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New teachers as learners: a model of early professional development

This project was designed to improve the learning of new teachers by developing a research-based, practical model of early professional learning. In addition to detailing the main part of the learning process that statutory standards neglect, the research implies that existing standards should be differentially weighted to reflect the multi-dimensional development process we have identified. In so doing, we have shown that it is possible to ‘connect the conflicting’ experience and standard through a more sophisticated recognition of early professional learning.

- Professional learning for new teachers is dominated by emotional and relational factors in its first few months, when they form their professional identity. → Formal standards may not reflect this stage of a new teacher’s experience of developing into a fully functioning professional
- Towards the end of the early emotional-relational phase there are signs of engagement with specific aspects of the teacher’s role. → We recommend a dialogue with policy makers to explore connections between professional standards and the actual learning experiences of beginners.
- Our central use of practitioners as researchers was innovative, and generated insider knowledge that led to a deeper, more detailed picture of what new teachers were learning. → Teachers as researchers have different experiences and understandings of the research process. These have methodological implications for research partnerships with users and for the interaction between academic and operational discourses.

The research

Background and rationale

Professional standards in teaching do not have an explicit theoretical or research-informed foundation. Their usual competence-based framework has been criticised in the academic literature precisely because it is not based on beginners' experiences of learning to teach. Despite this, it is held up as the benchmark for that process. Until the Early Professional Learning (EPL) project, no attempt had been made to seek connections between these opposing positions, the statutory system of competencies on the one hand and, on the other, an extensive literature that identifies teachers' knowledge as being personal, context-rich and elusive (Russell & Bullock 1999), involving processes of identity formation, emotionality (Hargreaves 1998) and intrinsic purpose. Our intention was to explore the extent to which a grounded theory of early teacher learning could enhance the competence-based model for new teachers and contribute to current theoretical formulations of the process.

We found that the main way in which new teachers engaged with the professional standard related to their need to complete their interim profile. There was also a small but significant connection with the standard when many new teachers began to adjust their teaching to difference across the children and classes that they taught. This occurred a few months into their first year of teaching. But the all-encompassing process in learning to teach was about becoming a teacher. This identity was gained through a number of discernable types of experience – emotional, relational, cognitive, material, structural, ethical and temporal. This is a process for which the standard provided no guidance. As one participating new teacher put it, the 'idea that we can give everything an [interim profile] code... is completely meaningless'.

We conceptualised these conflicting experiences as an uneasy amalgam of 'induction' and 'initiation' (Stronach & Corbin, forthcoming). The gap between these constitutes the unpredictable, unstable space of informal learning where teachers have to invent themselves, and where the emotional nature of the immersion is most immediately and sometimes painfully felt. Immersion is a term suggested by the language of the new teachers themselves, who often described their experience in watery metaphors of 'plunging', 'treading water', 'keeping my head above water', being 'swept along', 'sink or swim', 'thrown' or 'dumped in at the deep end' (ibid.). Such a

necessarily individual – we might even say autochthonous – place of learning is obscured by some of the past and current literature on 'communities of practice', collegial support, and nostra for 'effective teaching' routines. These tend to downplay the 'becoming' of the teacher, reducing the role to ethos, technique, competence or skill. They are all important enough, but peripheral to what we claim to be the idiosyncratic and individual nature of the beginning teachers' experience.

In our model of early professional learning, the experience of beginning teachers is seen as being largely dependent on engagement with colleagues and pupils. This confirms earlier research on a smaller scale (e.g. McNally et al 1997) that also identified the importance of informal learning. We acknowledged the work of Brown and McIntyre (1993) on making sense of teaching, which moved understanding of the teaching process beyond behavioural objectives. They created a more dynamic model of conditions, states of activity and decision-making. But the limited empirical base of their research (10-minute interviews with established teachers after lessons) tended to preclude the affective, the uncertain and the biographical. These are aspects of teacher thinking which were much more prominent in our extensive and in-depth ethnographic interviews, which also gave rise to longitudinal narratives in a field otherwise typified by synchronic analyses.

What we did

The EPL Project was a multi-method study which used ethnographic data as a basis for model building and testing in a correlational design that involved the development of five quantitative indicators of new teacher development. The research team combined practitioners, teacher educators and researchers, with backgrounds in different disciplines. The theoretical coherence of our findings is based on a qualitative data set of interviews with 154 new teachers in 45 schools in Scotland and England, and a quantitative data set comprising returns from five indicators of EPL, developed and piloted with users to be fit for purpose.

In year one, the initial case study phase, a group of six teachers were trained and supported as ethnographers of new teachers in their own schools. They gathered qualitative data on the learning experience of new teachers within their own schools and assisted in the development of the five indicators of new teacher development. Testing of the model and further adaptation for different teaching contexts took place in the two subsequent phases, in secondary and primary schools in Scotland and England.

The teacher-researchers conducted interviews in year one at approximately monthly intervals. They probed new teachers' experiences with the purpose of gaining a deeper, detailed picture of early learning – who and what was important, and why. Interviews with 10 participants in this sample continued as a longitudinal study beyond the first year of teaching. From this first phase of data (which included interviews with 21 NQTs in England) the quantitative indicators were constructed, piloted with the initial cohort and refined in preparation for the correlational phases.

Five quantitative indicators were developed: job satisfaction; children's views on their learning environment; interaction with colleagues; teaching ability as judged by an external expert; and development of the new teacher's pupils over the year as judged by colleagues. Each indicator was designed for its specific purpose in a series of workshops with the project's teacher-researchers and then administered to 167 new teachers in 39 schools in Scotland and England during the test phases of the project.

Interviews were conducted by the teacher-researchers on three occasions during each year of the secondary and primary school phases, likewise the administration of indicators, enabling triangulation of new teacher development across the induction year. Unlike the snapshot provided by less comprehensive methods of research, this multi-round, multi-paradigmatic collection of data captures an evolving picture of new teacher experience.

What we found

Close analysis of the interview transcriptions have identified the following dimensions of Early Professional Learning:

Emotional: the range and intensity of feeling from anxiety and despair to delight and fulfilment that permeate the new teachers' descriptions of their learning experiences.

Relational: the set of social interactions, mainly with pupils and colleagues, which produced the crucial relationships for the new teachers' professional identity and role.

Structural: the organisational aspects of the school itself and the wider educational system, including roles, rules and procedures that govern not only teachers' entry into the profession but also the idea of education within society.

Material: concrete manifestation of structure as resources, rooms etc. as they apply to new teachers.

Cognitive: the explicit understandings that tend to be applied in professional

practice including curriculum knowledge, assessment techniques, and differentiated teaching, and which include the professional standard.

Ethical: the new teachers' expressed sense (explicit and implicit) of commitment and care.

Temporal: recognises that these dimensions have trajectories that represent both ontological and epistemological change over the induction year and give expression to purpose.

These dimensions change in intensity over time and in context. The multidimensionality of professional learning is key to understanding identity formation in the beginner, a fundamental process that incorporates relationality, emotionality and a sense of a changing self.

The sets of interviews were organised into extended narratives for each new teacher and, combined with the quantitative data, generate case studies that capture differences between individuals, departments, schools, local education authorities and countries by cross-referencing participants' profiles in five discrete indicator data sub-sets. This makes it possible to identify experiences from participants' stories and use them to interpret variations in quantitative results, as for example in the case of the regression analysis which suggested that new teachers' job satisfaction depends on their working relationships with colleagues.

Analysis of the narrative data of one teacher, who indicated job dissatisfaction, revealed that she felt undermined by other teachers in the department. Because she had not been afforded a classroom of her own, her colleagues were in the habit of interrupting her lessons: 'I feel that certainly I am being undermined at times when people come into the classroom and make comments in front of pupils about the way I am teaching or the way things are being done and I don't necessarily think that is the way it should be done. I think perhaps that it should be said at a different time and certainly not in front of pupils'. In identifying dimensional themes from typically integrated experiences, the individual character of each new teacher's story is striking and, in this particular example, presents the opportunity to locate a particular difficulty in the material dimension that has the effect of eroding the relational, leading to a downturn in job satisfaction.

The emerging statistical correlations suggest that conformity to the EPL model tends to produce better learning outcomes.

References

Brown, S. and McIntyre, D. (1993) Making sense of teaching, Bucks, OUP.

Major implications

We have developed a grounded, multidimensional theory of early professional learning which we continue to disseminate to schools, local authorities and national bodies. An important finding is that EPL is mainly characterised by emotional and relational development. The relative absence of explicit cognitive learning suggests that existing professional standards, based on an extensive list of specific competencies, do not engage with the essential developmental challenges of the first year of teaching experience. Interim and final profiles for the standard for registration are experienced as disappointingly 'impersonal' by new teachers and do not readily support cross-referencing between the new teacher's experience and the standard. There is a danger, therefore, in over-relying on the standard and other formal support to reflect, explain or enhance the new teacher's lived experience of developing into a fully functioning professional.

Although the discourses of experience and the formal standard are very different, we suggest that particular aspects of competence may emerge later in the first year. An example is the emergence of a capacity to 'differentiate' as new teachers' relationships with pupils form and grow into a fuller sense of the pupils as individuals. Further exploration of possible conceptual links may help build a clearer evidence base for interpreting the standard with greater sophistication. An important counterpoint to this thematic analysis, however, is that the identification of these dimensions should not obscure the integrity of each participant's personal narrative and the sense of individual identity formation obtained in reading the transcripts.

The efficacy of the EPL model in practice is apparent in the statistical analysis of our project data. In the project's correlational design, dimensions of the model are operationalised as independent or predictor variables in relation to a series of learning outcomes as measured by the project's quantitative indicators. Correlating new teachers' induction experiences as conceptualised by the dimensions of the model with their responses to the job satisfaction survey shows that variations in new teachers' working relationships with colleagues in their departments (relational dimension), variations in pupil behaviour in their

schools (structural), and variations in the availability of teaching materials and other resources in their schools (material), are each statistically related to variation in new teachers' overall levels of job satisfaction.

An early result suggests that as much as 41 per cent of the variation in new teachers' overall job satisfaction is attributable to working relationships with colleagues in their departments ($\beta = 0.642$, $p < 0.01$, $N = 29$). As these relationships improve or deteriorate, there will be an equivalent response in new teachers' overall levels of satisfaction with the job. Regression analysis confirms causality and shows that for every rise of one unit in the independent variable (new teachers' working relationships with colleagues in their departments) there is a predicted rise of 0.438 in the dependent variable (overall job satisfaction).

Schools cannot guarantee that new teachers experience positive working relationships with colleagues. But as one of the project's teacher-researchers puts it, in writing about implications for schools and local authorities (Smith, forthcoming), 'schools can think about how to enhance practice-setting discourse'. He adds:

Given the contextual nature of practice-setting discourse, we cannot prescribe particular steps or rules that schools should follow. In fact, that may become another form of performance-management. Instead we phrase our aim as a question, "What in practice-setting discourse helps new teachers feel welcome and find their identity as teachers in a school?" Our answer will not be a set of prescriptions but a set of questions for you to apply to your own contexts in practice-setting discourse.

Feedback from dissemination activities suggests that practitioners see how the model and the indicators can indeed be embedded in their own practice, and that the policy community accepts the strength of our evidence base. We have identified the discrepancy between the official standards governing induction and the actual experience of induction, and have shown how this discrepancy can be resolved through a wider multi-dimensional appreciation of EPL and the development of a more stage-related, differentially weighted application of the standard.

Hargreaves, A. (1998) The Emotional Politics of Teacher Development Keynote address to AERA San Diego U.S.A.

McNally, J., Cope, P., Inglis, W. & Stronach, I. (1997) 'The Student Teacher in School: Conditions for Development' *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13, 5, 485-498.

Russell, T. & Bullock, S. (1999) Discovering our Professional Knowledge as Teachers: Critical Dialogues about Learning from Experience in J. Loughran (Ed) *Researching*

Teaching: Methodologies and Practices for Understanding Pedagogy, London: Falmer Press.

Smith, C. (forthcoming) Implications for schools and local authorities, (chapter of proposed project book).

Stronach, I & Corbin, B. (forthcoming) The invention of teachers, (chapter of proposed project book).

Further information

Further information, including several articles, conference papers, indicator posters, and downloadable editions of the research indicators themselves for use by schools, teacher educators and researchers, can be found on the project website (see below).

The apparently contradictory aims of describing a discourse of new teachers that is at odds with the policy-derived competence-based discourse of the professional standard for teachers, and of also seeking to find some points of connection that may help start a dialogue between policy and research, are discussed in McNally, J., Blake, A., Corbin, B. and Gray, P., (2008) 'Finding an identity and meeting a standard: connecting the conflicting in teacher induction', *Journal of Education Policy*, 23:3, 287 – 298, which suggests that standards for new teacher registration ought to be seen as a first attempt to frame professional learning outcomes that now need to be moved on to the next stage of a revised text in which the importance of emotional engagement and personal qualities is acknowledged.

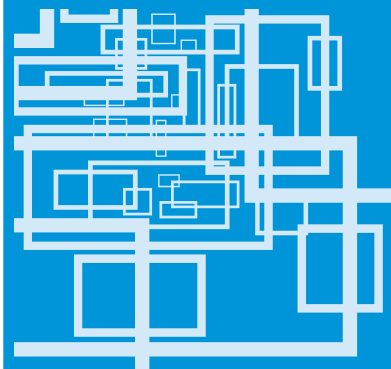
A TLRP Gateway book in the *Improving Learning* series will be available in late 2009, describing and analysing in an accessible way the processes and results of the project, and the implications of our findings for teachers, schools and local authorities.

The warrant

Our earlier research had identified the need for a more progressive focus on Early Professional Learning, including the need for a sharper instrument that might better elicit the subtler layers of the beginning experience. It was in order to realise these intentions that we employed teachers as researchers in Scottish schools, and it was precisely their insider knowledge that elicited data which struck us as 'hot' (immediate, spontaneous) in contrast to more conventional, 'cold' ethnographic interviewing where respondents recall their experiences in more reflective and perhaps rationalised ways. The project was methodologically innovative in two pioneering ways. The first was its use of practitioners as insider-researchers, leading to the project's unique ability to develop distinctive, close-grained, longitudinal narratives of teacher development. Second was the building-in of a complementary quantitative research instrument in which a set of five purpose-specific indicators of new teachers' development were designed and implemented through user engagement, and used in triangulation of the qualitative model.

Engagement with users has been thorough and includes the evolution of the research design, methodological adaptation, and the development of the indicators. All of this offers a substantial basis for the authenticity of the arguments and claims we make. The central role of teacher researchers in the project has been firmly established through data collection, discussion, analysis and interpretation; development and piloting of the indicators; negotiating access with local authorities and schools; and the dissemination of findings. Their work and experience represents a considerable resource in conceptualisation of practitioner research in a project of this scale.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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