Personal Reflections on the Masters in Educational Practice

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ABSTRACT

In September 2015, I successfully completed the Masters in Educational Practice (MEP). This article focuses on the professional gains of this qualification including the opportunities for classroom-based inquiry, structured reflection and professional dialogue with colleagues. I discuss the benefits of mentoring support from experienced teachers, as well as ongoing professional development in key aspects of national educational policy and practice. I describe how the qualification encourages newly qualified teachers to continually reflect on their practice and how this has had a direct and long-lasting impact on my own practice and the practice of my MEP colleagues, enhancing the experience for pupils and raising standards in Welsh classrooms. Core to my own experience of the MEP was the encouragement of professional dialogue and networking with mentors, experienced teachers, academics and other newly qualified teachers. This community has formed a strong platform for generating, critically considering and sharing a wealth of ideas about excellent pedagogical practice. Within this article, I give practical examples of how my experiences of the MEP have directly benefitted the learners. I explain the relevance of the MEP modules and how these underpin the Welsh Government's three national priorities for improving educational outcomes for learners in Wales: improving literacy, improving numeracy and reducing the impact of deprivation on attainment. Therefore, I maintain that the qualification crucially demonstrates the interaction between classroom, local and national contexts. I hold that, without the MEP, I do not think that I would have developed as a practitioner as quickly or as effectively. The

skill of critically reflecting on my practice is one which will benefit my learners for the rest of my teaching career.

Key words: Masters in Educational Practice, professional development, impact, Wales.

Background

I entered the education system at a time of fundamental change. The Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) was introduced in 2012 as part of the Welsh Government's drive to reform teacher development in Wales. The qualification is accredited by Cardiff University and was available to all Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) who began teaching in Welsh schools between 2013 and 2015. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) established this qualification as a way of ensuring continual professional development and reflective pedagogy after a teacher has gained their Post Graduate Certificate in Education. According to the Wales Masters in Educational Practice website, the rationale was:

> improving NQTs' classroom practice and developing their leadership in schools. Its underpinning philosophy is based on a recognition of the importance, and difficulty, of the transition NQTs have to make from being student teachers to teacher leaders. It sets out to support and enhance the professional learning opportunities provided by schools and local authorities. (WAG, 2012: 1)

Previously, NQTs were expected to make the aforementioned 'transition' between student teacher and teacher in a holistic and often ad hoc way. Support and encouragement to develop professional practice would be left to the discretion of their first employer school, rather than a formal and structured process. However, I was lucky enough to make the aforementioned transition during the first year that the MEP was offered, meaning I had the option to guarantee professional learning opportunities outside the high–achieving south Wales valleys secondary school in which I gained my first teaching post as an English teacher.

The decision

The decision did require great thought. The school I worked (and still work) in made it clear that they were dubious about the qualification's

impact as well as its future. They were uncertain about the pressure that it would place on an NQT in an already busy first year of employment and intimated that the qualification would not be a factor in deciding whether or not I would gain a permanent post. Thus, the pressures of an impending inspection and an unconvinced employer made me question whether it would be the right opportunity for me. On a personal level, I was concerned about the workload and was daunted by the prospect of studying, teaching, marking and planning simultaneously.

Ultimately, however, I wanted to improve my practice and that is what the MEP promised. Despite the fact that the other six NQTs in my school decided against embarking on the qualification, I applied and was accepted onto the course. My personal statement read: 'I owe it to every pupil that I teach to continually develop, reflect and research education and learning. I want my pupils to have not only the same, but *more* opportunities than I have had. I feel that the Masters in Educational Practice will help me to reach this aim.'

Learning event days

The journey started with a day of face-to-face teaching with academic tutors and teacher-mentors: the 'learning event day'. These took place three times a year and had three main roles: providing lecture-based tuition, ensuring collaboration within tutor groups and accessing resource material to aid the module's progress. Put simply, these days were an opportunity to be introduced to the modules, critically discuss our pedagogical experiences and ask for support with specific challenges in our classrooms.

I anticipated being overwhelmed by the amount of new tasks I would have to complete in addition to my teaching commitments. In fact, the experience of the first learning event day alleviated a lot of the stresses of starting a career in teaching and this is mainly because of the relevance of the modules. For instance, the first year consisted of modules entitled: Introduction to Teachers' Professional Enquiry, Child and Adolescent Learning and Development and Behaviour Management. Consequently, the content and the order of the modules seemed to mirror my immediate concerns about starting a career in teaching. Rather than balancing a tension between academia and pedagogy, in reality the MEP models encouraged reflection on practice and demonstrated the inextricable

relationship between the two. Schön's (1987) notion that good teachers are reflective practitioners has become even more crucial to my values as a teacher; the MEP programme has helped me to use this self-reflection to inform my future practice and to see it as a positive learning process, as opposed to extra 'work'.

Practical pedagogical support

One of my primary concerns, and I am sure one held by many NQTs, was behaviour management. I had done some supply teaching in my school in the summer term before I started my teaching post. During teacher training, a more experienced practitioner sits at the back of the classroom. My supply teaching experience proved that I had underestimated the influence of this teacher, their relationship with the class and thus their effect on behaviour. Therefore, I was not complacent about my behaviour management and knew that meaningful learning could not take place without it.

I taught a challenging Year 9 class in my first year. They were middle band, very lively and very difficult to keep on-task. To add to the challenge, there were thirty-five in the class. Off-topic chatter would spread like wildfire around the room and I felt like I was losing control. Fortunately, I had a learning event day for behaviour management scheduled and it served as a platform for professional dialogue with experienced teacher-mentors and other newly qualified teachers. Importantly, I felt that I could be honest with my tutor group as my contributions would be confidential: there was a professional trust, mutual respect and an ethos of support within my tutor group that I had not yet established with my colleagues in my school.

I shared my concerns about this Year 9 class with a Mathematics teacher in a different secondary school and, not only was I reassured by her similar concerns, but I was also amazed by the simplicity of her tried and tested strategies. I went into school the next day feeling so much more in control and made notes in my professional journal about the pupils' progress in learning. Within a few lessons, the behaviour was notably better, I felt more positive and, ultimately, the pupils learnt more. I cannot honestly say that I would have been able to identify the gaps in my behaviour management as quickly without sustained professional dialogue and observations in my professional journal.

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Professional networks

The professional dialogue was also invaluable because it sometimes pre-empted issues before they arose. Rather than waiting to discover certain situations and challenges through experience, which can always be a difficult learning curve, I sometimes felt as if I had an unfair advantage by being on the MEP. For example, on another learning event day, I was placed in a group with a primary phase teacher who was having difficulties ensuring the learning and development of a pupil who had suffered a sudden and close bereavement. Our tutor group shared resources, strategies and experience. It would be inappropriate to generalise about pupils' circumstances by suggesting that I knew how to react when this happened to one of my pupils, but I did have a better understanding of ways to care for this pupil's pastoral welfare as a result of the conversations with my MEP peers.

National priorities

The MEP modules linked directly to the Welsh Government's national priorities and coincided perfectly with the new initiatives of the school in which I work. The first draft of the 'Literacy and Numeracy Framework' (LNF) was established in 2008 and demonstrated a more formalised approach to teaching literacy and numeracy, introduced in 2013 (WAG, 2013). As my school was planning how to effectively implement the LNF, I was studying the year 2 modules, entitled 'Literacy' and 'Numeracy'. This made the modules and my research even more purposeful and meant that I had already anticipated some of the main challenges of the LNF, such as how to find opportunities to enhance numeracy skills within the English scheme of work, how to best prepare pupils for a new LNF-style reading examination and how to ensure that pupils could apply their literacy and numeracy skills in real life and extra-curricular contexts. I felt a sense of pride when I was asked, as a relatively inexperienced teacher, to share my innovative ideas and excellent practice with my colleagues, which I had developed as a direct result of being part of the MEP community.

Impact

I must admit that, at times, studying the MEP has been uncomfortable, particularly when I noticed a gap or an inadequacy in my practice. My tendency to generalise has been the main challenge faced during the inquiry process. I have had to ask myself 'What is actually going on here?' several times before arriving at plausible explanations. I have been, as Strauss (2006: 29) describes, 'unsettled' by my reflection on lessons as they have highlighted some of the weaknesses in my practice. However, this discomfort has been worthwhile because it has benefitted my learners. I have engaged in, as Elmore (2008: 1) describes, 'thoughtful practices' which have improved my teaching year upon year. I intend to continue these practices throughout my teaching career.

Additionally, I have grown in confidence as I have become more research literate. BERA recognises how important research literacy is amongst the teaching profession: 'Teachers and students thrive in the kind of settings that we describe as research-rich, and research-rich schools and colleges are those that are likely to have the greatest capacity for self-evaluation and self-improvement' (BERA, 2016: 1). I now know how to implement classroom-scale interventions to investigate any professional concerns or aspects of my practice in an appropriate and ethical way. Consequently, I feel more reassured when making changes based on my professional judgement in the interests of my learners: 'At the core is the learner: a unique individual who brings to each learning situation a critical set of variables, including his or her personality, prior knowledge and school achievement history' (Hewitt, 2008: 23).

Through the MEP, I have also gained valuable perspectives on the social climate of teaching. One of the things we were encouraged to include in our final research project was a network map: a diagram showing the web of parties who were influential and important to the research. At the start of the project, I had myself at the heart of the network map because I felt that all of the stakeholders in my teaching were connected to me (Figure 1).

The final MEP project helped me to appreciate that I am just one piece of the jigsaw of people connected to the learner and their progress (Figure 2).

This appreciation of the interconnected associates of education, such as the individual learner, parents, colleagues, schools, academics, policy and the government, has meant that my development as a teacher through the

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Figure 1: Original Network Map
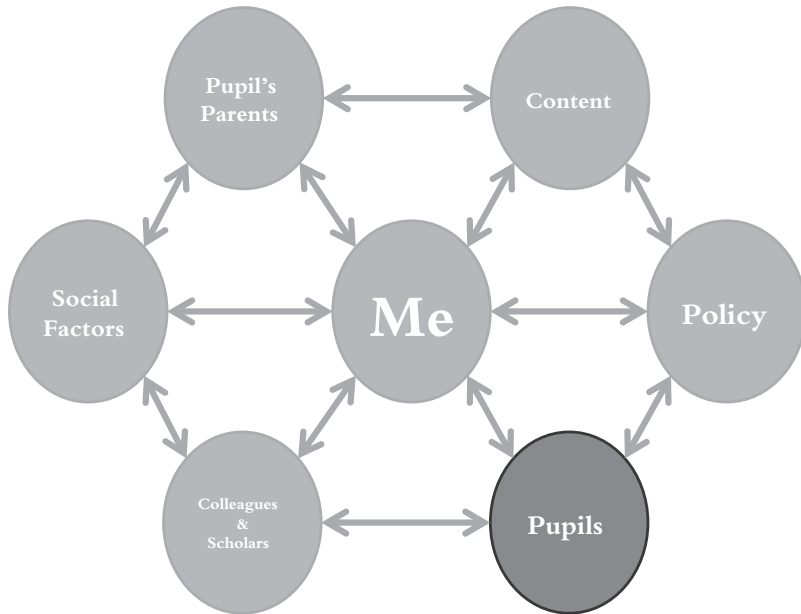
MEP will have a far-reaching impact: I am a more effective, confident and engaging teacher because I am able to critically reflect on my practice and improve it. Inevitably, my pupils are having a higher standard of education because of my development. Additionally, I hope that my research literacy and reflective practices will act as a pebble to a pool of water, creating a rippling effect which will influence other contexts as shown in my 'Impact Plan' (Figure 3).

Overall, one of the main critical reflections I have gained from the MEP is the realisation that teaching is a profession where there is no finite point to learning, for myself or for the learners. I have discovered that there is no end point to a learner's progress, just as teachers should never stop reflecting and developing new ways to effectively educate learners. This fact is both exciting and worryingly challenging. However, the sense of pride and confidence that I feel when I contemplate how much I have learnt in the last four years undoubtedly outweighs the fears I had about starting the MEP. I firmly agree with Capel et al.'s (2005:1) statement:

Figure 2: Amended Network Map
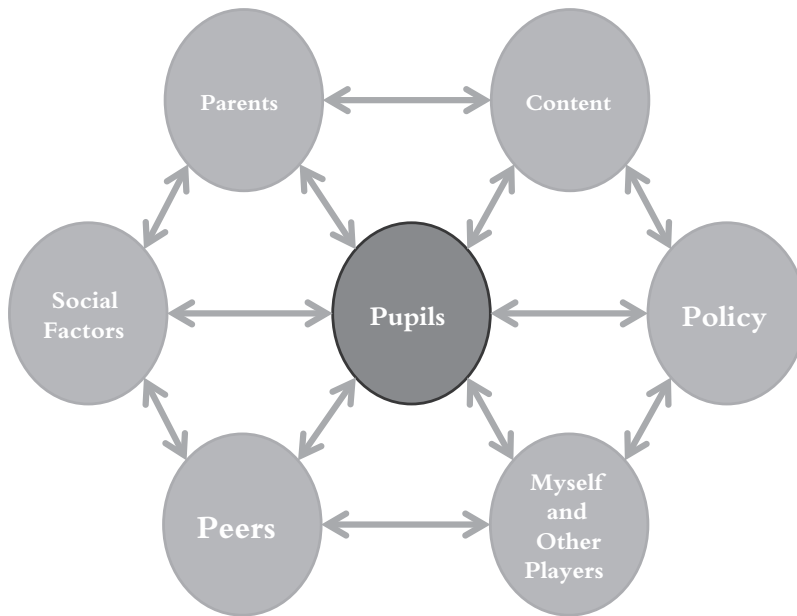
Teaching is a journey of personal development in which your skills of classroom management develop alongside an emerging understanding of the teaching and learning process. This is a journey of self-discovery that begins on the first day of the course and may stop only when you retire.

To conclude, I have found the MEP to be much more than a qualification: it is a commitment to a never-ending journey of learning, development and progress, not only for myself, but for every pupil I will teach. I would like to thank the Welsh Government for providing me with this opportunity as I do not think that I would be as effective in my teaching without having studied the MEP.

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Figure 3: Impact plan including factors to supporting successful communication of findings in my school
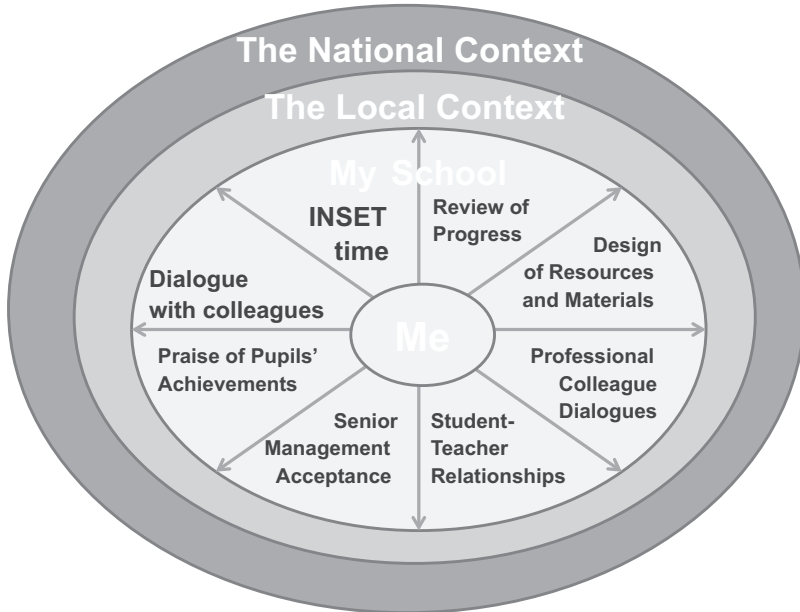
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