Beginning teaching and learning at Masters level: student teachers’ pedagogic and academic concerns

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Abstract
This paper reports on research carried out in the School of Education at the University of Leicester following the introduction of two Masters level modules for primary and secondary student teachers in 2007. The paper explores the tensions between student teachers’ pedagogic and academic concerns by drawing on questionnaire and focus group data collected over a two year period. It investigates the secondary student teachers’ choices of assignment topics and their methods of enquiry. It explores the reasons for the students’ choices of Masters assignment titles and questions what these beginning teachers’ choices of focus for research reveal about their pedagogical concerns within secondary teaching at key points in their Initial Teacher Education. In addition, we report on the perceived impact of Masters level assignments on classroom practice and teacher development. Conclusions are drawn for future practice.

1.1. Background to the Masters work within ITE
Teaching as a ‘Masters’ profession is the policy aim of the Training and Development Agency (TDA) and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF). In ‘Being the Best for our Children’ DCSF (2008) express the expectation that teaching become a Masters-level profession. M-level requirements in initial teacher education programmes in England have become the norm since 2007, when, in response to reviews of postgraduate awards (Sewell 2007) there began a national move to upgrade the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) to a Masters level qualification. M-level teacher education has required a shift towards a curriculum where theory and evidence supported by research are interwoven with the development of pedagogic skills. It has occurred even though the PGCE is a professionally demanding, congested and intensive programme lasting only 40 weeks.

1. 2. Research Questions and Focus of Enquiry
This paper investigates student teachers’ choices of Masters assignment topics and their methods of enquiry. It explores the reasons for the choices they have made and questions what the beginning teachers’ choices of focus for research reveal about their pedagogic concerns within secondary teaching at key points in their initial teacher education.
1.3. Mapping the literature
Previous studies of teacher education programmes have often criticised the programmes for their failure to enable students to bridge a perceived gap between theory and practice (Darling Hammond 2000; Good et al 2006; Allen 2009). Within the context of Masters level PGCE study, Bryan et al (2010) observe student teachers’ tendency to separate teaching and the academic aspects of their courses. The role of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) tutors in bridging this gap is vital. In studies pertaining to the development of pedagogic content knowledge (PCK), Grossman (1991) points to the initial teacher educator’s role in aiding students’ examination of their knowledge and beliefs about their subject and classroom practice. In later work, she investigates the transformation of PCK through the influence of school culture on pre-service goals. She contrasts pre-service training and its ‘experiential, learner-centred, activity-oriented, interconnected, and constructivist’ faculty-endorsed learning approaches with the ‘content-oriented, teacher-centred, authoritarian, mimetic and recitative’ practice of teaching in schools (Grossman, Smagorinsky and Valencia, 1999).

Stevens et al (2006) stress the importance of university-based work in providing space and opportunity for PGCE student teachers to reflect critically on their emerging practice and to develop as reflexive teachers who can begin to examine their own observations and practices ‘by reference to what is happening in the rest of the larger picture’ (Moore 2004: 149). McIntyre (1993 as cited in Bryan et al 2010) suggests that, at best, student teachers can be inducted into a critical approach during their ITE. Other recent studies have explored beginning teachers’ perceptions of Masters level (for example, Jackson 2009, Jackson and Eady 2008, who investigate the extent to which student teachers share similar perceptions of what Masters level study means in relation to enhancing classroom practice). However, it is evident that published research on Masters level work within PGCE courses is still in its infancy.

1.4. Research Methods
The paper draws on data collected over the two year period 2008-2010 and following a pilot study which was conducted immediately after the inception of the Masters programme. The data includes surveys (from 551 respondents) collected at the two assignment submission points in each year and semi-structured focus group interview data. The focus group interviews were conducted with eight small groups (of 2-6 participants) at the end of the PGCE year in 2009 and 2010, from a stratified sample of 36 secondary student teachers representing a range of subject specialisms.

Each group consisted of student teachers from two of the PGCE subject disciplines offered within the university PGCE course and also represented a cross-section of those attaining A, B and C grades in the two M-level assignments. A series of semi-structured questions, issued in advance, were used (see Appendix 1). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded independently by both researchers before data were reduced under four broad themes, discussed in section 2 below.
The interview data that were extracted and analysed in this paper concentrate on four themes, namely:

- Choice of focus and how the student teachers’ pedagogic concerns are explored/indicated through the assignment choices they have made
- Assignments: reasons for choices of topic and approach
- Research and reflection: the academic concerns which became apparent as the student teachers engaged with Masters level study
- Necessity and relevance: what impact the completion of Masters level assignments appears to have on student teachers’ classroom practice, their development as teachers and their workload.

Student involvement in all aspects of the research was on a voluntary basis. We have been careful to adhere to ethical guidelines at each stage of our data collection, coding and reporting processes. Permissions were sought to use anonymised focus group interview and questionnaire responses as well as to cite from a small number of assignments.

1.5. Approach to coding and analysis
The questionnaire responses were first independently coded and then shared and analysed using SPSS for frequencies and correlations across the nine different PGCE subject groups. Responses were analysed using categories linked to our original research questions. In coding the student teachers’ assignment titles and reasons for their choices of title, one code was allocated to each title and each reason. Although we have endeavoured to reflect the phrasing of each individual’s title and the factors influencing their choice of focus, inevitably the codes that we arrived at represent a compromise which cannot encompass all the nuances of each response.

The focus group interviews were analysed thematically (using the same categories) both with hand coding and use of Nvivo software. Analysis of data focuses on student teachers’ conceptualisation of aspects what we have termed ‘M-levelness’ and their reflections on how they managed the resulting assignment demands, while also seeking to meet the 33 professional teaching standards (TDA 2008) required for qualified teacher status.

Responses in focus group interviews were often perceived to be more positive than those offered through questionnaire responses and need to be viewed in that light. Researcher presence may have contributed to limiting critical comments although it is important to state that both researchers aimed to be impartial when conducting the interviews.

1.6. University assignments
The First University Assignment (UA1) is common to all subjects on the Secondary PGCE at Leicester and is attempted by all student teachers at Masters level. It consists of a portfolio of 2700 words, collected in the first (Phase A) placement and an overview/critical commentary on this portfolio of 2300 words. Its focus is Teaching,
Learning and Assessment for Learning in the Secondary School. It should focus on an aspect of teaching, learning and assessment which has been of interest and importance during Phase A. There is a degree of freedom in the choice of focus although the shape of the work should follow the guidance above. However, in preparing for and writing this assignment we advise students to keep as focused as possible on how they have planned and taught one topic or aspect to one class or one small group of learners and how they have assessed the learning which took place.

The Second University Assignment (UA2) is concerned with professional knowledge and understanding and is 5000 words in length. Student teachers are asked to focus on Critical Issues in the Secondary School and are required to research an aspect of subject teaching. There is greater freedom in the choice of focus than for the first submission and in the structure of the paper that emerges. The focus could be a specific element or issue within the subject curriculum that the student teachers find interesting, rewarding, challenging, or problematic. They should provide evidence of reading and reflection, and endeavour to relate this to their own personal observations and practice. Student teachers are required to underpin their essay with appropriate academic research literature and demonstrate a critical research element in their work.

2. Research Findings

This section is organised under the four analytic headings:
   a) Choice of focus: student teachers’ pedagogic concerns
   b) Assignments: reasons for choices of topic and approach
   c) Research and Reflection: student teachers’ academic concerns
   d) Necessity and relevance: impact of Masters level assignments on classroom practice and teacher development

2.1. Choice of focus: student teachers’ pedagogic concerns

In exploring the range of topics the student teachers chose to write on in both modules, a discernible rank order emerged. For all assignments 42 different broad topics were focused on. The most popular of these are listed below in rank order:
Of the 551 responses received, 549 were valid. Other topics were written about by fewer than 12 respondents. 8 did not provide their title and 26 titles were difficult to code due to the apparent multiple foci chosen by their authors.

The choices were perhaps not surprising in that they reflected the kind of challenges facing student teachers e.g. lesson planning. However, it is worth considering the effect of policy change/initiative on the choices. For instance, personalisation and differentiation have been the subject of recent initiatives from the National Strategies and without those initiatives such issues might not have been as well represented in the assignments. That said, there are some surprising omissions in this list. Only 2 student teachers focused on thinking skills and only 5 focused on behaviour management (using this specific term) although there were 4 assignments described as focusing on classroom management.

This suggests that the vast majority of choices focused on classroom pedagogy, on how to teach. This was an expectation in the first assignment but given the free choice of topic for the second there was scope for focusing on issues in education rather than just approaches to teaching a particular subject. Very few questionnaires responses suggested a focus on how young people learn and this might be an issue for future consideration and development within the PGCE programme. However, a detailed analysis of assignment content has not yet been undertaken.

2.2. Assignments: reasons for choices of topic and approach
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in/reflection on</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use/experience/application/pragmatic choice</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considered important/relevant/interesting</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became aware of/interested in during Phase A</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuable</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As result of subsidiary course</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in/became important during Phase B placement</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion/emotional satisfaction</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of prior experience (prior to PGCE course)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As result of course input</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As result of recommended course or prior reading</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. support available)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resulting from preliminary placement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2: reasons for choices of topic and approach

Ten respondents gave no reason for their choice of title.

The first three categories in table 2 above are closely interrelated and could have been combined but we wanted the reported reasons to reflect as closely as possible the language used by our respondents. While student teacher interest was a motivating factor it was also clear that many foci were determined by possible application in schools, in keeping with the aims of the modules that the assignments be practice-focused. Despite the fact that the two assignments differ in nature and the second allows more freedom, topic choices were generally practice-related. Nevertheless, the interviews revealed that the trainees did not feel constrained in their choices to what was narrowly pragmatic for use in school. A distinctive theme that emerged in the focus group interviews was the generally welcome element of choice that the students had in selecting their focus. Indeed, there was a recognition that the choice of focus required some degree of cognitive investment as trainees sought to narrow the range of the work to make it manageable and appropriate. This was seen as distinguishing the work in terms of level from many undergraduate modules that had ‘set question’ assignments.

The student teachers seemed to find the opportunity to make their own decisions about the focus to be challenging, useful and, in some cases, motivating:

*I think it’s helped me to find things I’m interested in – now I’m really interested in pursuing stuff to do with spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (Group 2).
It was really rewarding though to, you know, have formed the questions which were all so essential to your research and then having students answer them and then being able to use them. It’s actually quite a nice process I think doing that research but deciding what’s right for you.....(Group 3).

I considered doing EAL, ....thinking ‘Oh yes, well in the future I can tell employers that I have focussed on these areas that are very popular at the moment, very fashionable in education’, but actually the fact that I focussed on moral development for my second one, ...., the concepts I looked at were quite dated (but) because I was interested in it, it was so much easier, and I’d recommend choosing an honest interest rather than something that’s fashionable in education at the moment (Group 5).

The ‘honest interest’ comment above was well received in group 5 and this was a general view in at least seven of the groups, with the possible exception of group 8 where some frustrations were expressed. Motivation was clearly a key factor. For example, the following person identified the motivational necessity that accompanied any choice of focus:

But you have to be careful ...the topic you choose. So like for my first one I chose questioning because I wanted to focus on that, and the second one I chose ICT, because I wanted to work with them anyway, (...) whereas I suppose if you did something else you didn’t really want to work on, then you would have just got annoyed with it (Group 8).

Another did not feel so fortunate:

I think it depends on how much you enjoy your topic to be honest. I think at one point I got so into my topic that I was like ‘I wish I never chose this!’ – but it was too late to change it. (it was) just doing my head in, like, there’s too much out there and too many different things out there, and I was just like ‘I want to change’, but it was like 2 weeks left so I couldn’t! (Group 7).

Opportunity for exploration and development was a key determinant identified in the focus interviews, for example:

I kind of picked an issue that I knew that I would be able to generate quite a lot of evidence from. Because I was doing a lot of mixed ability teaching – so like differentiation, it’s a thing I knew there’d be a lot of literature on – it’s always really useful topic, (and I) kind of worked backwards from that, because it was something that I was doing anyway, and erm, I just basically picked apart all my own resources and my evaluations and the lesson observations that I had from tutors, and sort of, went through them all...and then compared them to the theories in the literature (Group 7).
There was occasional mention of time pressure to achieve a focus for the assignments:

   We had like an afternoon of panic, didn’t we? .....we’d been told to do it but, we may have forgotten (Group 7).

During the interview discussions, it was evident that a number of respondents were developing their awareness of issues pertaining to choices of methodology, validity and sample size. They were also becoming increasingly able to problematise the research approaches they had used. For example, one student teacher commented on the level of criticality of the pupils who completed her questionnaire and her own surprise in learning that results do not always tell you what you expect. She considered that this realisation could have a potential impact on her own future teaching. A second student teacher was learning about use of questionnaires and how perhaps her data could have been enriched by use of pre and post scheme of work student questionnaires and further enhanced by collecting the teachers’ views:

   I used questionnaires, but in hindsight after I’d done it I realised that when I came to analysing my results, I realised that it would have been a lot better for me and I would have got a lot richer sort of results if I’d actually done the questionnaire before, you know like you said, like really early on in my teaching and then again afterwards, to see, contrast the two things, because it was all based around me teaching poetry from all different cultures and you know how the pupils thought that their cultural understanding has been developed, but you know it would have been nice to know what they thought before and then after my teaching so that I could compare.

   In terms of what I was researching, which was you know the teaching of those sorts of poems, it would have been nice to have a teacher’s perspective; what do they feel as important and how do they approach it. Yeah I wish I had, but I didn’t have time (Group 3).

Another student teacher demonstrated a growing self awareness about her approach to reading the research literature and reflected in a self-critical way:

   When I was making notes and things.... I was searching through things that would fit in with what I wanted to say, I wasn’t sort of thinking outside the box because I knew what I wanted and I knew what I had to get, but I think I was very narrow minded when it came to that, I was just looking for what would fit in with mine and nothing else (Group 3).

Several student teachers showed awareness of the Hawthorne effect (although not named as such by any of them). For example, one stated that in the questionnaire responses she received:
What I found was that the students tried to please you, so in my head I was quite confident and when I handed out some small questionnaires and then when I actually went through and looked at their answers, they just write what they think you want to hear (Group 2).

Other trainees used interviews and surveys:

I actually carried out interviews, a few interviews from staff members, because I looked into the Citizenship and how...should it be compulsory or not? (Group 8).

Difficulties associated with gathering data were discussed. For example, another trainee was aware of the challenges of verifying what she was trying to do in the assignment. Literature searching with application to classroom practice was the approach that she took, as discussed in the following exchange from Group 7:

C: ...mine was about creating a safe environment when discussing controversial issues. So it was very...

S: ...That’s a hot topic in citizenship, isn’t it?

C: It is a hot topic. But it’s very sort of, it’s not always easy to be able to see what happens, because like when you observe as teachers, like, it’s really hard for a student to open up to you, to tell you how they actually feel – if they feel the same. So, it (was) more looking at literature and erm, about other people’s findings and evaluating them. I tried to do my own but it didn’t really work out as well as I’d hope to (Group 7).

The following person used extensive surveys in both assignments:

Both of mine were kind of survey based but different kind of surveys – my first assignment was looking at the use of language that students use, so I basically (had) done these kind of words surveys, so gave students different words to define: do they define it as a biology, physics, chemistry word, is it a science word, is it a non-science word? And I’d given it to each of my classes, different sets, different abilities, different subjects like I was teaching them and getting them to classify them accordingly – so that was that kind of survey which was interesting in itself. And then for my UA2 I was looking at, I was doing something on ethical choices (and) decision making, that kind of thing, so, and I did surveys of teachers amongst the PGCE cohort – so different subject groups, got them to complete a survey but also I was doing a comparison of what teachers think and what scientists think, so practicing scientists...I went to do the same questionnaires with some physicists, chemists, genetics’ up the road as well, so yeah, I went a bit overboard really but it left me lots of scope! (Group 6).
Choice of topic was influenced by school placement, subject tutor but also some policy issues. For many, literature review was a central part of the assignment process. In the survey, a significant influence on the development of the assignment mentioned by 70% of respondents was classroom practice. 25% saw the university tutor as significant in their choice of focus and 19% the co-tutor in school. Recommended books were identified as significant by 43%. A number relied on detailed literature reviews for their assignments as the scope for primary research was limited sometimes by school contexts or other pressures. For example, Group 8 had three literature based approaches, and then two with primary research methods but one of the former qualified her statement:

\[
\text{I mean mine was literature plus a review of textbooks (Group 8).}
\]

The extent to which literature reviews were just reviews with little or no application remains to be explored in the data. Initial impressions suggest that many were applied in some way to a document analysis, textbook analysis or to a review of classroom practice. The value of literature reviewing in relation to impact on practice is an issue with which future M-level studies might usefully engage.

2.3. Research and Reflection: student teachers’ academic concerns

In the focus groups, amongst the majority there was a sense in which M-level study was seen as a counterweight to ‘technicist’ application of practical strategies. These ideas permeated all discussions with use of terms such as critical engagement, reflective view, critical thinking, critical reflection, own research, reading, and even some mentions of engaging with theory.

Some student teachers focused on the nature of the process of learning to teach, one stating:

\[
\text{I think when I started this course I thought I’d be taught how to teach, but actually not necessarily writing the essay but researching for the essay made me not just know how to teach but why I make these choices in my classroom, which then I use in everything: why am I doing this? Why am I doing that? I don’t just do it like a formula (Group 1).}
\]

This kind of reflection about why particular pedagogic choices are made was echoed in all of the focus groups, as the following examples demonstrate:

\[
\text{...reflect more when perhaps I wouldn’t have done if I hadn’t been given the chance to do it.... (Group 2).}
\]

\[
\text{I think it makes you think more and look at what you’ve done more, and then try and improve yourself that way ....(Group 3).}
\]
I think the research helps explain why we do things the way we do (Group 3)

You reflect on what you do, the processes you go through as a teacher to ensure kids are learning stuff but doing the Masters level work, almost makes you ask why they are learning it, at the same time (Group 5).

I don’t think I probably would have become as reflective about what I had done in my teaching practice without having the engagement with the literature and what’s common practice without doing those Masters assignments, so I think it’s massively helped in terms of how I reflect which is obviously a key component to being a teacher or to progress to be a better teacher. So I think it’s definitely helped (Group 6).

I think it has. I think you’ve looked into specific things that you were interested in, or you wanted to develop, or you wanted to know more about. And I think that informed how you were in the classroom (Group 7).

I think you notice more as well, when you’ve done that kind of research, you notice more about what goes on in your classroom (Group 5).

The extent to which the new M-level modules contributed to greater and deeper levels of reflection than in previous non-M-level years cannot be measured. However, the focus group interviewees appeared to be positive about how M-level pushed them towards engagement with research literature:

..and it wasn’t until we were pushed to do it, most people did then do it, and you realise actually there’s a lot of research done on lots of aspects of teaching....it’s been really good ....because it makes you realise that ...you don’t need to just know things, you can actually go out there and learn things and go and find things out ...... (Group 3).

There was a general view that the assignments and the process of engaging with them had a positive impact on the interview respondents, with the exception of one group that appeared to view the Masters work as unnecessary. Open responses in the questionnaires raised issues about time management and pressure (e.g. the lack of down time during the year) but further research needs to be done with more groups of student teachers in the future to assess the impact on student teachers’ professional development and practice.

There was also concern about future application of M-level study and how newly qualified teachers (NQTs) might be perceived as researchers in their first-school contexts, for example:

...... go into a school in my first year and continue my Masters and saying to a school as a new teacher ‘I want to research this in the school’ I’m not sure how
happy, or how encompassing or how sort of willing the school would be to participate in that,........ ............ But in my first year, I almost feel it comes across a little bit rude and undermining to say ‘I’m just going to do a bit of research’ – that doesn’t sit comfortably with me and for that reason, as well as the practical constraints of timing, I don’t think I could do it in my first year of practice. It’s almost (that) I want to keep my head down and not offend anyone! (Group 8).

Concern about continuing with Masters was not isolated to one group. Such anxieties may impact on willingness or inclination to engage in continuing Masters study.

2.4. Necessity and relevance: impact of Masters level assignments on classroom practice and teacher development

There was some recognition by student teachers interviewed from most subject groups that M-level projects were useful to the development of classroom practice despite the fact that they were not all convinced that M-level work was essential to the development of reflective practice.

A number of those interviewed reasoned that increased familiarisation with the pressures of workload and time management had helped them to prepare for the demands of the classroom. It had helped them to develop independence, broaden their horizons and led to less reliance on their school mentors:

I suppose when you think of it from an objective point of view that sort of pressure and that sort of stress really does, in a way, well some people say anyway, prepare you for your teaching career because you will have that constant pressure of trying to get lots of different things done, and so that just shows that we actually can do it, we’ve done it, and we got through it (Group 3).

One student teacher also stated that the completion of Masters level assignments reminded her and her peers of the pressures of being a student:

While you’re still studying yourself, it reminds you that you know there’s pressures of being a student, and I found that quite interesting because I was at in one breath giving lessons to students and then at the same time I was learning myself, so it kind of just kept me on track, and reminding myself you know that it’s quite pressured being at school (Group 2).

Focus groups 2 and 3 had a long discussion about the effects of working at M-level, including applying their own learning for academic purposes to inform teaching:

Mine was really weird because when I was doing my UA2 I was teaching coursework as well and I remember getting feedback from X....(tutor) and it was all about structuring an argument, and a lot of what she said, I just brought it
down to GCSE level and just told them this is what you have to do, and it made so much sense; it was like somebody else explained it to me and I was able to explain to them (Group 3).

I thought it gave me the chance to reflect on certain aspects that I perhaps wouldn’t have thought of so much in depth, so for example my first assignment was on group work and that gave me the chance to look at different types of group work and to really consider it and reflect in a way when perhaps I wouldn’t have done if I hadn’t have been given or had the chance to do it (Group 2).

and to her understanding of the way her group responded to the different reading techniques she was using:

I did a questionnaire for mine and I got some genuine stuff I think, some really helpful comments to myself like reading techniques, so actually telling them to read rather than asking, they got a better idea of that level because they were quite nervous to do it so I think I got some genuine feedback from my study (Group 2).

Group 2 members recognised that learning at M-level involves much more than just seeking professional guidance from other teachers:

I think the [first assignment] I did on behavioural management... I kind of focused it on one particular student, sort of like theoretically, and then obviously through my research, that gave me ideas to try, and then I found out whether it worked or not (Group 2).

The same student teacher commented that the reading and research she carried out helped her to gain a critical perspective on how she was working with a challenging student. She realised that she was not the first person to have faced such difficulties and that they were not really as bad as she thought.

Group 1 and 4 student teachers offered positive perspectives about completing Masters assignments:

And I found my[first assignment] much more beneficial to the quality of my teaching because I was learning about differentiation and targeting lots of different students and sort of practical teaching skills ...... (Group 1).

I chose an interest area that I had – I was able to do the work, and a lot of the reading that I’ve done was an influence – I had to read like, around the subject quite a lot so I had to look at like, gifted and talented, and how socio-economic factors influence ‘this’ and why are we examining English and what’s this and what’s the new specification? It gave me this whole grounding about creativity and then when it actually came to then...because the problem I was looking at
was ‘how do you mark an A* grade rather than A?’ basically ‘what’s this special flare? How can you mark that?’ And I actually came across the examples of it in my Year 11 marking and I was like ‘Oh! That is very clearly (a) difference between an A and an A*!’ (agreement from B…….). And it was obvious then because I’d done the reading, because I thought so much about it, for so long! It just became… (Group 4).

We were struck by this student teacher’s use of the term ‘grounding’ and how she was using her assignment research and reading to extend and deepen her understanding. This was in direct contrast to some views expressed by Group 8 who felt they had gained little or nothing from their Masters level study, partly because they felt their first degree subjects had been very research-focused. As a result, they felt there was less value-added improvement in their own learning in terms of research method development through the PGCE.

The following exchange, from another focus group, suggested that M-level ‘thinking’ could inform teamwork as new teachers work with teaching assistants:

**Student teacher:** I had to talk about why I’d researched into questioning in the classroom, and it’s really interesting because in the classroom I was like ‘right I’ve just asked a closed question, now I’m going to work my way up’ …….. it makes you think about how you communicated to students and how to draw in every single pupil into the classroom, and I couldn’t have done that if it wasn’t for the assignment to get me thinking about how I teach, and what’s my thinking behind it.

**Researcher:** But could it have been a sub masters level assignment?

**Student teacher:** I think it’s good to think at a critical level and to think at a masters level because it adds more value on to education, and otherwise what’s the difference within, for example, a learning support assistant in the classroom trying to do questions to the class. You can use the skills within this assignment and then delegate to other people so for example; I’ve used in my classroom now, this is outside the assignment, closed questioning with the EAL learners, and it’s only been a result of understanding how questioning works, so I’ve had two TAs in the classroom, … and I’ve been able to guide them, and she was really grateful but I don’t think she would have been able to do that if it wasn’t for me understanding how questioning works, if that makes sense….. (Group 1).

There was support for the view that, in completing M-level assignment work, the significance of published research or theoretical perspectives had been made more real. One student teacher was energised by the fact that he now felt in a position to draw on his own teaching experience and reflect on how this related to his theoretical reading:

*I was just going to say I think it’s incredibly relevant to learning to teach because once you’ve had that experience in a school and you come to write that first assignment or even the second one, you can engage with theory that other*
people have written and actually have some sort of ground in whether you agree with that or not, which is the first time I've ever been able to do that with something from a textbook (Group 1).

Many felt that the PGCE had equipped them to begin research but they would need further guidance for future M-level study. Only one of the 36 interviewees stated an explicit intention to begin Masters work directly after completing her PGCE course although 3 others, who were to begin their NQT year in National Challenge schools/schools facing challenging circumstances, were beginning to think about commencing the Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) for which they were eligible.

One trainee saw the wider effect of M-level study when she drew on this at job interview:

*I think it just pushes you to know what issues, what are the key issues in, not just your subject, but in teaching and learning in general. And I tell you where it helped me the most, was in my interview, I just felt like I could really talk about all those issues and sound like I knew what I was talking about* (Group 7).

The most critical group recognised the status and maturity value of an M-level qualification:

*In terms of the status attributed to it ... I did feel maybe it was sort of a more mature qualification* (Group 8).

This comment came from the least positive group but was echoed in other groups. Despite their scepticism about the value of the assignments, they acknowledged that acquiring an M-level qualification gave them greater kudos than a professional qualification.

3. Tensions and Conclusions

Many tensions and contradictions were revealed in our investigation which we believe could make a significant contribution to research in this newly developing field and to PGCE M-level course planning. Unsurprisingly, Masters level study during a QTS training year was seen to present undue challenges in terms of workload and time pressures, but benefits, both professional and academic, were identified in the interviews.

Many of the cohort welcomed the opportunity for Masters study and identified some of its benefits. For some student teachers, teaching itself was perceived to be not academically stimulating but the additionality of Masters level work had made it so and enabled them to look critically at aspects of their practice such as development of questioning skills, use of group work, supporting EAL learners and the planning and teaching of specific topics within their subjects.
Interview comments appeared to recognise the significance of M-level work at this early stage of their professional development. In addition, they highlighted the need for PGCE M-level courses to provide student teachers with opportunities and critical spaces within which they can begin to develop their own reflexivity (c.f. Moore 2004, Stevens et al 2006). In this way they could gain a sense of how their own professional experiences are located within the bigger picture beyond their placement classrooms.

However, questionnaire responses about the assignments revealed that beginning teachers were by no means all convinced of the relevance or value of working at M-level (these will be further analysed at a later date). On the other hand, for this paper, we found that 25 of the 30 interview participants were broadly supportive and welcoming of the opportunity to engage with M-level study despite reservations about timing and whether M-levelness was essential to reflection. Broadly, there was some optimism but also there was awareness of the realities of classroom and inevitably of the exigencies of a crowded teacher education curriculum.

Our interview sample of new teachers seemed to want to interrogate established practice but a small minority (in particular but not exclusively Group 7) were also wary of how they would be perceived by established teachers (especially if they continue Masters work in their NQT year) and wanted to ‘keep their head down’ to begin with.

Tentatively, we conclude that there is evidence that while learning to teach itself may be cognitively stimulating, the introduction of ‘Mastersness’ has perhaps made it more likely that some beginning teachers will look critically at their practice and gain confidence in their skills:

> because it’s such a challenging essay to do, to be able to pull it off and do it well just makes you feel quite confident and honestly it does make you feel you know ‘I am academic and I am in a position where I can teach this in a high level to my students’. For me that was the biggest thing; being reminded that I can write (laughter) (Group 3).

and

> It made me not just know how to teach but why I make those choices in the classroom (Group 1).

References


Appendix 1

Focus Group Questions

1. What do you understand by Masters level? (in terms of level)?
If asked to explain to an incoming PGCE student what Masters level PGCE meant, how would you do this?

2. In your view, what does Masters level study have to do with learning to teach?

3. a) Briefly describe the research methods used for UA1
b) Briefly describe the research methods used for UA2.

4. How confident did you feel in conducting research in relation to:
a) research design?
b) deciding which methods/instruments to use?
c) data collection?
d) data analysis?

5. How effective was the support and guidance about research methods?
a) how effective was the support given e.g. on Research Methods
b) how effective was the formative guidance/feedback on your research projects?

6. For writing the assignments, were the expectations clearly explained, with regard to
a) what you needed to do and why?
b) differences between M and H Level?

7. To what extent, if at all, has Masters level helped with the development of your
   teaching skills?

8. What problems have you faced with working on a Masters level course?

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