

Teachers undertaking master's level professional study: An investigation into motives and perceived outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the outcomes of a small scale enquiry focussing on the impact of professional master's level study undertaken by teachers in the early years of their career. It reports the perceived benefits of undertaking such study in terms of professional competency, personal motivation and career progression. It discusses the barriers faced by students undertaking such courses and how these are balanced against the perceived benefits.

It is suggested that the factors driving teachers to undertake such a course and the outcomes they perceive map clearly to a vocational professional model where the higher level needs of Maslow's motivational hierarchy such as self-actualisation, professional esteem and a need to belong to a professional community take priority over lower level needs.

The paper goes on to discuss the highly variable way in which schools respond to teachers undertaking further study with some actively facilitating dissemination whilst others neglect to capitalise on this investment.

Finally the importance of such courses is discussed in relation to rebalancing the locus of control of education between client stakeholders, educational professionals and government. It is suggested that such courses offer a necessary balance to competency based systems of professional accreditation which cast educational professionals, particularly those below the level of institutional leadership, in the role of policy implementers rather than policy stakeholders and as receivers of good practice rather than classroom based professionals actively involved in defining it.

Whilst the study relates to the UK the trend for increasingly centralised control of educational policy and its impact on the definition of professionalism are applicable in many developed nations.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th and early 21st century education in general and schooling in particular has emerged as central polemic of political discourse. This has been largely fuelled by an economic narrative centred on the role of education as a means of accumulating the human capital required to maintain a competitive advantage in a global knowledge economy (Becker, 1975). Such a focus on the economic imperative as a driver for educational reform cannot be said to be new, indeed Disraeli's affirmation of the central importance of education for national economic success was quoted by Butler in the frontispiece of the 1943 White Paper on Educational Reconstruction. What is new is perhaps the all embracing nature of central control. In such a globalised environment, local and even national educational changes have become framed within a set of 'global mega-trends' which describe a set of forces acting to centralize control of the curriculum and processes of

schooling at the level of national government (Caldwell, 1992). In tandem with this, it is suggested that the very policy process has become polarised between policy formation and policy implementation relegating schools to the role of 'delivery agencies' and casting those who work within them in the role of passive actors charged with implementation and largely disenfranchised from the policy formation process.

If educators are to reclaim their role as active stakeholders in the process of policy formation and evaluation or as change agents as Fullan (1993a) suggests, attention must be focussed on ensuring that those who enter the teaching profession acquire a critical understanding of the fundamental issues which surround the educational debate. Further they require a professional forum within which such debate can take place.

The 1988 Education Reform Act may be seen as a turning point for professional autonomy and involvement in policy formation (Halpin, 1994). Educators have witnessed the framing of a National Curriculum defining what should be taught, when and to whom which has impacted on teacher's influence and their sense of professionalism (Helsby, 1995). Simultaneously, accountability frameworks, external to schools, have strengthened their hold since the 1976 labour governments 'Great debate' (Bush, 1994). Associated with this trend has been a growing managerialism and performativity within schools fuelled by a target setting and standards agenda which has acted to disenfranchise teachers as stakeholders in the educational debate (Menter, 2004).

Figure 1 shows an influence vector representation suggesting how the locus of control of the education system (C) is subject to a dynamic balance influenced by the changing power of various stakeholder groups. The diagram indicates that the standards agenda, central control of the curriculum and influence over pedagogical practice coupled with the quasi-market rhetoric of choice and the increasing influence of the private sector in the educational arena has served to move the locus of control away from educational professionals.

Diagrammatically represented, the three key stakeholders exert a force on policy formation. Where each stakeholder has equal influence then C is balanced in the centre. The movement of C towards government and client stakeholders represents the disenfranchisement of teachers from the policy formation process (Halpin, 1994), the increasing power of commercial interests (Monbiot, 2000), (Hatcher, 2006), (Whitty, 2005) and the centralisation of curriculum control with government (Caldwell, 1992).

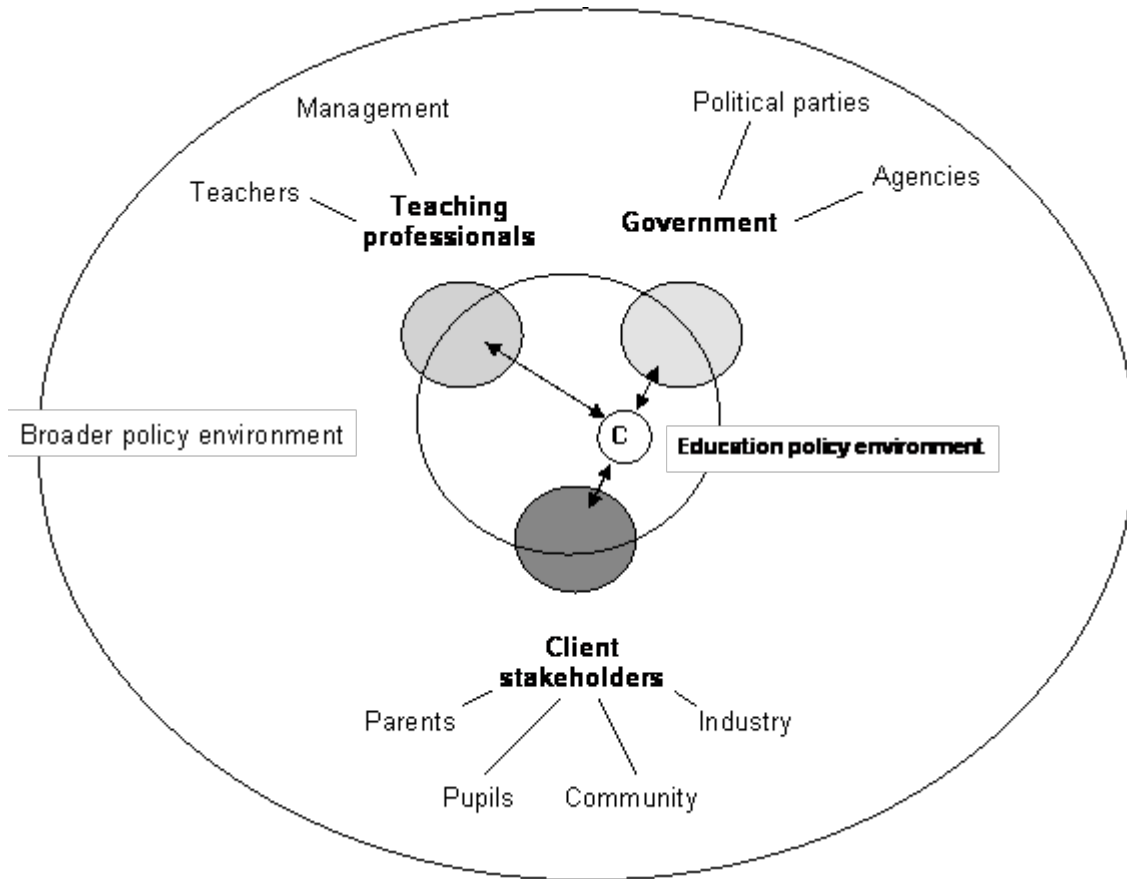


Figure 1: Gravity model showing impact of marketization on the locus of policy control.

The last decade has also seen the emergence of a set of centrally formulated ‘Standards’ (TDA, 2006) which act as a competency framework for the achievement of Qualified Teacher Status. A brief analysis of these competencies reveals a strong emphasis on knowing about and being able to implement a centrally defined curriculum in terms of its content and mechanisms for delivery and assessment. Absent, or at best weakly implicit, in these ‘Standards’ is the ability to engage with educational issues from a critical, analytical and creative perspective. Whilst many providers of ITE would legitimately suggest that their courses of study towards QTS do require analytical skills and the development of a critical perspective these are not strongly or explicitly required by the QTS standards themselves.

In short such competency frameworks place the teacher’s professional role firmly within an operational context, doing little to foster engagement with wider educational issues.

Certainly, few would argue for a return to a time when teachers operated behind a cloak of professional autonomy where ‘expert status’ acted to exclude other stakeholders from active engagement in the processes of educational decision making.

However, recent moves to liberalise the National Curriculum both in content and applicability, the lightening of the burden of inspection and the growing concerns about excessive testing which form the foundations a culture of performativity, suggest that a potential policy vacuum may be formed if teachers are not ready to reclaim their role as key contributors and leaders within the educational epistemic community. Consequently the question is raised, who will fill this vacuum? In an increasingly marketized educational environment we are faced with the potential undermining of the democratic control of both the content and processes of education (Scanlon, 2003). If teachers are to have a voice which helps to fill a power vacuum and are to avoid becoming further marginalised, there is a need to develop opportunities, both formal and informal, to engage with educational debate at a level which transcends that associated with a largely competency based frameworks for professional development and the implementation of 'best practice' delivered via a top-down system.

CHALLENGES TO TEACHER'S PROFESSIONALISM

What it means to be a professional teacher is defined with respect to space, time and culture (Broadfoot, 1993) and in times of rapid change the concept of teacher professionalism requires constant revision informed by on-going critical reflection both at the level of the individual teacher and collectively. Whilst competency standards are capable of establishing a framework for the acquisition of skills and knowledge the key attributes of deeper professional reflection and the willingness and capacity to engage in ongoing collegiate discourse are not.

Teachers' self-conceptualization of professionalism is inevitably influenced by the rapid and fundamental changes occurring within the educational field and those beyond it which profoundly influence the context in which teachers work and the processes of schooling take place. Specialism and ownership of a body of knowledge need to be replaced with adaptability and the capacity to constantly adapt to new ways of working (Beare, 2001). In addition the fundamental changes in society and concerns for social equity require the teacher to increasingly engage with value judgements and moral interpretations which can only be done effectively through collective professional discourse and by teachers whose training and development engenders in them a capacity to deal with value related issues in an informed and critical manner (Socket, 1993).

OUTLINE OF THE ENQUIRY

The research reported here constitutes the pilot phase of a larger study aiming to investigate the impact of further academic study on the attitudes and career trajectories of those who choose to undertake master's level teaching related courses.

The target population consisted of serving teachers who were currently enrolled or who had recently completed a professional master's level qualification in education. As such the

attitudes expressed by respondents do not necessarily represent those of the teaching profession as a whole or indeed all teachers in the early years of their careers.

Given that those enrolled on such a course have made a financial commitment and have chosen to undertake work in addition to their normal teaching duties it may be expected that the views expressed represent those of more career focussed and committed members of the teaching profession. Any inferences made need to recognise this target population as atypical to some degree.

Data was collected by the distribution of an email questionnaire sent to all current and past course members and asked for responses to the following points:

- Why did you choose to undertake this course?
- What have you gained from the course?
- What were the major obstacles to completing the course?
- What do you feel your school gained from you undertaking this course?

Returns were received from 26 teachers with the degree of detail varying considerably with a small number consisting of bullet-pointed responses. A large number of respondents provided more detailed feedback with many combining factual responses with more impressionistic views.

The responses were tabulated under each question heading and the data was then reduced to a range of factors and sub-factors and a summary of the analysis is given in figures 3 to 6. The relatively small number of responses was not considered sufficient to assign a weighting for each factor but where a factor is shown and discussed in the text it represents views expressed by at least 4 of the respondents.

The responses gave a broad insight into the factors influencing these new teachers' motives for engaging in further professional study and the analysis of the responses received are placed within the conceptual framework of an adapted motivation theory outlined below.

TEACHERS, VOCATION AND PROFESSIONAL MOTIVATION – ADAPTING MASLOW

As with other occupations, teachers' engagement with their work can be analysed within the conceptual framework provided by motivation theory. In this particular case this framework is applied to the analysis of motivation to undertake, on a voluntary basis, a course of accredited professional master's level study.

It has been stated that motivation theory is:

'probably the most confused, confusing and poorly developed concept in organisational psychology'

(Smith, 1990)

However, despite the inherent complexity in the application of all motivational theory, the hierarchy of needs model (Maslow, 1943) presents a useful framework for the analysis of motivation in vocational and professional contexts.

Whilst Maslow's work has undergone enhancement and adaptation within a range of contexts the three higher level motivational drivers maintain their relevance.

Maslow's higher level needs of self-actualisation, esteem and belonging equate well with the concepts of vocationalism which underpin the notion of professionalism, particularly within the context of education. In addition, enhancements to

Maslow's original hierarchy is shown in the left-hand frame of Figure 2 indicating the foundations of physiological and safety needs underlying the higher level needs relating to largely non-tangible rewards. In the right-hand frame, each level is interpreted in the context of the work of the professional teacher.

Maslow's theoretical perspective suggests that individuals seek to address higher level needs as lower level needs become satisfied. Also, Maslow's original work suggests that where the achievement of higher level needs become frustrated, greater emphasis is placed on lower level needs (Graham, 1998). This potentially provides an explanation of the emphasis on pay levels as a justification for leaving the profession (Smithers, 2001) rather than issues of professional status.

The model would suggest that for teachers the lower level physiological and safety needs are relatively easily satisfied as teaching posts offer significant security of tenure and remuneration in keeping with UK graduate occupations.

Maslow's hierarchy of need	Professional interpretation
<p style="text-align: center;">Self-actualisation (Achieving individual potential)</p>	<p>Self-actualisation – Continuing development of professional skills. Developing professional awareness.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Esteem (self-esteem and esteem from others)</p>	<p>Esteem – Self-esteem through enhanced professional outcomes. Esteem through leading others. Acknowledgement of a qualification. Promotion and responsibility.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Belonging (Love, affection, being a part of groups)</p>	<p>Belonging – Being part of a community of practice and enquiry. Professional relationships which transcend the immediate work environment.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Safety (Shelter, removal from danger)</p>	<p>Safety – Job security. Automatic pay increments.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Physiological (Health, food, sleep)</p>	<p>Physiological – Paid employment.</p>

Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs mapped to the vocational context of teachers

Certainly, the complexity of motivation theory and the inherent variation in individual teachers' preferences makes generalisations difficult but in seeking to understand teachers' tendency to engage with or to avoid continuing professional development the conceptual framework provided by Maslow serves as well as any.

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A summary and brief discussion of the responses to the questionnaire is given in the following four sections and presented graphically in figures 3 to 6.

1. What prompted the respondents to undertake the course?

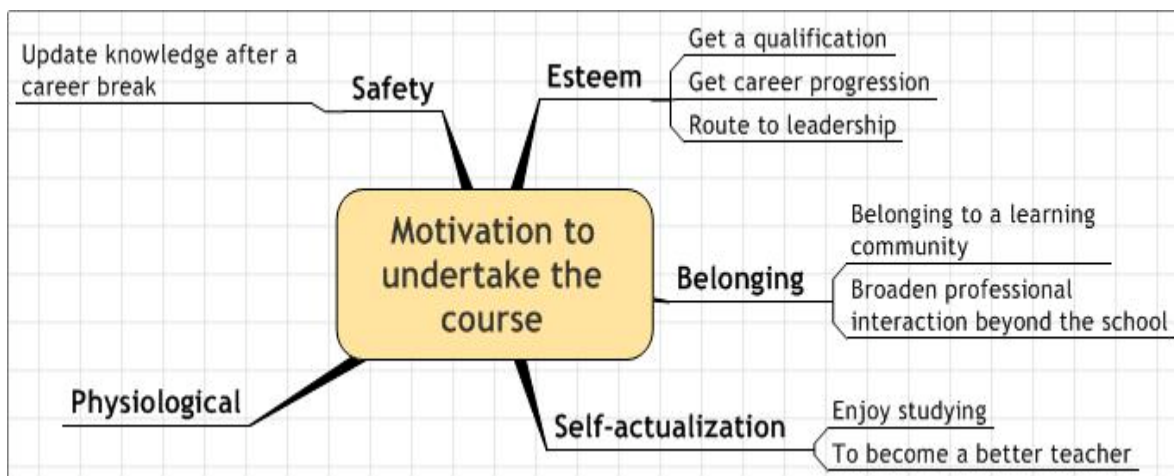


Figure 3: What motivated students to undertake the course?

Individual responses were grouped and mapped to the headings provided in the motivational hierarchy shown in Fig 2. The mapping shows that a significant majority of comments equate to the higher levels of motivation such as self-actualisation, esteem and belonging.

Many of the comments relating to professional esteem referred to the perceived connection between gaining a qualification and gaining career progression either to specific roles such as mentoring or, more generally, into leadership roles. The validity of the perceived link between study and career progression was born out in several cases by respondents giving examples of responsibilities they had been given as a direct result of school based work undertaken as part of the course.

From the above it is clear that such a course is perceived to be professionally relevant by those who undertake it. What is less clear is the articulation between such professionally focussed masters level study and the emerging framework of professional competency based frameworks such as 'Leading from the middle' and NPQH.

The importance of engagement with fellow professionals within a community of practice has been long recognised (Schlager, 2002) and the current study suggests that a major motivation for engaging with the course involved the respondents wishing to feel themselves to be members of a community of practice. A number of respondents suggested that the benefits of being a member of such a community included the opportunity to interact with professional peers beyond their own school and to develop their understanding of a wider range of learning contexts.

Whilst the opportunities for interaction on-line were clearly valued by many respondents the study raises the question why such interaction could not be provided through the many on-line discussion groups provided by subject associations and a variety of other organisations. It is possible that the course provided a clear and common mutual goal with discussion managed by tutors although further research would be needed to explore this area adequately.

Self-actualization or the need to fulfil ones full potential was also well represented by comments made by respondents. A number of respondents suggested that the course offered an opportunity to continue to study and develop their broader knowledge of education and to build theoretical perspectives which some felt led to a greater understanding of the context within which they worked and, in turn, the wider context in which education takes place. Some suggested that this developing understanding allowed them to rationalise and accept problematic issues which they were unable to change.

This degree of acceptance through understanding of issues which are beyond the immediate control of the teacher and the capacity to rationalize their own professional situation was seen by some respondents to reduce their sense of frustration. Given the clear association between stress and teacher turn-over it is possible that such a course may impact positively on teacher retention which has emerged as a national priority particularly with respect to those in the early stages of their career.

2. What did students get from the course?

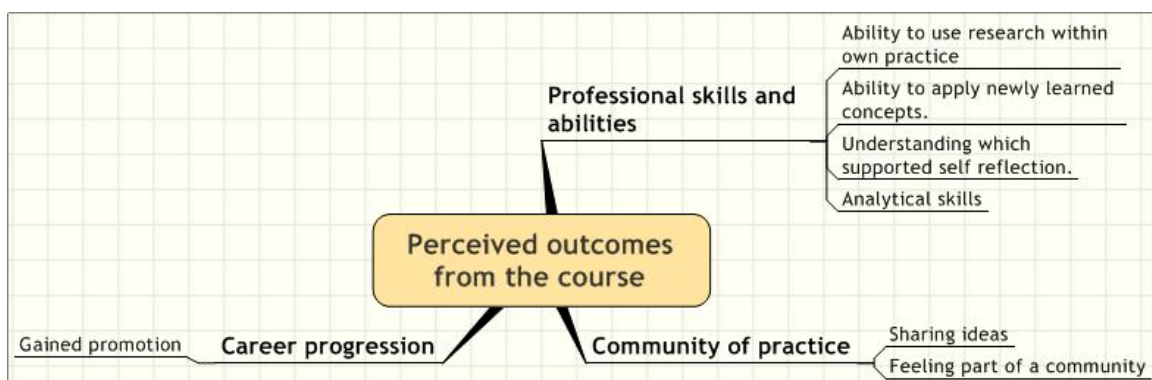


Figure 4: What benefits did students receive from undertaking the course?

Figure 4 maps the perceived outcomes of the course of study with the comments falling under three main headings strongly associated with the issues outlined above. The analysis would indicate that to a great extent the course meets the desired outcomes of those undertaking it.

Many respondents gave specific examples of the way the course had led to enhancements to their professional skills and abilities with some emphasising the practical value of research tasks when applied to inform their teaching. Others suggested that issues covered as part of the course supported their development as reflective practitioners. In some cases the respondents outlined how their research supported practice and systematic reflection on their teaching had been disseminated through supporting colleagues either in their own department or through whole-school INSET days. This was seen to further enhance professional self-esteem.

As stated above, many respondents found that collaborative working through a community of practice supported their professional development and a number could give specific examples where their involvement in the course had led directly to career progression.

A sample of student comments, grouped under Maslow's three higher level needs, is provided in Table 1.

Self-actualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>".....a chance to develop my own knowledge through reading and research in my subject."</i> • <i>".....being more analytical in my approach to teaching and leaning"</i>. • <i>".....I wanted to become a more effective practitioner, armed with a steady arsenal of both theory and practice"</i>.
Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"I love the on-line discussionsand have gained a lot of friends and knowledge as a result"</i>. • <i>".....support and companionship from other teachers in London"</i>. • <i>".....on-line discussions helped me to become more confident...to express my ideas and develop professionally"</i>.
Esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>".....added to my professional development and found myself looking to lead on issues in school"</i>. • <i>".....in order to maintain my professional development and with a view to possibly becoming a senior manager sometime in the future"</i>. • <i>"It's helped me get promotion"</i>.

Table 1: Sample comments taken for student responses

3. What barriers did students encounter in completing the course?

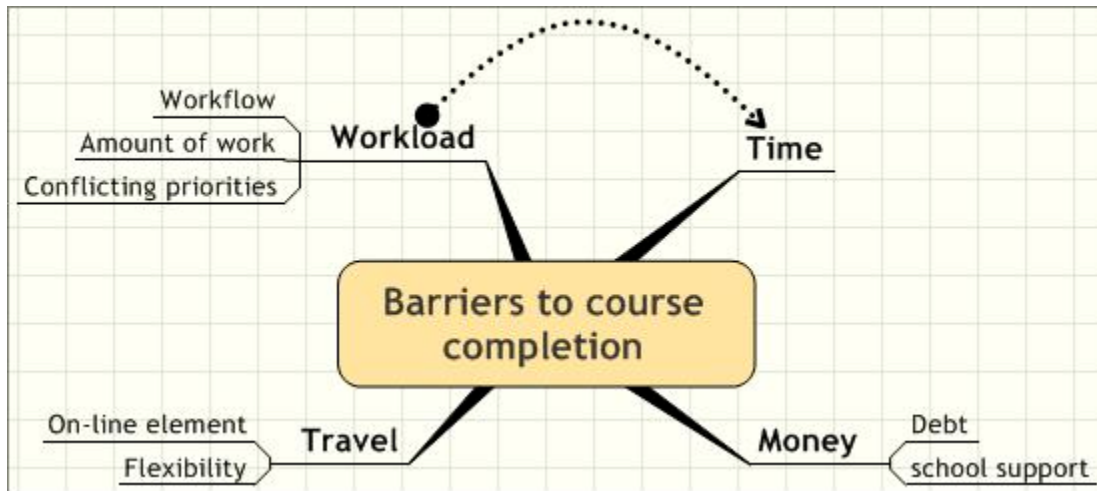


Figure 5: What barriers did students encounter in completing the course?

By far the most frequently mentioned barrier to actively engaging with the course were the associated factors of workload and time. Whilst it might be expected that undertaking masters level study early in a teaching career would impose a workload which some might find impossible to cope with, analysis of the responses indicated that the amount of work to be undertaken was less important than the workflow and conflicting priorities imposed by school based deadlines and domestic pressures. Whilst many felt that the course was demanding, most balanced these demands positively against the benefits listed previously and a number mentioned that the flexibility to frame assignments within the context of their school based work acted to mitigate the impact of workload.

Other barriers mentioned by respondents were the financial commitment required although over half of the respondents stated that their school provided some element of financial support. Given that the course attracts new teachers many whom are still encumbered with student debt, this issue carries a greater significance than for courses aimed at established professionals at the level of middle and senior management.

The final barrier mentioned by a small number of respondents was the need to travel to face to face sessions.

The analysis of the responses to this question showed that whilst most students encountered some barriers which needed to be coped with most felt that, on-balance, the benefits significantly outweighed the problems encountered.

4. What did you feel your school got out of your participation in the course?

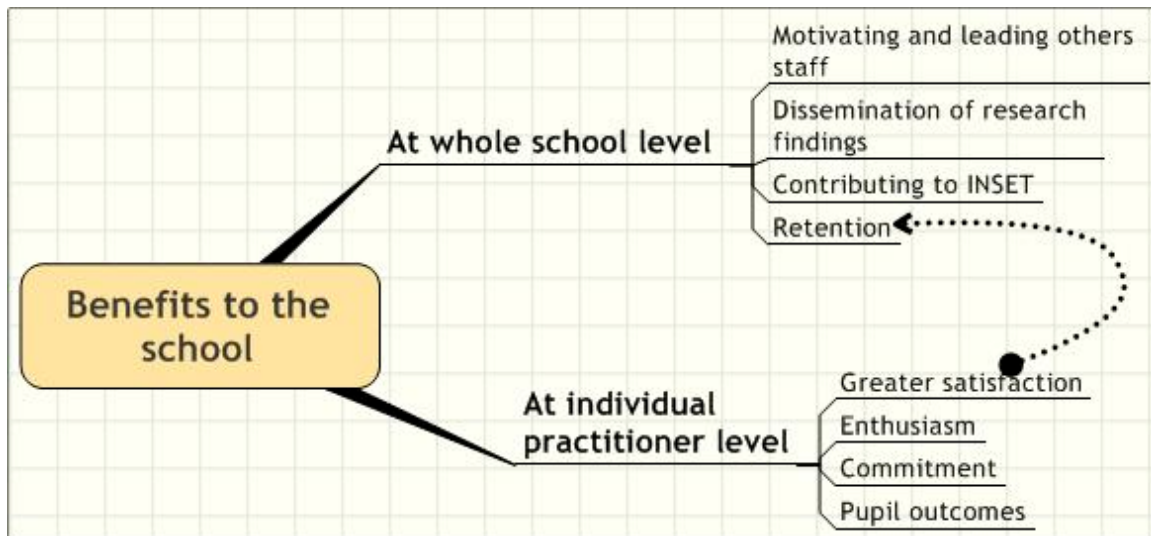


Fig 6. What did you feel your school got out of you doing the course?

From a post-Fordist perspective where the key assets of the organisation comprise the skills, knowledge and attributes of staff (Hodkinson, 1997) it would be expected that a school leadership team would seek to ensure that the benefits of independently undertaken professional development were maximised as an asset for the organisation as a whole and a significant majority of respondents commented that their involvement in the course had led to recognisable benefits for their school. Analysis of the comments made indicates that the degree of impact relates to the willingness and the capacity of the school to support dissemination of ideas and the results of institution based research. Where schools facilitated dissemination, benefits accrued at the level of the individual and at the level of the whole school. A number of respondents reported that they had been given opportunities to disseminate their ideas and research findings at a whole school or department level thought formal INSET arrangements. Others reported less formal opportunities offered by working alongside their professional peers and sharing ideas.

Unfortunately some respondents perceived their schools to be indifferent to their work and felt that little impact had accrued at whole school or department level.

However, a majority of those who felt that their work had not been usefully disseminated at whole school level reported a range of positive influences on their work at an individual professional level.

The individual level impacts reported included a strengthening of commitment and a sense of being more proactive and enthusiastic and on a practical level respondents suggested that, in a number of cases pupils had benefited from their enhanced practice.

From the above it is clear that whilst benefits accrue to course members at an individual level the degree to which benefits are more widely shared is determined by the systems in-place within the school.

Hargreaves states:

‘An effect of recent educational reforms has been to discourage teachers from engaging in the process of professional knowledge creation by which, in rapidly changing social conditions in schools and society, the profession generates new knowledge to become more effective.’

(Hargreaves, 1999)

Given that a majority of respondents reported that their schools had provided either financial support or time off to facilitate their engagement with the course the issue arises of the degree to which this potential investment is under utilized in some institutions and the degree to which managerialism and associated educational reforms have led to the neglect of issues central to teachers’ self-conceptions of professionalism (Forde, 2006)

CONCLUSIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The impact of central government control, the divorcing of policy formation from policy implementation and the impact of managerialism on the professional autonomy of teachers is well researched (Caldwell, 1992).

The gravity model discussed above (Fig 1) shows a gradual disempowerment of teachers which has impacted on stress levels and which in turn has been implicated as a factor influencing teachers’ decisions to leave the profession (Kyriacou, 1987).

The age profile of the teaching workforce in the UK is heavily skewed to older staff and research suggests that a sense of professionalism and commitment grows throughout teachers’ careers (Broadfoot, 1993). This combined with the trend for attrition to be particularly high in the first few years of teaching (Smithers, 2001) suggests that a course of professional study which provides opportunities to be a member of a professional community, enhances and develops enthusiasm, professional understanding and a sense of empowerment may well serve to sustain new teachers through the early stages of their career.

Furthermore, whilst the locus of control of education currently rests closer to government and client stakeholders, with the teaching profession occupying a relatively marginalised position, it is suggested that truly effective educational change can only take place where the teaching profession takes up the challenge of reform and innovation (Hargreaves, 1994), (Fullan, 1993). In consequence, a programme of professional capacity building is needed if new teachers are to engage critically with educational issues and provide leadership in an era of challenge and change.

As has been discussed above, new teachers are awarded QTS based on meeting competency standards which serve relatively well as a baseline ensuring that those entering the classroom are safe and capable of teaching lessons effectively. What such standards do not do is provide a broad framework within which new teachers can collaboratively develop their knowledge and understanding of broader educational issues at the level of the school and just as importantly at the interface between economy, society and education.

What is required is a framework for professional development and discourse which transcends but does not replace the classroom competency standards required to gain QTS.

The small scale study described here supports the claim that teachers new to the profession both want and need opportunities to engage in research, critical evaluation and to take part in professional debate. To meet this need, courses such as the one described in the article above need to be more widely available to new teachers. Further, if schools are to develop as truly learning organisations it is essential that they build their capacity to foster and encourage active enquiry, reflective practice and provide a forum for professional discourse to act as a counter-point to 'top-down training' focussing on externally imposed initiatives.

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