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Teaching as a Masters profession in England; the need for continued debate

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Teaching as a Masters profession in England: the need for continued debate

Introduction

In this paper we suggest that teacher educators in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England are not fully convinced that teaching should be a Masters profession. The original engagement with Masters level provision for student teachers in England seems to have been founded on a technicality rather than a committed philosophical stance as to the value of Masters for the teaching profession. The alignment of postgraduate qualifications across Europe (Bologna Agreement, 1999) highlighted a misnomer which had been used without question for years; the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) did not include any Masters level study and should not assume that title. Thus HEIs offering PGCE decided to resolve this dilemma by including Masters level credits in their postgraduate programmes. Subsequently, the Children's Plan (DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2007: 4.24) stated that 'to help fulfil our high ambitions for all children, and to boost the status of teaching still further, we now want it [teaching] to become a masters-level profession', indicating the Labour government's intention at that time to endorse a move to teaching as a Masters profession in England. For the Labour government (1997-2010) Masters study was conceptualised in the form of the MTL (Masters in Teaching and Learning) and seen in practical terms: 'The Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) is a practice-based masters programme designed to help teachers gain the knowledge and skills they need to have a real impact in the classroom' (TDA (Training and Development Agency for Schools), 2010). In December 2010 in a letter to the TDA, Michael Gove, Education Secretary of the new Coalition government withdrew central funding for the MTL. However he seemed to imply in this letter (TES (Times Educational Supplement), 2010) that a connection between teaching and Masters level study would still be on this government's agenda: 'The quality of teaching and teachers' professional development are of the utmost importance and I am committed to developing a strong culture of professional development where more teachers acquire postgraduate qualifications like masters and doctorates'. It is against this shifting political scene that teacher educators present Masters study to student and practising teachers. The project reported in this paper takes a point in time when teacher educators from across England came together to discuss this issue and consider their position with respect to teaching as a Masters profession.

The project

Teacher educators' perceptions were collected during three events; an ESCalate (Education Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy) Masters colloquium (June, 2009), a presentation and workshop at the UCET (Universities Council for the Education of Teachers) conference (November, 2009) and a TEAN (Teacher Education Advancement Network) workshop (March, 2010). The debates set out to discover whether there was a shared understanding amongst teacher educators of what it means to study at Masters level on an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme and whether there was a convinced response as to the value of Masters level study and qualification for the teaching profession within or beyond an initial training course. Approximately 70 delegates from a range of HEIs gave permission for the outcomes of their debates to be used. Written data was collected from participants in three ways: individual reflection on their definition of Masters; focus

group responses to what the connection between teaching and Masters should be and whether or not teaching should be an all Masters profession; plenary debate and feedback. There are limitations to this data as the participants were self selecting and may represent staff with a greater commitment to the topic, therefore the outcomes are not necessarily generalisable to all teacher educators. However, they present a unique and significant body of data which adds to the debates about teaching as a Masters profession across the sector.

Delegates' personal definitions of Masters were not totally formed which added to a general impression that there was a lack of conviction about teaching as a Masters profession. However, all groups at the events wanted to work out a response and suggested such things as 'self initiated', 'linking theory to practice', 'linked to professionalism', 'something which enhances critical reflection' although it must be said that attempts to define these ideas were limited. Every individual was looking for solutions: 'look at the assessment', 'look at the criteria' (FHEQ (Framework for Higher Education Qualifications), 2001). Government 'intervention' was not generally welcome; it was seen as a 'control mechanism' perhaps suggesting that the new government's decision to let teachers 'decide for themselves which masters level course is the right one for them' (Gove in TES, 2010) would be popular. Generally there was an overall sense that delegates were actively engaged in their own quest for a definition of Masters and evaluations of the events suggested strongly that each delegate had drawn on the valuable collaborative discussion to continue this quest.

'What has Masters to do with teaching?' is a question often posed by unconvinced students, school mentors and headteachers. It was offered to delegates to discover how they would react. Two main problems were addressed: the disparity between the government view of Masters and the university view; and the perceived widespread prejudice against Masters because you are already 'a good teacher' and do not need it or are awarded with a Masters qualification and yet, this does not necessarily translate into good classroom practice. One group of delegates problematised the concept of Masters and the concept of teaching, and then the relationship between the two. It seemed that they were doing that to help clarify their own understanding rather than provide a definitive answer. This was elaborated upon by other groups who thought that Masters has something to do with teaching because it can take teaching away from the concept of it being 'just a job'; it overcomes what many described as the 'technicist' view of teaching being a matter of ticking the boxes of the standards (a reference to the Professional Standards for teachers, TDA (Training and Development Agency for Schools) 2007). Positive thinking about Masters was encouraged; one delegate sums up the feelings of many by suggesting Masters is a 'disposition, a kind of standing up tall, something beneficial to the individual and to the profession'.

Whether or not teaching should be a Masters profession drew an uncertain response. There seemed to be a reluctance to engage with this, something of a 'head in the sand' mentality; many thought 'it's not my (or our) decision'. Such an important decision should be 'founded on the benefits to children and schools and the profession at large'. It was pointed out that there was little hard evidence to indicate that teaching as a Masters level profession was beneficial at all: 'At the moment these benefits seem to be perceived rather than proven.' The arguments against teaching as an all Masters profession centred around the differences between teachers and the need to provide a profession which made use of a variety

of talents that teachers at different academic levels can bring: 'No it should not be an all-Masters profession. There should be room for teachers at different levels. Some work in teaching requires little more than the functional knowledge and skills required to induct students into a subject – other work requires much more breadth and depth of knowledge/skill'. The arguments in favour of teaching as an all Masters profession were linked to the following issues: to raise professional esteem; to raise and improve the quality of teaching and pupil outcomes; to reinforce teaching as a research based profession; to increase skilled performance from teachers; to improve teacher education.

Conclusion

Through the ongoing debate with teacher educators concerning 'teaching as a Masters profession' it was discovered that it remains difficult for teacher educators to propose a definition of 'Mastersness' which satisfies them on a personal or political level. There are hints of a 'jargon' of 'Mastersness', expedience rather than conviction, assumption linked with confusion. There are challenges to the concept of a link existing between Masters and teaching and to the desirability of teaching being an all Masters profession. It was hoped that the research would offer 'insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Within the limitations of the study, we suggest that it has given insight into perceptions which would otherwise have not been shared with the community. It has enhanced understanding as, while highlighting teacher educators' concerns and lack of conviction about Masters, it has given opportunities to engage with the concept and benefit from interaction with peers. We suggest that the value of discussions of the sort undertaken here is high and that the debate on teaching as a Masters profession needs to continue. Further research should focus on a broader based study of teacher educators' views about the value of Masters for the teaching profession with the aim of working towards a convinced approach.

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