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**The Place of Professional Learning Groups in the
Induction of In-Service Teacher Educators.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of**

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in
Adult Education**

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ABSTRACT

In New Zealand In-service Teacher Educators (ISTEs) provide professional development for teachers, principals and management in Early Childhood Centres and Schools. ISTEs have been teachers or principals themselves. However, the role of ISTE is different to that of a teacher or principal. There are varied practices throughout New Zealand relating to the induction of ISTEs. The research of Trowler and Knight (1999) concluded that educators required support in gaining explicit knowledge about their new professional role and a process was required to enable this learning to take place.

This study investigated how the use of professional learning groups (PLGs) supported the professional learning of five new ISTEs and also examined the perspectives of three members of the team responsible for implementing the PLGs. A mixed-methods approach was taken with predominantly qualitative and some quantitative information gathered from on-line surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Broadly, the study's findings suggested that ISTEs do find the transition into their new role difficult and that the PLGs were a relevant structure to support their professional learning and induction. The findings also identified factors related to the broader area of induction of ISTEs. These were collaboration, observation and feedback related to ISTE practice and the leadership and facilitation of the PLG.

This study's findings support research that concluded PLGs had the potential to strengthen professional learning and that there were conditions that were necessary for this to occur. The first was the purpose of the PLG related to the PLG as part of a larger induction structure. The second was what occurred in the PLG including the

composition of the PLG and the environment that was necessary within the PLGs for them to be effective.

Finally, the findings are presented relating to the ISTE's' and the Implementation Team's perspective on the continuation of the PLGs to support the professional learning of new ISTE's.

The findings support research that proposed the transition into new professional roles was stressful and that an induction process that met educators' needs was vital to positively support the transition.

The findings culminate in five recommendations and three suggestions for further research.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE CHAPTER

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the background to and reasons for this study. The chapter is divided into nine sections; the introduction, focus of the study, the rationale for the study, myself as a researcher, the research question, an outline of the induction process at University of X School Support Services (XSSS) to the end of 2007, clarification about the terms ‘problem of practice’ and ‘professional learning progressions’ used in this study, and finally an outline of the thesis structure.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

For over thirty years the Ministry of Education (MOE) in New Zealand has funded the continuing professional development of graduated teachers, known as in-service teachers, primarily through School Support Services that are located within universities throughout New Zealand.

The support is delivered by In-service Teacher Educators (ISTEs), traditionally called Advisors or Facilitators. ISTEs support teachers, principals and management in Early Childhood Centres and schools to critically reflect on and improve their practice, where necessary.

While ISTEs have been educational practitioners themselves, the role they adopt as an ISTE is different to that of teacher or principal. For example the age groups that teachers and ISTEs work with are different. Teachers work mainly with children and adolescents, while ISTEs work primarily with adults. Another example of difference is the setting that each group works in. Teachers generally work within one physical location and one institutional culture. They also focus on

the same group of learners as do the other colleagues in the school. On the other hand ISTE's work in many different physical locations and institutional cultures. ISTE's and their colleagues will not necessarily be focussing on the same group of learners.

“ISTEs in New Zealand work in a complex and rapidly changing environment. Within this dynamic setting, ISTE’s fundamental purpose remains constant: to support teachers to learn and improve their practice in ways that will lead to improved student outcomes” (MOE, 2008, p. 13).

FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

The focus of this study was to explore how well a professional learning group (PLG) structure supported ISTE's to transition into their new role when they joined University of X School Support Services (XSSS). The PLGs were used as a framework for all ISTE's in XSSS to critically reflect on their practice. The research focus was on five new ISTE's and their experiences of being members of a professional learning group. In addition to the new ISTE's' perspectives, I also investigated the perspectives of three members of the Implementation Team responsible for the implementation of the PLGs.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

There were two perspectives that provided the rationale for this study; the national perspective and local perspective.

National perspective

“Recent research indicates that what teachers know and do is the important influence on what students learn ... [therefore]... professional development [for teachers] is moving to centre stage as the primary vehicle for enhancing student learning outcomes”

(Ingvarson, 2003, p.1). Ingvarson (2003) proposed that an important element for improving student learning outcomes is to invest in teacher knowledge and skill. These points are supported by New Zealand research, for example Alton-Lee (2003), and Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, and Richardson (2003). This research indicates that teacher knowledge and skill need to be developed in several areas. Examples of these areas are; content knowledge, that is, the 'what' to teach, pedagogical knowledge, that is, the 'how' to teach it, and the relationships that are necessary for teachers to establish with students and families or whānau. It follows that if the professional development for teachers is to be effective it must be of a high quality and delivered by skilled facilitators or ISTE's. Piggot-Irvine (2007) identified that ISTE's need to be continually reflecting upon, evaluating and improving the professional development programmes that they facilitate, to ensure that these programmes are effective in building the capability of in-service teachers.

However when an educator becomes an ISTE, training for their new role varies considerably from one institution to another. At the time of writing, 2008, there were some national approaches to ISTE induction in certain learning areas, but not across all School Support Services for all ISTE's. Viskovic (2003) identified that few new tertiary educators, as ISTE's are, received training for their role and mainly learnt 'on-the-job.'

These were the factors at a national level that influenced this study, but there were also local factors that had influence. These are discussed in the following section.

Local perspective

I have been an ISTE for over five years. The need for evidence in the area of supporting the professional learning of new ISTE's was apparent to me in 2005 when I became involved in planning and

implementing the 'Induction Programme' for new ISTEes within XSSS. In 2006 I participated in In-service Teacher Education Practice Project (INSTEP). This was a MOE "... research and development project about the learning and practice of advisers, facilitators, resource teachers, and other in-service teacher educators" MOE (2006). For me, INSTEP highlighted the importance of professional learning for ISTEes.

The overall aim of the XSSS INSTEP project was to "... raise the quality of teaching and therefore student achievement by improving the quality of ISTE practice" (Pym, 2007, p.5). There were two main components to this research. The first was the use of PLGs, or pods as they were termed, as a "structure to enhance the sustainability of an ISTE professional learning community within [XSSS]" (Pym, 2007, p.5). The second component was the "...use of professional learning progressions to support the professional practice of ISTEes and to guide an individual's professional learning..." (Pym, 2007, p.5).

In 2007 I was privileged to be a PLG leader and as the year progressed I began to see new ISTEes undertaking professional learning in a way that I had not previously seen. Consequently, I became interested in how well the PLG structure supported the professional learning and induction of new ISTEes.

As a result of being involved in INSTEP and a PLG leader, I realised there was an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge related to supporting ISTE professional learning and induction. This research has the potential to be of benefit to a number of groups. The first groups are XSSS and MOE, because it provides evidence of the effectiveness of PLGs in relation to the professional learning and induction of new ISTEes. Therefore it has the potential to inform future policies and practices within XSSS and MOE. A second benefit is for future ISTEes within XSSS because the findings of this research may be used to inform induction and professional learning

programmes to meet ISTE needs. A final potential benefit was to the ISTEes in this research because it was an opportunity for them to reflect on and learn from their experiences.

MYSELF AS A RESEARCHER

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that we view the world through our own lenses of “language, gender, class, race and ethnicity” (p.24). Therefore the experiences that we have influence the choice of topic for research and how the findings are interpreted (Mutch, 2005), hence the need for the researcher to be open and transparent about their experiences and clarify the values that are held as a result of those experiences.

I am a 52 year old, middle class, married, pakeha woman with no children. I was born in New Zealand. My mother was born in New Zealand and my father had emigrated from England with his family when he was a boy. My paternal grandmother, who was born in England, had a considerable influence on me when I was growing up.

Even though I grew up in a working class family, the ‘family friends’ came from a variety of walks of life and ‘class,’ ranging from doctors to coalminers. This, along with strong Labour political views in the household and parents that were accepting of everyone, established a strong sense of all people being equal, a belief that I strongly hold today. I also have the belief that if everyone is equal, then so too are their views and perspectives, with no one perspective being able to be judged more right or wrong than the other. I believe that it is important to acknowledge that there are always a variety of views and perspectives on any given situation. This belief was fundamental in my choice of research methods.

Vocationally I have been involved in education for 33 years, with 23 of those as a primary school teacher. While I was a ‘generalist’ teacher, that is a teacher of all subjects, it was Social Studies and Health that were my passion. People and relationships are at the core of both of these areas.

I have been an ISTE with XSSS since 1998, with the majority of this time being involved in delivering professional development to teachers in the areas of Social Studies, Health and Student Wellbeing. Again, these areas are very people and relationship orientated.

These life and vocational experiences have influenced my choice of research question and methods.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Due to the lack of New Zealand based research relating to new ISTE professional learning, my own observations of ISTE’s transitioning into XSSS, my involvement in INSTEP and the ISTE induction programme in XSSS the following research question was developed.

Research question: How well do the structures of the professional learning groups used by XSSS support the learning needs of new In-service Teacher Educators?

The structures explored were:

- Peer observation and feedback of ISTE practice
- Sharing of philosophy of practice and elements of practice within the learning groups
- Facilitation of the group, including activities used within the groups.

The question was designed to fulfil the aims of the research. These were to investigate the research question and to use the findings to inform future professional development programmes for ISTE's within XSSS.

INDUCTION PROCESS TO 2007

Historically there have been induction processes within the wider institution of University X for a number of years. These have been for all new staff, regardless of the department that they belong to. Generally these have focussed on new employees gaining operational knowledge relating to the institution, for example employment agreements, ethical behaviour and information about the institution's identity. The length of these sessions have varied from an hour to a day. Depending on when a new employee started, this option may not have been available to them and they may have had to rely on information in a handbook, on the intranet, people around them or finding out for themselves.

Since 2005, XSSS had been endeavouring to implement an induction programme that focused primarily on ISTE practice, but also included opportunities for the operational knowledge required by ISTE's to be gained. Prior to 2007, there was an induction day at the beginning of the year for new ISTE's before all XSSS ISTE's met for two days. During the year the group of new ISTE's met on two to three additional occasions and were joined by any new ISTE's that may have been employed since the beginning of the year.

In 2007, as well as being part of the induction programme, new ISTE's were also members of the XSSS PLG's focussing on ISTE practice and using professional learning progressions designed to map shifts in ISTE practice. "[The professional learning progressions] allowed the ISTE's, with the [PLG leader] and other ISTE's, to identify gaps in

knowledge and practice in order to identify next learning steps” (Pym, 2007, p.16). To focus on their practice ISTE were required to select an element of their practice that they wanted to investigate more closely. This was termed their ‘problem of practice’. The terms ‘problem of practice’ and ‘professional learning progressions’ are clarified in the following section.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRESSIONS

The term ‘problem of practice’ was first used in XSSS in relation to the INSTEP research. A problem of practice is something that the ISTE is interested in finding out more about in relation to their practice. It does not necessarily have to be a problem. “Looking at practice in this way helps teachers or ISTE to surface the assumptions underlying their decisions and can lead to improved practice” (MOE, 2008, p.28).

The professional learning progressions were developed within XSSS and were designed to map shifts in ISTE knowledge and practice and identify their next professional learning steps (Pym, 2007). The professional learning progressions related to the principles of ISTE practice within the INSTEP material and were a series of progressive statements, with indicators, to describe what ISTE practice might be like at each stage. At the time of writing the professional learning progressions had not been used outside of XSSS and were confidential to the institution.

Having introduced the study, the research is structured in a series of Chapters followed by Appendices and References.

THESIS STRUCTURE

Chapter One – Introduction

It has introduced the background to and the reasons for this study as well as my position as a researcher.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

It presents a review of relevant New Zealand and international research to identify training or induction processes that have supported the transition of educators into higher education institutes. This chapter is presented in four sections. The first is research and literature around the experience of individuals transitioning into higher education institutes. The second section focuses on the induction processes in relation to the professional learning of educators in higher education institutes. The third section examines the place of professional learning communities within the induction process. The final section is a chapter summary.

Chapter Three – Research Design

This chapter explores how the research question, relevant theories and my own world view drove the research process. It is presented in six sections. The first section places this study within Social Science Research. The second section presents the research framework underpinning this study, with each stage explored in detail. Then the ethical considerations are presented followed by data gathering, analysis methods and limitations of the research. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Chapter Four – Findings

The chapter begins with an introduction section, followed by the findings. The first part of the findings section relates to the experience of the ISTE's transitioning into XSSS. The second part develops the themes that emerged from the research related to the

induction of new ISTE's. The third part explores the findings related specifically to the PLGs.

Chapter Five – Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the findings of this research related to PLGs and aligns it with relevant literature, considers the implications of the findings, makes recommendations for further action or research and draws the study to a conclusion.

Appendices

Appendices of relevant documentation are included.

References