

The Contribution of Teacher Education in Singapore to the Development of Teacher Competencies and Identity

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. Initial Teacher Education programmes can have a stronger focus on targeted teacher competencies
2. A supportive and collegial school environment can help retain teachers
3. A prolonged school teaching experience to strengthen theory-practice nexus

BACKGROUND

Literature review indicates that current Singaporean research on initial teacher education (ITE) is limited in number and scope and tends to be highly fragmented. There has been little attention paid to programme design and implementation and their impact on student teacher learning. Internationally, studies that track teachers' development of competencies and identity from pre-ITE to ITE, and into their first few years of school teaching are also lacking. There is therefore an urgent need to establish a chain of evidence that links teacher education to the development of teacher professional competencies and identity.

FOCUS OF STUDY

The core purpose of the two-phase project is to account for and characterise the development of teachers' professional competencies and identity during ITE and into their early career. Specifically, we track student teachers' learning

experiences from pre-ITE (e.g. contract teaching and Enhanced School Experience) to ITE (e.g. ITE courses and practicum) and into their 1st and 2nd years of school teaching (teaching experiences and professional development). Findings from this study hope to provide informative empirical evidence for enhancing pre-service teacher learning and in-service teacher professional learning and in so doing, strengthen the pre-service (ITE) and in-service continuum.

KEY FINDINGS

Teacher competencies: Survey results showed statistically significant increases in perceived levels of key professional competencies including pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), classroom management, use of ICT in teaching, and reflection from Entry to ITE to Exit from ITE, indicating the positive contribution of their 1-year pre-service learning. Our results suggest that the one-year PGDE programme serves as a good start and a solid foundation for developing student teachers' professional competencies. Specifically, PCK had the most gains while reflection had the least. The data showed no significant difference in terms of Beginning Teachers' (BTs) perceived levels of professional competencies in the first two years of teaching. Our results suggest that the competencies acquired by BTs in their pre-service programmes remains fairly stable even after

two years of teaching. However, enhancing BTs' competencies in the first two years of teaching seems to be difficult. BTs' interpretations of the major challenges included: gap between theories learnt in NIE and practical situations in schools, higher expectations and different understandings of teacher competencies, and constraints in trying what is learnt in NIE due to busy schedules or other constraints.

Teacher identity: BTs' perceived competence to function well as a teacher increased significantly from Entry to ITE to Exit from ITE. It dropped significantly in BTs' first year of teaching in school, and increased again in their second year of school teaching. This suggests that ITE learning has built up participants' confidence to be a competent teacher. However, their perceived joy and pride in being a teacher and intention to stay in the teaching profession have dropped significantly from Entry to Exit point, and to Year 1 of teaching. Fortunately, there was a slight increase in Year 2 in these domains. Interviews with BTs showed that they enjoyed teaching; what they did not enjoy was non-teaching related workload and expectations. The gap between expectations and teaching realities partly explain the reduced job enjoyment and intention to stay. Interview data suggested that teachers remained in the profession mainly because of their students. However, school culture and work environment also seemed to play an important role in boosting teacher's job satisfaction and retention.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for Practice

- ITE programmes can have a stronger focus on desired targeted competencies in order to ensure growth in these competencies.

Offloading teachers with less administrative work and cultivating a supportive and collegial school environment may help retain teachers.

Implications for Policy and Research

- A prolonged school teaching experience (e.g. contract teaching, practicum) may help teacher candidates and student teachers better understand the multiple roles and responsibilities that teachers need to fulfil, and better prepare them to face the various challenges in real teaching contexts.
- More efforts can be made to ensure that competent teachers stay in the profession.
- Future projects can investigate whether a programme of a longer duration would bring more gains in teacher competency development.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for findings reported here were 450 student teachers of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) cohort (July 2012 intake), who were then beginning teachers (BTs) in Primary and Secondary schools and Junior Colleges

RESEARCH DESIGN

The projects adopt a cross-sectional (involving NIE Year 1-4 degree student teachers) and longitudinal design (involving BTs who were NIE PGDE student teachers). Main research methods include online surveys and individual interviews. Findings reported here draw from the longitudinal survey and interview data. Participants were surveyed and interviewed four times: when they entered and exited the PGDE programme, and during the 1st and 2nd years of teaching.

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