professional development, and the interconnection between these (Eraut 2007), may differ considerably between the two contexts. Nevertheless, some common features of successful development and learning may also emerge, with important implications for teacher education policy and practice. The need for continuing in-service professional development for teacher educators is stressed, as well as the importance of a range of collaborative strategies within an active learning community.

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