A study of teachers' views upon the role of other teachers in their work - work in progress

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Contextualisation

This research note focuses on the assumptions made about the ways in which teachers work with their colleagues. It further focuses on issues of inter-professional collaboration between public service professionals involved in services targeted at supporting children and young people. This is significant at a time when the UK Government initiative, 'Every Child Matters', seeks to ensure just such a collaboration. The work-in-progress reported here argues, however, that such collaboration needs to be built upon an understanding of how *intra*-professional practices, within *individual* professions, work.

Abstract: *Teachers work with a number of other professionals when supporting children in their care. They also necessarily have to work with other teachers. This research note reports the initial findings from two studies aimed at exploring the factors teachers perceive to be significant when working with their colleagues. Study (1) involved an opportunity interview sample of primary, secondary and special school teachers, working predominantly in management positions or teaching in classrooms. Thematic coding, informed by a grounded theory perspective, was used to analyse this data. Study (2) involved semi-structured audio-taped interviews with 13 deputy-head teachers drawn from primary, secondary and special school settings. Current work on the coding structures, and categories needed to analyse this data in the light of the previous data, are highlighted. As a result of the initial analysis, a need for a greater understanding of the significance of intra-professional practices is identified. It is suggested that these necessarily inform effective inter-professional collaboration.*

Introduction

The assumption that teachers' work involves other teachers pervades current educational guidance, policy, and legislation. It also relates to many topics including, school improvement and innovation (DfES, 2002; 2004), 'whole school' policies, curriculum delivery (DfE, 1988, DfES, 2001; DfES 2004), management of behaviour (DES, 1989), arrangements for meeting students' special educational needs (DfES, 2002), the fulfilment of pastoral and care functions (DoH, 1989, DfES 1999), and working with parents / carers and other professionals (DoH, 2004). This study is particularly relevant to a current, and major, governmental initiative: 'Every Child Matters' (DoH, 2004). This seeks to ensure *inter-professional* collaboration between *all* professionals involved in public services targeting children and young people. I maintain that understanding *intra*-professional practice within *individual* professions is a necessary prerequisite for this.

The available literature on this topic features very little material that is based upon empirical research. As a result, I have drawn upon non-technical materials, such as professional practice literature, my own and colleagues' professional experience, and the viewpoints of participants from an initial study, to first, identify the themes which will, second, then inform the aims of study.

I have identified these as being, first, to gain a deeper understanding of the proposition that teachers view the role of other teachers in their work as an important and problematic topic. Second, that there is a need to explore teachers' views about the influence of teachers'

individual qualities and characteristics. Third, that this has to be in the context of exploring their views about the influence of school structures and systems on such qualities and characteristics and, finally, that these views need to be further contextualised by exploring views about the influence of Local Authority, DfES and other national structures on these qualities and characteristics.

Study 1 (my initial study) consisted of 37 interviews with an opportunity sample of primary, secondary and special school teachers, in management positions, and classroom-based teachers. I worked as an educational psychologist (EP) with all of the schools involved. The data from Study 1 – the 37 interview transcripts – was analysed using thematic coding. Findings suggested that teachers viewed their work with other teachers as important yet problematic, and not articulated, or facilitated, within schools' systems and structures.

Methodological issues

I experienced a number of difficulties in gaining access to potential participants. This was very much in accord with Hargreaves (1972), whose British, secondary school-based, research on teachers, had found that:

> "Life in the staffroom and its impact upon the teacher constitutes one of the most significant gaps in our knowledge of social processes within the school." (Hargreaves, 1972, p 402).

Hargreaves attributed this 'gap' largely to methodological problems, such as difficulty in gaining access to sample groups; a perception that the topic was an emotional and sensitive one, and therefore hard to study, and one which necessitated courage on the part of the researcher.

I was aware that participants would be a self selecting group - they were only likely to volunteer if they considered the research topic to be valid and important. This posed issues regarding representativity. However, my overall use of a social constructionist paradigm, (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994), which prioritised depth, understanding, authenticity and complex social realities was an acknowledgement that research findings would not take the form of absolute answers upon which generalisations could be based. Rather multiple and rich perspectives would be produced. I wanted to explore a range of different perceptions from participants who shared the common experience of being a teacher, regardless of type of school or curriculum and therefore I drew my samples from primary, secondary and special schools.

The theoretical position provided by social constructionism locates social process, and interaction, as being central to understanding the social world. In line with this I wanted to explore the Study 1 findings using focus group interviews with groups of teachers from different types, and phases, of schools. However, despite writing to every head teacher within the chosen education authority, I heard from only a very small number of volunteers, all of whom were deputy head teachers. I decided to conduct further individual interviews, specifically with deputy head teachers. My rationale for this was that especially rich data was gained from interviews with deputy heads, in the first study, and also, the staff in these positions were more likely to have a particular interest in the topic of how teachers work together and would occupy a good vantage point, within their schools, from which to form detailed views.

Methods

Following the events reported above, 22 deputy head teachers were sent letters inviting them to be interviewed. Four were from special schools, nine were from secondary schools, and nine were from primary schools. From these I was offered 16 interviews; but three of these were cancelled on the day of the planned interview because of participants' work pressures. Semi-structured audio-taped interviews were carried out with 13 deputy head teachers; three from secondary, seven from primary and three from special school settings. These constituted the data arising from Study 2. This study had taken place in a different education authority from the one in which Study 1 was conducted, where I now work as a senior EP. The interviews had been conducted in participants' work settings or at my office. Setting up the interviews was achieved via telephone and email communications. All participants were told that their interviews would be transcribed and sent to them in 'raw form' for additional comments and / or changes. Most participants telephoned me to say that they were happy with the transcriptions. Five interviewees returned their transcripts with comments and amendments and most of these related to grammatical or typological aspects.

Current progress on data gathering

I have used a grounded theory, constant comparative, method of data analysis (Straus and Corbin, 1990). This was used as a way of maintaining scepticism in order to ensure theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978); I utilised as many data sources as possible and stepped back periodically to look at the reality of the data. I also regarded all theoretical explanations as provisional and dependent upon verifications through the data. The process of data collection and analysis has been an alternating and recursive one.

The transcripts of the interviews were read, and re-read, many times. These contained a large amount of data, not all of which related specifically to the research topic. I reduced and selected the data (Miles and Huberman, 1984) through extraction of the relevant sections and then distilled these for each transcript. Some triangulation was achieved through the involvement of an assistant psychologist.

I am currently refining my coding framework with a view to coding the thirteen transcript distillations in order to identify themes, and then categories, from which to formulate the key findings. My coding framework has been constructed from key themes drawn from a search of the limited literature currently available; my own, and colleagues', professional experience and findings from Study 1. The key themes identified, were first, the importance of other teachers in the work of teachers and, second, the possibly problematic nature of the role of other teachers in teachers' work. A further theme was that of the influence of individual teacher characteristics on the earlier themes; the influence of school systems and structures and finally, the influence of Local Authority, DfES and other national structures on these issues.

Some further points have arisen from my initial reading of the Study 2 transcripts. These will need to be considered and, incorporated into the on-going analysis and include the perceived links between: effective whole school function and school management and teachers' work together; teaching effectively and teachers' work together; teachers' well-being and teachers' work together; teachers' work together within the life cycle and development of a teacher and its significance and the perceived benefits, and function, of teachers *not* working together.

Questions

My challenge at this time is to draw the points made above, together, extending and developing my coding framework. From this I want to continue to draw out further patterns, interesting features, contradictions and omissions. These, it is hoped, will offer a means of clarifying relationships and links, making inferences and ultimately theorisations. The main questions, as I see them at present, are: given my level of involvement with the research topic and the length of time in which I have been immersed in this study, how can I blend a systematic, structured and distanced approach to analysis with more situated, creative and intuitive ways of looking at the data? Secondly, how will I know if I have sufficient data to allow this to happen, and finally, given the complex, 'messy', 'real world' context of the research, would a soft systems approach (Checkland, 1981) be useful for further analysis at this stage?

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