The Value of Masters Study to Teachers' Professional Practice: Contradictory Discourses within the Workplace

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Abstract: Postgraduate study provides teachers with opportunities to become critical consumers of research as well as generators of their own knowledge, enabling them to fulfil the mandate of teaching being a research informed and evidenced based profession (Robinson, 2003). This article pays attention to 18 practicing teachers' reasons for undertaking a master's degree and the type of workplace support offered during their enrolment. Findings suggest that teachers' reasons for undertaking academic study were very much tied to their perceptions of what it means to be a teacher and how teaching and learning can be improved. As such teachers' professional identity seemed to reflect the discourse of teaching as a complex and professional activity. Such an identity seemed contradictory to those of many of their workplace colleagues and senior managers who provided the teachers with subtle messages regarding the importance and value of study and research to teachers' professional practice.

Introduction

In the case of teaching, the professional expectations of teachers have changed over time. In an era when teachers were 'trained' as opposed to educated, the discourse of teaching was predominantly focused on the technical and practical aspects of teaching with the acquisition of skills and techniques of fundamental importance (Cameron & Baker, 2004). Further, an emphasis on the practical was at the expense of the theoretical. During the 1980s the work of scholars such as Schon (1987) and Shulman (1987) challenged the discourse of teaching as a practical activity which resulted in a move from teacher training to teacher education, from colleges of education to universities, and hence the move to a degreed profession. These discursive shifts transformed the teaching discourse from that of a practical activity to a complex, professional activity (Alcorn, 1999). Of importance, currently, is the melding of the theoretical with the moral, ethical and practical dimensions of teaching. Effective practice is predicated on theoretical underpinnings and in turn research is seen as playing an important role in the creation and adaptation of theory. At both an individual and collective level teachers are now expected to engage with problems of practice in a reflective and reflexive manner. As a result the professional expectations for both newly qualified teachers and those already inducted into the profession have changed thus requiring practicing teachers to forge new professional identities.

Research-Informed and Evidence Based Teaching

In New Zealand there is an obligatory requirement that practicing teachers engage in continuing professional development to improve their practice (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2010). Given that formal academic study is considered a legitimate form of professional development (Williams, 2005), the upgrading of qualifications has been incentivised through the provision of contestable study awards and grants-in-aide from sources such as the New Zealand Ministry of Education and various teacher unions. Such moves have been underpinned by the need for teaching to be a research-informed and evidence-based profession. To achieve the mandate of teaching being research-informed and evidence based there is an expectation that teachers will be both critical consumers of research as well as generators of their own knowledge pertaining to learning and teaching (Robinson, 2003).

A growing recognition that practitioner research under its numerous guises can provide the evidential base from which teachers can understand and improve their practice (Robinson, 2003; Stenhouse, 1985) has seen the emergence of research methodologies such as self-study, action research and teaching as inquiry. As Rust (2009) has noted, systematic, intentional and self-critical inquiry about one's work affords teachers with the opportunity to investigate questions fundamental to teaching and learning for an insider's perspective. If done well such inquiry can contribute in "substantive and substantial ways to our understandings of teaching, learning and schools and thus to the knowledge base of educational practice at the local level and at a public level." (p. 1884).

Working within the domain of educational leadership, Robinson (2003) has argued postgraduate academic study can provide teachers with high quality opportunities to acquire the skills necessary not only to engage in practitioner research but also to become catalysts within their school environments, whereby they support and promote research based inquiry. However, whilst on one hand the academy can indorse the benefits of practitioner research teachers themselves need to ascribe to these benefits if the rhetoric of teaching as a research informed and evidence based profession is to become a reality. As Gray and Campbell Evans (2002, p. 31) have noted "the growing expectation for the professional role of teachers to incorporate the role of reflective practitioner and researcher is not easily accommodated by all practicing classroom teachers" with a number of teachers still questioning the role that research can play in either informing or improving practice. Even for those who have subscribed to the notion of practitioner research there is extensive evidence related to the technical difficulties teachers have encountered as they move into the realms of teacher-researcher. Difficulties related to time, workload and sustaining motivation and momentum (Thornley, Parker, Read & Eason, 2004; Ward & Dixon, 2014) are well documented.

Support for Academic Study

Cognizant that each level of study presents its own unique set of challenges and that those returning to study are usually coping with the multiple demands of family, career and academia, some attention has been paid to how best to facilitate the timely completion of postgraduate degrees through the provision of support. Significantly greater attention has been paid to the establishment of support structures at a systemic level aimed at enhancing the student experience. Many universities have made improvements to channels of communication, course design and delivery modes (Arthur, Marland, Hill & Rea, 2006; Blackwell & Diez, 1998; Bourke & Holbrook, 2002). Methods of inquiry such as various

forms of practitioner research are often promoted to part-time education students as preferred methodologies within postgraduate qualifications.

While structural and technical improvements are laudable, support for practising professionals undertaking academic study cannot and should not be the sole responsibility of universities (Barnacle & Usher, 2003). Whatever the level of study students need access to a range of support (Arthur, et al., 2006; Barnacle & Usher, 2003; Sayed, Kruss, & Badet, 1998), a number of which should be provided within the context of the workplace. As Arthur et al., have argued, "professional support from Higher Education Institutions, schools and local authorities should also be expected and should not simply rely on chance." (p. 216). Within the context of academic study, support has been defined as the "resources that the learner can access to carry out the learning process" (Garrison & Baynton, 1987, p.7). Recognising that learning is a complex, multifaceted process these resources may focus on the cognitive, financial, social and emotional support needed to facilitate and enhance student success.

Through an investigation of the nature of the support offered to registered nurses while earning a bachelor's degree, Oehlkers and Gibson (2001) identified two broad categories of support: formal and informal. Formal support was that provided by the learning institution and included the provision of appropriate learning materials as well as access to lecturers and other key staff. Informal support was that provided to students from outside of the learning institution. While such support was deemed to come from family, friends, peers, colleagues and employers, nurses in this study reported greater amounts of social and emotional support from family and friends than from colleagues or employers. In a similar vein, an Australian based study focused on support for nurses undertaking postgraduate study, revealed that support from employers was less than nurses desired (Black & Bonner, 2011). Little workplace support was offered to nurses and was given as a result of demand rather than as of right. Black and Bonner have argued that employers need to develop a workplace culture that assigns a high value to academic study, which in turn provides support for academic endeavour. Furthermore, as Sayed et al. (1998) found, employer support in the form of time was an enabling factor. Time off from work or a reduced workload helped students to balance personal, professional and academic commitments. In contrast, those students who worked and studied concurrently with no such support reported a sense of isolation and dislocation from their postgraduate study.

Workplace social support can be defined as "the actions of others that are either helpful or intended to be helpful" (Deelstra et al., 2003, p. 324). In the majority of instances schools are the workplace within which teachers operate and as such schools are recognised as a site of learning for teachers. However, the values and the goals that a school commits to will potentially constrain or enable the school community (Day & Gu, 2007). Findings from recent work undertaken by Borg and Liu (2013) within the context of language teaching highlighted the constraining effects of the workplace when teachers engaged in research. A lack of support from educational leaders, and an associated lack of a collaborative research ethos, were seen as significant impediments to teachers' continuing engagement in research. A further concern was the lack of interest shown by teachers in regard to how research could inform and improve practice.

Given that there has been a shift in the discourse from teaching as a practical activity to one that is a complex, professional activity that requires teachers to be research informed and research led, the first research question explored in this current study was: What value do teachers place on academic study as a means to assist with their development within the research space?

While it appears agreed that students require a range of formal and informal support to achieve academic success, little attention has been paid to the type and level of support within the workplace, particularly in the teaching profession. In order to bridge this gap, the second research question was: What types of support do teachers receive when undertaking academic study?

Methodology and Research Design

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger study that examined the experiences and perspectives of students who had successfully completed a masters anytime during 2005 to 2011. Situated with the interpretive paradigm (Neuman, 2003), the current study attempted to gain insight into the value teachers, who were engaged in masters study, placed on academic study in regard to the fulfilment of their professional obligations and the support they received during their time of study. Data gathered from two sources comprised the dataset for what is reported in this paper. In the first phase of the research, participants were asked to provide relevant demographic and biographical data by completing a questionnaire. These data provided the authors with the participants' background and are displayed in Table 1. The authors were also provided with permission to access the participants' transcripts to ascertain the papers they completed and the research projects they undertook. In the second phase of the research, participants took part in a two-hour, semi-structured focus group interview.

Interviewing allowed the authors to ascertain the participants' words, thoughts, beliefs and interpretations. This qualitative strategy enabled the authors to gain insight into the subjective human experience and understand and interpret social reality through the meanings that the teachers attached to their experiences of masters study (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). Consequently, an in-depth understanding of the participants and a rich, full description of their social reality could be achieved.

Focus group interviews have the advantage in providing the opportunity for different experiences, perceptions, attitudes and points of view, to be shared. The potential disadvantages of focus group interviews such as the reluctance to disclose or the domination of a focus group member (Denscombe, 2003) were mediated through the appointment of two independent interviewers who had a broad knowledge of the schooling sectors and particular skill in making people relaxed and willing to give 'honest' responses (Belgrave & Smith, 2002). Neither the interviewers nor the person employed to transcribe the interview data had involvement in the masters' programme.

Understanding the subjective meanings of the participants involved in the study was seen as important (Delamont 1992). Consequently, the interview questions were semi-structured in nature providing the teachers with some flexibility to develop and follow their own train of thought within the constraints offered by the interviewer.

Name (pseudonym)	Sector during degree	Years' teaching	Gender	Age group	Masters degree	Masters option	Enrolment status at outset of degree
Sally	Early childhood	20	Female	>50	MEd	Research (thesis)	Part-time
Barbara	Primary	20	Female	40-49	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Tanya	Primary	15	Female	>50	MEd	Research (thesis)	Part-time

Blair	Primary	7	Male	30-39	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Beth	Primary	13	Female	40-49	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Natasha	Primary	13	Female	30-39	MEd	Research (thesis)	Part-time
Louise	Primary	26	Female	40-49	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Joanna	Primary	33	Female	>50	MEd	Taught (dissertation)	Part-time
Jackie	Primary	10	Female	>50	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Lily	Primary	14	Female	30-39	MEd	Taught (dissertation)	Part-time
Nigel	Primary	27	Male	>50	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Georgina	Secondary	25	Female	>50	MEd	Research (thesis)	Part-time
Veronica	Secondary	15	Female	>50	MProfSt	Taught (dissertation)	Full-time
Margaret	Secondary	12	Female	40-49	MEdMgt	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Molly	Secondary	30	Female	>50	MA (Education)	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Harry	Secondary	21	Male	40-49	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Laura	Secondary	15	Female	30-39	MEd	Taught (coursework only)	Part-time
Amy	Primary/ Tertiary	30	Female	>50	MEd	Taught (dissertation)	Part-time

Table 1: Participants' biographic and demographic data

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted within a faculty of education in a large urban university in New Zealand which offered a number of 120 point one year equivalent masters degrees in Education. At the time when the research was conducted, students could complete a masters degree as a taught option or a research option. The taught option involved coursework only or, coursework and a dissertation. The research option involved writing a thesis or portfolio of work guided by either one or two university supervisors.

For the larger study, letters were sent to approximately 170 masters graduates inviting them to participate in the study. Twenty-six acceptances to participate were received and these comprised the original sample, that is, the original sample was one of convenience (Punch, 2005). The current study focuses on the 18 participants within the original sample who were experienced teachers who worked in the early childhood, primary or secondary sector.

Of the 18 teachers, 15 were female and three were male. Six of the teachers taught in the secondary sector and one taught in the early childhood sector. Of the 11 teachers who taught in the primary sector, one of the teachers (Amy), changed jobs during her study and began working in a university setting (refer to Table 1).

The majority of the teachers in the current study had completed a Master of Education. Of the 18 teachers, four had completed a Research Masters and 14 had completed a Taught Masters. Of those who completed a Taught Masters 10 participants, completed their masters through coursework. The remaining four participants completed coursework with a dissertation. Only one teacher was enrolled on a full-time basis. While the majority were

enrolled at the beginning of their study on a part-time basis, some received study awards during their enrolment enabling them to be released fully from their teaching duties for various lengths of time (refer to Table 1).

While the authors recognise that the overall sample is small, the participating teachers were typical of masters students with regard to gender, age, years of teaching and enrolment status. As such the sample represents the views of mature adults who mostly studied part-time to complete their masters, fitting study around the demands of full-time employment and already busy lives.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviewers made contact with potential participants and organised the focus group interviews. There was one interviewer per focus group. Taking into account teachers availability and the Masters option they had completed, there were six focus group interviews ranging in size from two members to five members. The temporal interlude between masters completion and interview ranged between one and four years.

The interviews were of two hours duration and the interview questions were semi-structured in nature. Interview questions pertinent to this study focussed on reasons for choosing to complete a masters via the teachers' chosen pathway; the formal and informal support structures in the workplace; and, how these structures may have enhanced or detracted from the masters' experience. With teachers' permission, the interview was audio-taped and transcribed. Given the nature of participants' contribution it was evident that all contributed and felt comfortable to disclose both positive and negative experiences.

A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken by the authors using techniques associated with the constant comparison method and open, axial and selected coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The themes were verified with both authors presenting and defending ideas and supporting or challenging those of the other author. The themes were also compared against the participants' demographic and biographic data. In addition a content analysis of the papers the teachers studied was completed to better understand the type of paper the teachers preferred to enrol in (Robertson and Hawe, 2009). The data used to undertake this analysis was the participants' academic transcripts (that contained course titles and/or research project titles) and the description of the courses from the University Calendar.

Findings

The Value of Academic Study

All of the participants whether they were enrolled in a coursework only Masters, a dissertation and coursework, or a research thesis valued the study they were doing. While they all saw value in the Masters they had chosen to enrol for different reasons.

The Value of Coursework: Engagement with Scholarly Ideas and Empirical Evidence to Gain Knowledge and Improve Practice

Those teachers who were completing a masters by coursework saw the opportunity to gain knowledge to improve their teaching. Margaret saw the study as an opportunity to "keep interrogating what I was doing" and Nigel believed that those in universities "generated

knowledge" and it was important for him to tap into that knowledge. Nigel realised "there's lots of things I didn't know" and saw the University as "one place to explore some of those answers" so he kept "picking papers that provided me with information." An analysis of coursework students' enrolment choices revealed that they did select courses that had the potential to increase their knowledge base about contemporary perspectives about teaching and learning. In these papers students were expected to critically examine and critique theoretical perspectives and empirical research studies pertaining to the subject domain.

There was recognition of the importance of "lifelong learning" (Molly) and of currency in practice. Louise, like other participants, recognised that "things had moved on" and masters study was a form of professional development which could provide much needed 'new' knowledge and skills. Completing papers that were relevant to their teaching was important as Lily noted, "The ones that I had chosen anyway were very classroom focussed and based in what I was doing in my room and things that I could take back to my room." But she also came to the realisation that the papers provided the opportunity to reflect on her practice and reconsider her practice using a different lens:

> Just because you see things from a different perspective coming into the University … you take a step back and you have another look at the bigger picture and then when you go back into your classroom you'll bring elements in.

(Lily)

To these ends, to expand their knowledge base the teachers who enrolled in a coursework masters most frequently selected curriculum papers that paid particular attention to implementing effective pedagogical practices in a subject area (for example, literacy papers that considered national policies as well as interventions and strategies aimed to support effective learning and teaching in a specific literacy domain). Educational leadership and school improvement papers and papers that focused on priority learners[1] and how achievement gaps for these students might be closed were also popular choices for teachers.

Both Nigel and Louise were in leadership positions, so they believed they had a responsibility to help others learn. Hence their decisions to enrol in papers focused on the theory and practice of educational leadership, including the leadership of teaching and learning within their schools. Knowledge of school and community contexts and how these impacted on student learning and achievement was also seen as important. Nigel believed the knowledge he gained from the papers aligned with, and advanced his "own personal practice as a teacher and a senior manager." For Nigel his Masters has been influential in setting up Professional Learning Groups in which staff members in the school do professional reading before making decisions regarding school plans and projects.

Whilst it would seem that the perceived "usefulness" of papers (Beth) or their "direct relevance" (Blair) to practice were driving forces in regard to course selection, teachers also reported unanticipated outcomes as a result of course completion. As a number teachers noted, being able to draw on scholarly work or empirical evidence had increased their levels of confidence to speak with authority within their schools. An increased level of criticality pertaining to both policy and practice was also seen as a valuable outcome of academic study at masters' level.

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[1] In New Zealand Maori and Pasifika students and students from low socio-economic areas are identified by the Ministry of Education as priority learners based on their achievement levels compared to other student groups, for example New Zealand European, Asian.

The Value of Completing a Research Project: An Opportunity to Generate Knowledge Linked to Practice

Initially the teachers who enrolled in a dissertation were interested in the papers they completed prior to their dissertation for the purpose of deepening their knowledge and improving their practice directly by gaining "different ideas, strategies..." (Veronica). However, the papers also acted as a catalyst in which some of the teachers developed an ongoing interest, raised their own questions that they wanted answers to and developed their own research study to investigate these questions. Veronica explained, "I did a TESOL paper and that got me interested. I knew that, second language speakers had problems, I always knew that but, you know, it didn't really mean much to you until I did some TESOL papers. So that sort of led on to maybe an interest to study something further."

Those completing a thesis also explored areas of interest. Sally talked about how her research questions "fell out of her work" in an area in which she found little research completed previously. Natasha had a similar view:

> There was a lot of research into interactive whiteboards and there was some into higher order thinking, but not a lot into if they were being used in that way. So I thought, right, this might be something I can look at … an area that I'm interested in and an area that hasn't been looked at much in New Zealand.

By completing a research project there was the opportunity to come to understand the area they were researching at a deep level: "It was fantastic just to get started and to be able to write, be able to research, be able to deal with things in depth rather than just do token research" (Georgina). By finding the knowledge gaps within their own area of interest and by investigating their own questions in a deep and meaningful way, teachers' believed they were able to create new knowledge.

Not content with knowledge production *per se* they wanted their research to have a direct impact on their work so it was important to the teachers that the questions they were investigating were relevant and connected to their own practice. For example, Veronica noted her research about effective teaching of second language learners stemmed from, "What's relevant to you and your job and those you're dealing with." Veronica wanted her research to have a direct impact on her teaching in order to help the students she taught. The outcome of Lily's study in the area of gifted and talented had led her to develop a gifted and talented programme that she put in place within her school.

As a consequence, the participants believed that their research project not only had the potential to generate new knowledge, but also to create change either personally or school-wide. But they realised that the research had to be rigorous if implications for practice were to be taken seriously. They recognised the importance of the systematic nature of research and the significance of evidence. Lily and Joanna described the curriculum programmes developed on the basis of their research findings as "robust", because of the research process in which they had engaged. The teachers now had the research to support their ideas and claims and were no longer satisfied with "people's opinions" (Amy) as a rationale for making change or decisions about pedagogy.

The Provision of Informal and Formal Support

However, the journey through their masters was not necessarily a smooth and straightforward one, particularly for those engaged in a thesis or dissertation (Ward & Dixon, 2014). Common to all participants was the need for and importance of support during a period of their lives where they had to meet both anticipated and unexpected challenges as they grappled with the demands of academic study. Specific aspects of support, both informal

and formal, that were identified by the teachers as either present or lacking are discussed in turn below.

Systemic Forms of Support: Time and Financial Support

The New Zealand education community supports primary and secondary teachers by providing contestable grants in the form of study awards. Over half of the teachers in this current study, received an award releasing them from teaching. This made a huge difference to the teachers as "not having to work fulltime made all the difference" (Natasha).

Natasha "couldn't picture how I would cope with doing a thesis and working fulltime." Study leave was considered "the best gift I've ever had." Joanna was enrolled in a coursework only masters but changed to the dissertation option when she received the study award. She commented, "had I not [got the study award], I wouldn't have been able to manage the research and full time work." Lily agreed that she was only able to complete a dissertation because she was given the study award.

In addition to time support many of the teachers received financial support with money available from the school to pay either fully or partially for the completion of coursework. While Jackie and Amy did not receive a study award they did receive financial support from the Ministry of Education who gave fee rebates to papers in areas of strategic importance, for example, literacy education.

Collegial Support at Work: Questioning the Relevancy of Academic Study to Professional Practice

The teachers found that there was initial support from their schools. Lily found her school's support motivating because they were accommodating with her leave and were excited about the prospect of her study and wanted to "hear how it was all going." However, once in the programme, on-going support was less forthcoming. Louise also indicated that a school might be supportive to a point, but if you were unable to fulfil out-of-school expectations because you had a university lecture, a school might be less supportive. Similarly, Margaret was concerned about a lack of support from principals in schools:

> Often there's a wariness I think because actually having people go off on study leave, win study awards, is a pain, and sometimes it threatens the status quo when people start going and doing these things in schools so that is an area that I think could be more supportive. Certainly I have known colleagues who keep very quiet about the work that they're doing because there's some sense of, 'is the principal thinking you're spending time on that and … not on your work.'

Only Tanya and Laura experienced various types of support from their work colleagues. Laura indicated, "friends you have lunch with were like, 'what are you doing? Oh that's interesting'" thus providing social and emotional support. She also had colleagues in the school who had studied previously and they were able to provide cognitive support by having "conversations" about the coursework she was completing. Georgina, found her school management supported her during her masters degree, providing release from work in order for her to conduct the interviews for her study. However, this support did not extend to her immediate work colleagues.

A lack of support from colleagues, within the workplace, was typical particularly if teachers were completing the research option. Georgina and Natasha experienced a lack of interest and support from their work colleagues and perceived their work was under-valued. Georgina noted that, "it would be nice if somebody would say, 'can we have a look at it?' but

no interest whatsoever, I guess everybody is just too busy." Natasha said she did not receive any support from colleagues who viewed what she was doing as "crazy". She explained:

> Nobody at work was really interested even though it was a field that could feed into [practice] … no one was interested in reading it or hearing about it …. I did research in the school for some of my masters papers … and I presented at a conference in Brisbane and no one in the school ever read that conference paper or that research which was done in their school. …. I'm just a bit surprised that there was that lack of interest when they were all in that field of education.

Sally also found reluctance from work colleagues to take an interest in her research findings. She believed the implications stemming from her research could make positive changes within the workplace but "there was absolutely no interest". She gave her thesis to her workplace supervisor but "I know she never bothered to read it so that is really demoralising".

So while the teachers appreciated the informal support they received in the form of study awards, fee payments and encouragement from school management, they soon realised that this support was short lived. Consequently, the lack of sustained support in the workplace led the participants to look elsewhere for support.

Support Seeking Outside of the Workplace

In the first instance teachers in the current study turned to peers who were engaged in similar study. Jackie realised that previously she had worked on her academic study alone and now appreciated the emotional and social support she received from a peer outside of the workplace who she could talk to about her coursework. Louise met people during her study that took on the role of critical friend. Others also noted that through working together they were able to support one another on a cognitive level and the participants valued the fact they were "learning from other people" (Beth). Receiving support through the avenues of peers also doing university study may have been easier for those undertaking masters that included coursework as they were meeting likeminded peers in the classes they were taking. For those engaged in a dissertation or thesis finding this type of support was more difficult.

Given the paucity of informal support from work colleagues teachers were also appreciative of the support they received through the university. Those teachers completing coursework commented on the cognitive support they received from lecturers. Lily found that the lecturer on the research methods course "excited" her about doing research and consequently Lily enrolled in the dissertation option. Blair felt emotionally supported by lecturers' "open door policy, you know, could always contact them, I could email them." Louise found lecturers "affirming" and appreciated their availability to discuss her work. She felt "mentored" and this supported her academic self-efficacy.

For the teachers who were undertaking a dissertation or a thesis, the university supervisors were pivotal in supporting them emotionally and cognitively. Georgina described the email contact she had on a regular basis with her supervisor as her "lifeline" and described them as the "only person on the same wavelength" and a "critical friend." It was important for the participants to receive encouragement from their university supervisors so that they could complete their research. Lily received emotional support from her university supervisor commenting, "Hearing her talk about her experiences and, almost her belief that I could do it, and that it was achievable, was really good."

So, findings from this study suggest that while there was an absence of sustained cognitive and emotional support from colleagues at work, support from the learning institution and likeminded peers became pivotal to the completion of their qualification. In

particular, the support received by a university supervisor for teachers completing a dissertation or thesis students cannot be underestimated.

Discussion

Professional identity has been described as "the attitudes, values, knowledge, and beliefs shared with others within a professional group and relates to the professional role being undertaken by the individual and thus is a matter of self-conceptualisation associated with the work role adopted" (Adams, Hean, Sturgis & Macleod Clark, 2006, p. 56). Shaped by history and culture, professional identity is dynamic, subject to formulation and re-formulation at both an individual and collective level as the professional discourse both reflects and constructs the social world. In the current study, teachers' conceptualisations of their professional role seemed to have an alignment with much of the current discourse of teaching. The value in undertaking academic study was seen by all teachers as being able to connect 'researchers and professional practitioners, research and practice, academic coursework and professional training' and in doing so 'address the learning needs and interests of those working in a professional capacity.' (Forsyth et al., 2009, p. 652). Furthermore, all the teachers seemed intellectually engaged with theories and ideas generated from research and to this end they were critical consumers of research (Donnell & Harper, 2005). Unlike the teachers in the Borg and Liu (2013) study, teachers in this study appreciated learning about ideas generated by others. Reading research was seen as a productive activity with findings from research considered to be directly relevant to the classroom.

Although there is a growing expectation that teachers should be researching their practice thereby generating knowledge about learning and teaching not all in the study subscribed to such an identity. Driven by a need to solve problems of practice those who enrolled in the thesis or dissertation option of the masters degree took on the mantle of teacher as researcher. Critically they seemed to have developed the mind-set, skill-set and therefore an identity that enabled them to complete a substantial and robust piece of research which was deeply embedded in practice. Rust (2009) has argued that if done well research undertaken by teachers can contribute to the knowledge base of educational practice. Teachers who undertook research in the current study were motivated by such a belief. Knowledge generated by their research was not considered a private good but was viewed as a public good – findings had the potential to be used by their school community as well as the wider educational community. Moreover, as a result of their experience of completing a piece of research these teachers showed a willingness to take a lead within their school environments supporting and promoting research based inquiry as a means by which others could investigate problems of practice. Mostly their advocacy for research based inquiry was dismissed by colleagues as having little value to teaching and learning.

As has been argued elsewhere (Black & Bonner, 2011; Oehlkers & Gibson, 2001) the provision of academic support from universities while a necessary condition for success, is insufficient on its own to ensure a successful and satisfying academic experience. Students need access to other support, including that provided by the workplace (Arthur et al., 2006; Barnacle & Usher, 2003; Sayed et al., 1998). Given the current discourse of teaching as a research informed and research led profession (Robinson, 2003) along with the expectation that those working within education will engage in on-going professional learning, including the upgrading of academic qualifications, it is not unreasonable to expect that teachers will receive workplace support to ensure successful completion of a masters qualification. Teachers in the current study appreciated the systemic support provided to them in the form

of release time and the payment of fees and acknowledged that support of this kind was enabling (Sayed et al., 1998). However, from teachers' perspectives, notably absent from the workplace was the provision of cognitive, social and emotional support. While some senior managers encouraged participants to enrol in a masters degree this encouragement seemed superficial and transitory. In the main workplace colleagues, including those in leadership positions, were perceived as being disinterested in the substantive content of participants' study, particularly when there was a strong research focus to that study. Such responses run counter to the discourse of teaching being research-informed and evidence-based (Robinson, 2003) and perhaps suggests that neither senior management nor teaching colleagues are yet ready to either adopt or enact the current discourse of teaching. Similar to the findings of Sayed et al. (1998) a lack of collegial support engendered in participants, to varying degrees, feelings of isolation and dislocation from their work colleagues, necessitating a greater reliance on colleagues from outside the workplace and university staff and supervisors for cognitive and emotional support.

Conclusion

Teachers' reasons for undertaking academic study were very much tied to their perceptions of what it means to be a teacher and how professional practice can be improved. As articulated by the teachers their professional identity seemed to reflect the discourse of teaching as a complex and professional activity. Enrolment in and completion of a masters degree was seen as a way in which teachers could develop new knowledge, skills and understandings through the examination, deconstruction and reconstruction of their professional practice. Moreover, undertaking academic study and interrogating research enabled them to adopt an informed and critical stance toward teaching and learning. To these ends, teachers in the current study, subscribed to teaching being research informed and evidence based (Robinson, 2003). Proponents of teacher research have argued its authenticity and locality can speak to, and engage teachers in ways that traditional research undertaken by those in the academy has often failed to do (Rust, 2009). For those in the current study who selected a research option, undertaking research to improve practice was viewed as very much part of the professional work role of the teacher which in turn was seen as beneficial to the profession.

However, the actions of colleagues such as disinterest and disregard provided participants with subtle messages regarding the importance and value of study and research to teaching and learning. Academic study, particularly research was seen as having little to contribute to the enhancement of professional practice. In extreme cases, study was seen as detractor from rather than part of teachers' work. Such responses can be considered a professional contradiction between the participating teachers' values related to the benefits of masters study to professional practice and those held by their workplace colleagues. While these ambiguities raise questions as to whether the rhetoric of teaching becoming a research-informed and evidence-based profession is still to become a reality, it was beyond the scope of the current study to ascertain reasons for these contradictions. Hence, further research is warranted. Firstly, to appreciate more fully why some teachers and senior managers are sceptical in regard to the value of academic study and research to practice. Secondly to understand, from these teachers' perspectives, what practices and norms of behaviour are influential in regard to the enhancement of professional practice.

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