

Facilitators and Barriers in Training to Teach (0049)

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Abstract

Representing one strand of a larger National Teaching Fellowship Scheme Project: “*Facilitating Transitions to Masters-level Learning through Improving Formative Assessment and Feedback*”, this study investigates student teachers experiences of transitions from previous study and/or employment onto a one year post-graduate certificate in education programme (PGCE). The aim of the study is to identify both facilitators and barriers experienced by student teachers (STs) when training to teach through an exploration of their experiences of assessment feedback.

Taking an interpretative phenomenological approach, focusing on the subjective experiences of fourteen student teachers, data gathered via group and individual interviews, as well as email communications was analysed using content-analysis procedures. A number of key themes impacting on ST experiences of the programme are subsequently identified. Implications for the development of ITE programmes are discussed.

Keywords: Transitions; Masters; Teacher Education; Formative Assessment and Feedback

Introduction

The aim of this study, as part of a larger National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project funded by The Higher Education Academy “*Facilitating Transitions to Masters-level Learning through Improving Formative Assessment and Feedback*”, was to consider factors impacting on ST experiences of an ITE programme through the specific lens of ST experiences of formative assessment and feedback, to inform programme development. This study is pertinent and timely given the high dropout rate (40%) of UK STs between their final year of teacher training and the taking up of a teaching position in school and further drop- out rate of 18% and 30% during the

first three years of teaching for UK and USA teachers respectively (Smithers and Robinson, 2009; Forsbach-Rothman, 2007)

In supporting ST transitions, the focus on assessment feedback is an important one given the potential power of feedback to impact on performance (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). As reported by Evans and Waring (2010), student dissatisfaction with feedback is a global issue. Problems with feedback highlighted by Huxham (2007) include lack of access to feedback (Orsmond et al., 2002) including ambiguity and opacity (Hounsell, 2003); lateness of feedback (Yorke & Longden, 2006); inability of feedback to be able to feedforward; over-emphasis on negative feedback (Young, 2000) as well as student uncertainty about criteria and contexts (Higgins et al., 2001; Hounsell, 2003).

For this study an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was adopted (Smith, 2003) whereby the subjective experiences of the STs to inform programme development was the focus. The sample involving 14 STs, (from a range of subject areas including MFL; Religious Education; English; Music; Science and History), is both opportunistic and a self-selected one.

ST perceptions of their programmes including feedback were captured via group and individual interviews both face-to-face and via phone at regular intervals with one member of the research team throughout the one year PGCE programme. All STs were invited to participate in email discussions as well as being asked to provide evidence of written feedback they had received from mentors in school and HEI tutors. In addition, the STs also mapped their own experiences

of the programme through production of line graphs with annotated notes to explain the 'highs' and 'lows' they experienced; they later discussed these in groups with their peers.

ST experiences of the programme were quite varied but it was also possible to identify underlying themes permeating accounts. Initial analysis of interview data using content-analysis procedures ((Krippendorff, 2004) identified a number of key themes impacting on ST experiences of the one year programme. Over-arching themes identified included: (i) the relative agency and autonomy of the ST whilst on placement within a school (ii) the importance of relationships with mentors ; (iii) negotiating differing cultures of learning within and between schools; (iv) conflicts between ST values and beliefs and those of the placement school; (v) volume of workload (vi) the need for more concrete experiences and opportunities to practice ideas; (vii) the impact of ST prior experiences of learning and employment in enabling effective coping mechanisms. Specific feedback themes included: (viii) the need for more concrete and specific feedback; (ix) filtering mechanisms STs employed when accepting or rejecting feedback offered; (x) the need for a clear bench mark of how they were doing in order to understand the meaning of the feedback offered.

In considering implications for programme design, STs comments about the volume of work and the '*need to get through the course*', along with balancing the requirements of teaching practice and written assessment. It may be relevant here to consider the extent to which initial teacher education has become balkanized as well as the extent to which forms of assessment are aligned to curriculum goals (Grossman et al. 2009). In considering curriculum design, it is worth noting

that for some students, the lack of previous experience in classrooms meant that they could not access ideas discussed within the HEI at the beginning of the programme. The STs wanted more practice in the hows and whys of teaching and greater integration between school and HEI elements of the programme. They also welcomed more opportunities to practice and share ideas with peers. In order to have greater access to feedback, STs wanted further training in how to make the most of feedback opportunities with their mentors. As also identified by Burn et al. (2003), some STs indicated a much less positive phase towards the end of the PGCE year which also raises questions as to the nature of work at this stage in their development. The importance of gaining access to and developing understandings of different communities of practice was of paramount importance to STs; it is vital that HEIs and schools review support mechanisms afforded to STs making the transition from one school to another. For schools and HEIs it is important to consider to what extent communities of practice within schools support student teacher learning and the notion of distributed mentoring is an important aspect of this.

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