

What are the benefits of Masters accredited CPD: An exploration of Primary Postgraduate student teacher views

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Abstract

During the midpoint of the PGCE programmes a small group of students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of taking M level credits as part of their PGCE. The themes arising from their responses were used to inform the questionnaire, administered at the end of the summer term to the whole cohort of Primary PGCE students. A grounded theory approach to analysis was adopted by first drawing out broad themes, which were then used to structure an initial analysis of the questionnaire. The findings from both the mid term interviews and end of programme questionnaire suggest that PGCE students perceived M level study to provide both benefits and challenges during their PGCE. Many of these were also highlighted as reasons for deciding whether to continue or not with Masters level study in the Induction year. Becoming a 'better teacher' was repeatedly cited as a reason for both continuing and not continuing Masters level study. Predominant incentives for continuing further study was the desire to have a more in depth understanding of facets of learning and teaching as well as career enhancement. Predominant reasons for not continuing were real concerns about survival and coping with the 'unknown' demands of the Induction year. A few respondents also felt they did not need a Masters qualification to prove they were a good teacher.

Key words: Masters; Initial Teacher Education; Primary; PGCE; Continuing Professional Development; early career teachers; induction, Newly Qualified Teachers.

Background

The advent of the new Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) marks a reconceptualising of what continuing professional development (CPD) means for early career teachers. It aims to target both individual and school needs and marks a continued commitment by the government through the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) to ensure that teachers have an entitlement to 'high quality' CPD for the first five years of their careers (DCSF, 2007), with the adage that it could be a way of addressing teacher retention. Much of the underlying rationale for the MTL can be found within recent evaluations and reviews of Induction and CPD (see Ofsted 2003, Totterdell et al 2004, Bolam and Wendling, 2006 and Totterdell 2008).

From September 2009 Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in North West (NW) England who obtained Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in June 2009 and NQTs and new Heads of Department in National Challenge Schools were invited to express an interest and by January 2010 to register for the MTL. £30 million has been made available by the government between 2008-09 and 2010-11 for the initial roll-out of this qualification. The funding will support a three way partnership between the NQT, the school coach and a Higher Education (HE) tutor and the TDA are aiming for 75% of NQTs to take up the entitlement for MTL. Phase one of the MTL programme aims to build on the professional experience of the participants and develop 'M' level enquiry skills. Phase two aims to broaden and embed professional practice with particular reference to subjects and age phase taught by engaging with four interrelated areas of content; teaching, learning and assessment; subject knowledge and curriculum development; how children and young people develop; and leadership, management and working with others. Phase three aims to further develop practice within a specialist focus and demonstrate it to be at the forefront of the professional field. It is envisaged that Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) may be obtained in certain, limited circumstances (NW MTL Consortium, 2009).

The rationale for MTL lies in the belief that by making teaching a Masters profession the government will be able to:

ensure that every teacher will now be engaged in high quality performance management linked to continued practical professional development from when they first start teaching. This will represent a step change for the profession that will bring us in line with the highest performing education systems in the world. (DSCF, 2007:88)

The expectation is that this will also help in the recruitment and retention of the best teachers in these schools and consequently have a direct impact on outcomes for their pupils (DSCF, 2007). Totterdell et al (2004, 2008) report that where there is careful consideration and support given to the novice teacher and experienced mentor during the Induction year in terms of time for meeting and collaborative planning; then it can be a highly effective way to develop classroom practice and increase teacher retention. They also suggest that this effectiveness could be further capitalised on if such support was extended over the first three years of teaching. However, The State of the Nation research (TDA, 2009) suggested opinion was divided as to whether a MTL qualification would encourage retention, with 75% of teachers seeing school and class based CPD which focused on improving pedagogy and learning processes, as of greater value than accredited courses. Furthermore, a pilot study by Jackson and Eady (2008) has indicated that students do not immediately see the benefits of Masters study so early on in their training or associate it with supporting development in learning and teaching in their Induction year and beyond.

Stronach (2009) argued that succeeding in the Induction year is more complex than simply mastering effective teaching skills but it is about developing a persona as a teacher. Stronach (2009) documents the experience of NQTs in England and Scotland as one of 'induction and initiation' in the way they begin to learn as professionals (Stronach, 2009). He suggested that not only have NQTs got to 'juggle with economies of performance and ecologies of practice', but they also have to deal with the 'emotional chronology' of becoming a professional, of learning to think, act and feel as one'. Thus the 'gap between induction and initiation is where teachers invent themselves and find their identity as a teacher' (Stronach, 2009:173). If the proposed MTL encourages reflection in action, then it could be a powerful way of introducing NQTs to self understanding and a realisation that the dilemmas and

tensions they experience in the initial stages of becoming a teacher are part of a normal process. However, if NQTs decide they will not take up the entitlement to studying for the MTL then this could subvert government policy and plans for a coherent package of early professional development.

This study conducted in 2008-09 looked at the value primary PGCE students placed on Masters study during the PGCE year and into the first year of teaching. As part of their PGCE programme all students studied modules at Masters level (level 7). This required elements of critical reflection on theory and practice through small scale practitioner research whilst on placement, in addition to gaining Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Whilst the completion of the PGCE enabled students to gain 60 credits towards a Masters degree in Education it is envisaged that only 30 of these credits would be eligible for APCL into the MTL (NW MTL consortium, 2009). Thus, this study aimed to explore the following questions.

- What benefits do Primary PGCE students perceive Masters level study to have during their teacher training?
- Do students feel a 'Masters' in Education would be a worthwhile pursuit in their early careers as teachers?

Data collection methods

The research is located in an interpretivist paradigm and as such, seeks to identify meanings and interpretations of the perceived value PGCE students place on Masters level study by drawing on qualitative data collection methods and analysis. By adopting an interpretive stance it was acknowledged that the researcher would have a significant influence on the research process at all stages, and, in this sense, there is a need to understand that the research process is shaped just as much by the researcher's personal history as it is by participants in the study. For example, the role and professional position of the researcher as teacher educator has been an important factor in terms of not only in terms of designing the study, but also in terms of interpreting the findings. However, researcher bias was reduced by discussing the research design, data collection and analysis with colleagues from other Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Institutions.

Within an interpretive paradigm it is recognised that ethical issues affect all aspects of the research including the extent to which participants shape and direct the research as well as the extent to which they have ownership of it. With this in mind strict ethical guidelines in line with those produced by the British Educational Research Association (2004) were adhered to ensuring that the participants were fully informed of the aims of the research throughout. They were offered the opportunity to volunteer to participate in the initial interviews and later invited to anonymously complete a short questionnaire in the last week of their programme.

Whilst questionnaires are considered an effective way of gathering large amounts of information relatively quickly and within a short space of time (Mujis, 2004), care was taken with the wording, structure and order of the questions. Oppenheim (1992) warned that the validity and reliability of responses is as much due to the wording of questions as to the mood and circumstances of those responding. The issue of 'non-return' was also an important consideration as those that decided not to respond form a significant group who may, by the very nature of not responding, have different views than those that choose to do so (Oppenheim, 1992). In many ways it could be considered that the study employed methods of 'purposive sampling' (Mujis, 2004) in that the questionnaire was administered to PGCE students in one ITE Institution across two campuses and as such it should be acknowledged that the views of these students may not necessarily reflect those studying at other ITE Institutions.

Thus, in order to maximise the validity and reliability in this study, the questionnaire contained only six questions, carefully constructed using themes arising from the earlier interviews with PGCE students. The questionnaires were made available to the whole cohort when they attended lectures in the final week of their course which resulted in a response rate of eighty returns out of one hundred and fifty. It was acknowledged that 'non-response' could lead to further bias in the sample, however, the aim of the questionnaire was to provide a broad description of perceptions and value placed on Masters study in order to inform future research in this area. Grounded theory techniques were used to analyse the data, enabling broad themes to emerge. Comprehensive data treatment through constant comparison and deviant case analysis (Silverman, 2000) was applied at all levels of data analysis,

with theory arising out of the data collected (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The data from the interviews were analysed first drawing out broad themes. These, together with discussions with colleagues from other ITE Institutions were then used to construct the questionnaire. Responses to open ended questions from the questionnaire were examined for processes, actions, assumptions, consequences, metaphors and conflicts. Throughout the process code notes were made so that main themes, issues and surprises along with contrasting views could be identified. Finally, theory notes were made in an attempt to build a conceptual model (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), which is presented in the discussion section of this paper.

Findings and discussion

Table 1.1 shows that the students at the end of their PGCE were divided in their views as to whether they felt they would continue with Masters level study in their Induction year. At this stage, only 51 would consider continuing with a Masters, with 37 indicating 'no' or not responding to this question. This is well below the government's target of 75% of all NQTs in the NW.

Table 1.1 Number students considering registration for MTL or existing Masters programme

Cohort	Yes (MTL)	Yes (MA)	No	No response
Campus A	13	7	9	15
Campus B	24	8	6	7
Total	36	15	15	22

N = 88

From the interviews it would appear that some students struggled to decide on an initial research focus for the Masters component of their PGCE assessment; whilst others also struggled to balance their time effectively between meeting QTS standards and collecting data during their PGCE year. Typical comments made during the interviews were:

There is a tension between planning and passing lessons and collecting data for research. (S1)

I found fitting in the research in the timescale and being able to write critically and reflectively very challenging. (S2)

As a consequence of this experience, it is unsurprising that such students felt that continuing Masters study in their Induction year could result in similar tensions. The apparent uncertainty whether to continue with Masters level study (see Table 1.1) is perhaps also an indicator of this.

The findings from the questionnaire suggest that Primary trainee teachers perceived Masters level study to provide both benefits and challenges during their PGCE and into the first year of teaching. Becoming a 'better teacher' was repeatedly cited as a reason for continuing Masters study and this seemed to be associated with having a more in depth understanding of facets of learning and teaching as well as some understanding of the place of teacher research and reflective practice. For example, typical responses were:

it has helped me to think critically about my own teaching practice in order to improve it. (L)

Another suggested Masters study would encourage:

more in depth analysis, discussion and dialogue, not only with children but with peers as well. (C)

An emerging incentive for continuing Masters accreditation in the Induction year was career enhancement. For example, typical responses included:

I hope it helps me to develop in my career and gives me a greater understanding of the teaching profession. (L)

If it becomes part of a threshold on the pay scale then I will complete it. It will also depend on what responsibilities I have within my job. (C)

Conversely, 'becoming a better teacher' was also cited as a deterrent for not registering for the MTL or an existing Masters programme in the Induction year. This seemed to be strongly linked to real concerns about survival and coping with the 'unknown' demands of the Induction year and a wish to concentrate on perfecting teaching skills. A typical response was:

I do not want the extra commitment of studying and would rather concentrate on my NQT year and becoming a successful teacher. (L)

Likewise, several respondents from both campuses indicated they were keen to prioritise teaching and workload above further study.

Thus, the group of primary trainee teachers in this study seemed to represent four different perspectives, when considering the value of Masters level study both as trainees and as NQTs.

'Pedagogic practitioners' perceived themselves as becoming a 'better teacher' by continuing Masters study in their first year of teaching. They commonly associated 'reflection' as a way to improve, deepen and have a greater understanding of subject knowledge, pedagogy and practice. The responses below were typical of this group who seemed to associate Masters study as a vehicle for developing teaching and learning skills:

[It will] further development on classroom techniques and methods which really impact on teaching and learning. (L)

It will help me to develop as a teacher and equip me with the knowledge I need, in order to give my best to the pupils I teach. (L)

A small number associated increased self esteem:

[It will enable me] to develop my teaching skills and knowledge of teaching increase my confidence in teaching develop more detailed understanding of teaching and what is involved in the learning process and add to my professional development. (L)

[The PGCE] has helped me to learn how to write at level 7 and become more analytical and reflective upon my practice. (C)

Others in this group emphasised the importance of Master study supporting the links between theory and practice:

[It] has helped me reflect on my teaching and to understand learning theories underpinning education. (C)

[I now have] deeper thinking/connections between theory/practice. I have been able to use what I've learnt on placement and then reflected on its success. (L)

Another group could be thought of as **'Career ladder practitioners'**. These trainees were also keen to continue with Masters level study during Induction, primarily because they saw it as a way to enhance and fast track themselves through threshold and progress rapidly in their career. Becoming an effective teacher in the classroom seemed to be less a priority than gaining professional kudos. Typical comments from this group were:

I hope it helps me to develop in my career and gives me a greater understanding of the teaching profession. (L)

And another stated:

it will give me more confidence in my teaching, better career prospects, an increase in my teaching knowledge. (L)

On the other hand a further group, '**Gap year**' practitioners wanted to concentrate on their induction year before continuing with Masters level study. They wanted to feel more confident with teaching, subject knowledge and general routines in the classroom. A preference was for a break with a view to continuing Masters study in the second or third year of teaching. For example, typical comments stated:

[there is] too much work to do with NQT year – might think of doing a Masters in a few years time. (C)

I would like to get my Induction year out of the way and then focus on completing my Masters. (C)

This seems to reflect Stronach's (2009) notion of 'induction and initiation', suggesting NQTs felt a need for 'space' during the Induction year to develop their identities as teachers. There was a sense that these students firmly wanted to engage in accredited CPD in order to become 'better teachers' and in many ways saw this as something that should happen perhaps in the second or third year of teaching, with more than one student stating:

I wish to spend my first year focusing on my teaching and on the job development without having a Masters alongside. (C)

A fourth group '**Chalk face practitioners**' also seemed to emerge. This group was characterised by the fact that they could not see any relevance taking Masters level credits during the PGCE year or continuing with them during Induction and beyond. They felt they could become just as proficient and effective as a teacher by repeatedly mastering and perfecting skills of teaching in the classroom and building up their status and reputation as teacher in this way. When reflecting on the PGCE year, a typical view was:

surely it would make sense to just leave it [Masters] out and give us lectures on planning/assessment/more time on [subjects like] music/art/PE teaching that we actually need? (C)

The following response was largely reflective of reasons given for not continuing Masters level study:

I believe the NQT year is very intense and hard work and until you know the staff in the school and who will be your mentor, you are in the dark about the level of support available. (L)

Others did not see any relevance for getting a Masters degree either now or in the future with two independent responses stating:

I don't need a MA to prove I'm a good teacher. (C and L)

Regardless as to whether Masters level study was perceived as beneficial or not by students, the findings seemed to suggest that many felt there to be a potential tension between gaining the necessary standards for QTS or Induction and engaging in Masters accredited learning. Thus, greater clarity and differentiated support is most certainly needed if trainees are to perceive this aspect of Masters study as beneficial and worthy of continuation into the Induction year.

One of the limitations of this small scale study could be that the timing of the questionnaire was too close to the end of the PGCE year, for trainees to realistically decide whether they would pursue Masters study in their first year of teaching. Equally the timing of the questionnaire could reflect the feeling of students wanting to celebrate their success of achieving QTS rather than contemplate the idea of further study. Furthermore, it was also difficult to tell whether the associations trainees made with 'deeper understanding' and 'reflective practice' were a result of the language frequently used by academic tutors and related course documentation, or whether student teachers really felt that Masters study had enabled them to reflect more critically on practice.

Thus, the tentative findings from this study would indicate that not all of the participants were convinced of the value of Masters study and that possible experiences from the PGCE year could strongly influence whether the perceived value of Masters study was largely positive or negative.

Conclusion

Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) suggested that policy is only played out in practice if stakeholders understand and or are willing to engage with policy initiatives. Whilst there does seem to be any evidence that NQTs are willing to take up the entitlement offered for MTL, there was a significant number from this study who were not completely convinced. Furthermore the number of non returns may reflect others

indifferent to the perceived benefits of further Masters study. It is too soon to say if making teaching a 'Masters Profession' will in fact improve retention, or increase standards in the classroom, although initial indications from this study would suggest that there is a role for ITE Institutions to consider how they prepare students for CPD and building a commitment to reflective practice through accredited study. The findings from this study indicated that a significant number of trainees saw career enhancement as a primary motivator for continuing study rather than improving practice through critical reflection; whilst some struggled to see a real purpose for further accredited study.

Whilst the introduction of the MTL may have a powerful influence on the way we reconceptualise CPD for the early career teacher, we need to consider if the MTL is actually offering NQTs anything new. Much of the good practice evidenced by evaluations of the Induction year (Totterdell et al, 2004, 2008) have shown that quality support from an HE (Higher Education) and Induction tutor through a coaching and mentoring context significantly enhances both retention of newly trained teachers and the quality of teaching, so the question might be why then do we need to now link this to Masters accreditation? Furthermore, tentative findings from research indicate that NQTs would welcome a break from study at least in the first year of teaching in order to get on with the job with space to develop their persona as a teacher (Stronach, 2009).

It would seem that the success of making teaching an all Masters profession (DCSF, 2007) will hinge on the quality of the relationship between support from the HE tutor and MTL coach to enhance the development of teaching and learning for NQTs (Totterdell et al, 2008):

It is unclear why policy-makers do not seem to have grasped adequately the need to develop greater coherence between initial training, induction and continuing professional development, or to have realised that induction is potentially an important link or lynchpin between initial and continuing professional development.

Finally, whilst there may be scope for the MTL becoming a vehicle for critical reflection on practice; it could also be perceived as a cunning way by the

government of organising learning and induction for NQTs so that their identity as a teacher and professional development is not left to 'chance' but is seen as a way of implementing educational reform through professional development.

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