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Acknowledgement of Reviewers

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TEACHERS CHANGING CLASS LEVELS: A PLATFORM FOR SHAPING PEDAGOGIES

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Abstract

Teachers changing class levels is common practice in many New Zealand primary schools; however, it is not always seen as a platform for shaping pedagogies. In order to manage the change to a new class level teachers are compelled to reflect on many of their established practices. Engaging in this reflection can help teachers to see their practice "in a new light" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 30) and provide them with a platform to shape their pedagogy.

This article reports on the findings of a study that focused on the experiences of four teachers who each changed class levels. It illustrates how these teachers engaged in critical reflection on their practice and pedagogy as they negotiated the change to a new class level. The benefits from teachers engaging in this reflection when they change class levels are outlined, and the importance of being supported through this change is highlighted.

Key words

Teachers, class levels, change, practice, pedagogies

Introduction

Many teachers change class levels in primary schools in New Zealand, and for them it is common practice. However, it is often seen more as an administrative requirement rather than an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice and pedagogy. This article reports on the findings of a study which focused on the experiences of four teachers who each changed class levels in primary schools in New Zealand. The following overarching question guided this study:

What experiences have teachers had of changing class levels in primary schools during the span of their teaching careers?

My interest in this topic derived from my own experiences as a parent and teacher. For me, the experience of changing class levels provided an opportunity to engage in critical reflection and challenged many of my existing practices and pedagogy. I engaged in reflection at a deeper level than I had previously and this resulted in some of the most enriching professional growth and learning I had experienced as a teacher. Engaging in this ongoing critical reflection enabled me to see my practice of teaching in a different class level in a new way and shaped my teaching pedagogy (Brookfield, 1995).

Although I was an experienced teacher, my prior teaching skills and knowledge did not necessarily mean I would find it easy to adjust to a new class level, and certainly did not guarantee me a smooth change (Bullough, 2008). New class levels present many challenges, as Fullan and Hargreaves highlight: "Grade levels present very different contexts" (2002, p. 6). When I changed levels some of the challenges I faced were around communication, expectations, and relationships. In order to manage these challenges I was compelled to reflect on many of my established practices and find ways to adapt in my new class level. In addition, the support from mentors within a positive school culture ensured that I was able to be successful in my new class level and to continue to grow and learn. My own experiences, and also observations of others changing levels, led me to consider if other teachers' experiences were similar to mine, and if this had helped them to also shape their teaching pedagogy.

This article begins with a review of the literature about teachers changing class levels and the importance of teachers engaging in critical reflection to help them negotiate this change. This is followed by an outline of the research design, including methodology, methods, and a discussion

about the participants. Next, the findings of the study are discussed and concluding comments are presented.

Review of the literature

A review of the literature indicated that while there is a limited amount of literature about teachers changing class levels, there is considerable research about teachers changing schools, sectors, or countries. This literature has been drawn on for the purposes of this review.

Literature such as Feldman (2005) suggests that adapting to a new setting requires teachers to engage in critical reflection about themselves and their teaching practice. In her self-study about her experiences of teaching in a new setting, Feldman explored the complicated nature of professional identity, knowledge, and teaching, and described the experience as a time for deep inner reflection (2005). She outlines how changing settings enabled her to see her "new situation as 'other', with a stranger's eyes" (Feldman, 2005, p. 49). It seems that when teachers reflect on their identity and practice in this way they develop the skills and confidence to make important decisions about their teaching practice (Walkington, 2005). Newell, Tallman and Letcher (2009) agree and claim that moving among and between different settings enables teachers to develop a deep understanding of themselves and their students, and this helps them to successfully negotiate the change. Moreover, Bullough (2008) suggests that changing settings can provide opportunities for teachers to push personal boundaries. Seah (2003) contends that this can help them to "sustain their professional health" (p. 10). Likewise, Carlyon and Fisher (2012) suggest that there are clear benefits for teachers when they change class levels as "they bring a greater openness to new learning and they bring wisdom to their craft" (p. 76). Changing class levels is a particular example of how changing to a different setting can provide teachers with opportunities to develop their practice and shape their pedagogy.

The literature suggests that the practice of changing settings, such as class level, may well provide opportunities for teachers to engage in critical reflection that has many benefits for them. The importance of teachers engaging in critical reflection to support their growth and learning has long been acknowledged (Brookfield, 1995; Kottler, Zehm, & Kottler, 2005; Nieto, 2003; Schon, 1983). According to Fullan (2003), teachers need to develop the habits and skills of continuous inquiry and learning for positive professional change to take place. Gibbs (2006) agrees, and has highlighted how engaging in reflection with others will help teachers to become critical thinkers and enable them to become more inter-connected with others. He describes "inspirational teachers" as those who are consciously committed to engaging in reflecting on their values and beliefs to gain deeper insights. Seminal authors such as Schon (1983) and Palmer (1998) advocate that teachers engage in ongoing critical reflection to understand themselves and their own practice.

Brookfield (1995) asserts that critically reflective teachers "have their practice grounded in a clearly understood rationale" (p. 266) and suggests that although critical reflection begins alone, it is ultimately a shared endeavour. The four critically reflective lenses through which he suggests teachers can view their teaching are their autobiographies as learners and teachers, their students' eyes, their colleagues' experiences, and theoretical literature. Smith (2002) agrees with Brookfield's suggestions and adds that as teachers engage in reflection in this way they gain a "sense of power in their teaching" (p. 34).

The literature clearly indicates that it is important for teachers to engage in critical reflection and this is a way to enhance their growth and learning. It also shows that when teachers change sites, such as class levels, they engage in reflection to understand their own practice and to ensure they are meeting the needs of different groups of students. Work by Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) and Timperley (2005), among others, leaves us in little doubt that growth and learning such as this supports teaching practice. As teachers' understanding of their own teaching practice develops they become adept at "cueing and retrieving prior knowledge and developing an awareness of new information" (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008, p. xv). Furthermore, both Katz (1995) and Moir (1999) posit that teachers need growth and learning during the different development stages of their careers in order to stay challenged. According to Moir (1999), the stages that all teachers go through are anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, reflection, and then back to anticipation again. Although the time spent in each stage may vary greatly between teachers, it is widely accepted that when teachers move into the later stages they are ready for new challenges to

gain new perspectives and embrace the broader social context of education (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). Certainly, whatever stage of development teachers may be in, engaging in critical reflection will help them to "take informed action, develop a rationale for practice, avoid self-laceration, ground emotionally, enliven classrooms, and increase democratic trust (Brookfield, 1995, p. 265).

The research

Methodology & methods

A case study approach grounded in interpretive methodology was deemed most appropriate for the study because it allowed me as the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of how the participants experienced changing class levels. This is supported by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), who assert that interpretive researchers aim to "portray participants' lived experiences of thoughts about and feelings for a situation" (p. 254). Furthermore, a case study approach focuses on providing a rich description of a bounded case (Mutch, 2005), such as teachers changing class levels.

Qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews for the study. The participants were each involved in one in-depth interview during which they shared their experiences of changing class levels in primary schools. Questions pertaining to demographic information were asked at the beginning of the interview, such as years of teaching, year levels taught and for how long. However, the majority of the questions were open-ended to allow the participants to talk freely and share their experiences. This enabled me as the researcher to gather rich data from the participants about changing class levels, and build a clear picture of what this was like for each of them. The open-ended questions allowed free interaction and discussion, which also enabled me to follow hunches and explore unexpected lines of inquiry during the interviews. All the interviews were digitally recorded in addition to field notes being taken.

From the recordings and field notes a draft summary of each interview was written. These were then checked by each participant to ensure they were an accurate representation of their experiences. Following this, a thematic analysis approach was used to examine the summaries for patterns and themes in order to develop them into findings (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006).

Participants

Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to preserve the participants' anonymity. The participants for the study comprised four teachers who had all changed class levels in primary schools in New Zealand. They were selected from a list of possible teachers collated from my knowledge of primary schools in the Waikato region through my own teaching and leadership networks, and University of Waikato liaison work. The number of years the participants had been teaching varied from three to 18 years, and the schools they had taught in varied from small two-teacher rural schools to large urban schools.

Each of the participants' change in class levels was significant, with three of them having experienced teaching all primary school levels. One participant had taught at junior and senior levels but not in the middle school. These changes in class levels varied somewhat but included changes such as from level one to level four; level two to level three; level four to level two; level three to level one. Abby, Bronwyn, Chloe, and Debbie, the participants in the study, had all changed class levels for a variety of reasons which included initiating the change themselves, being asked to by the principal, and because of relocation and moving to a new school.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the study indicate that changing class levels appears to require and encourage teachers to engage in the kind of ongoing critical reflection that has been identified by Brookfield (1995). It appears that teachers can benefit from engaging in this kind of reflection when they change levels, although the findings also show that it is important that they are supported through these changes. Two benefits that emerged from the findings as being significant for all participants were that their teaching practice improved, as did their ability to manage different learning environments.

However, they all identified that this was due to the support that they had received when they had changed class levels. As such, these findings are presented under the following headings: improved teaching practice, managing different learning environments, and the importance of support.

Improved teaching practice

A key finding in the study was that when teachers change class levels this can result in improved teaching practice. When teachers change levels this involves new ways of planning, developing new programmes, and understanding the needs of children who are from different age groups. Fullan (1993) describes change such as this as complex and asserts that it requires new skills, behaviour, beliefs, and understanding. All four participants in the study described their experience as positive and felt that their teaching practice had improved significantly as a result of changing class levels. Although their reasons for changing levels varied, they all spoke enthusiastically about their experiences, with comments such as:

> There were definitely benefits for me from moving levels. The experiences have been huge. (Abby)

> It's been good. I think it helps you to gain respect from other staff members when you are willing to change class levels. (Bronwyn)

> I think transitioning between different class levels is a good thing, it keeps you up-skilled. (Chloe)

> I think it's good. When you are actually there doing it, it's really not all that hard. (Debbie)

The participants acknowledged that they felt it necessary to engage in reflection when they changed levels and to re-evaluate many aspects of their previous teaching beliefs and practices (Cowley, 1996). This enabled them to further develop their teacher identity and challenge their existing practices and personal philosophies (Walkington, 2005). By reflecting in this way they were able to find ways to adjust and adapt their practice in their new class and believed that this helped them to improve their teaching practice. The following comment by Chloe is typical of how changing levels prompted the participants to engage in critical reflection:

> I have had to rethink about how I teach. I had programmed myself the last two years in a standard way—this is the way I teach, this is what I do and now I have had to rethink reading, writing, maths, everything. I had become quite confident in my teaching and now I feel a bit like, is this right, is this wrong? I now question myself and my knowledge of lower levels. I now think, did I let the children down who were working below level 3?

From engaging in critical reflection such as this the participants were also able to gain a greater understanding of how students worked at different levels and they explained how they found themselves referring to the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) more frequently. Abby explained, "I wouldn't have looked beyond the level 1/2/3 when I was teaching new entrants–year 4. I was probably honing in on that area and I would have seen that level 4 as the next teachers' job." Likewise Bronwyn said, "We need to understand what it is like at all levels, we cannot build a school if we only have one view or are only coming in from one aspect of the curriculum." This indicates the participants were lifelong learners who were willing to adapt to their new context (Newell et al., 2009).

As the participants used the curriculum document more frequently they became more confident about modifying activities to meet the needs of all students. This is reflected in the following comments: "It gives you a good idea of teaching across the levels … you can't just give them baby books" (Debbie). "You understand where they have got to get to and where they should have come from" (Abby). "You can have a 12-year-old who is working at level 2. But you have to know how to make it fit or appeal for the older student" (Bronwyn).

The participants felt that having an increased knowledge of different curriculum levels helped them to be much more resourceful and better able to modify material to meet the learning needs of all students.

They developed the capacity for exercising sound judgement when having to "decide between a range of pedagogical options" (Hoyle & John, 1995, p. 123). This indicates how changing class levels can provide "a context rich in possibilities, but individual teachers must choose to act upon them if professional growth is to result" (Bullough & Baughman, 1995, p. 475).

Managing different learning environments

Changing levels can be complicated and present challenges for teachers, such as managing a different learning environment (Feldman, 2005; Seah, 2003). As Timperley et al. (2008) have pointed out, even if a teacher has expertise in one situation or level this does not necessarily mean they can translate that into another. Bullough and Baughman (1997) agree, and add that teachers need to adapt their expectations and practices with each new context. For the participants, managing a different learning environment was an area that initially presented some challenges. Chloe felt that when she first changed levels she didn't have the necessary classroom management skills required for teaching junior students: "I have had to learn the nurturing aspect very quickly. I was scared I was going to be really tough on the students and I wouldn't have the patience with younger children." In contrast, Debbie felt nervous about changing from a junior class to a senior class:

> I was very scared and thought I was going to fail completely. The higher level freaked me out and what the children were capable of. I thought they weren't going to listen to me, but they didn't say boo … I have now got more strategies and self-confidence to deal with challenges that are thrown at me.

These comments show how teachers can lack confidence when interacting with students from different class levels and some may feel vulnerable in this situation (Bullough, 2005). However, by reflecting on their management strategies and adapting their expectations and practices the participants showed that they were able to gain greater confidence to work with all students. This aligns with Newell et al. (2009), who suggest that teachers need to develop strategies to enable them to successfully change to a new setting.

The participants also shared observations they had made of other teachers who lacked confidence when interacting with students from different levels. Bronwyn made the following insightful comment:

> I think teachers of junior children are often intimidated by older children. It is the behaviour management side that they are worried about. I thought when I taught Year 5 and 6 that Year 7 and 8 children were stroppy. Once you are in that older level I notice the older children can be quite rude to the teachers of junior children where they wouldn't be to teachers of senior children. They often don't respect these teachers, or maybe the teachers don't respect them either. Duty time is where I notice it. They [the teachers of junior children] don't want to deal with issues and will come and find the team leaders or DP to manage the situation. I don't know if the junior teachers come in too heavy or don't listen to the children or what.

After changing levels the participants all felt they had become much more confident and connected with all students, both inside and outside the classroom. As they learnt about the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students they felt they gained a much broader understanding of their learning needs and the school as a learning community (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). The following comments indicate this: "You broaden your whole spectrum of teaching" (Abby). "To be a whole school everyone needs to be there as a team and not just worrying about their own little area" (Bronwyn). Debbie said changing class levels gave her "a good connection and understanding of the whole school". This suggests that the participants moved from being restricted professionals who tend not to see their class within the wider school, to extended professionals who are concerned with locating their classroom teaching in a broader sense (Hoyle & John, 1995).

The importance of support

Although changing levels was an empowering experience for the participants, it also presented a number of challenges and they all acknowledged the importance of support to help them manage

these. Support can be provided in many forms, but in particular the participants identified school leaders and mentors as personnel that could provide it. This aligns with the findings of Carlyon and Fisher (2012), who posit that school leaders play an integral role when teachers change class levels. Others agree, particularly when teachers are asked to change levels, that it is important that leaders provide support and work in a collaborative manner with them (Fennell, 2005; Harris, 2003; Storey, 2004; Timperley, 2005).

Some schools leaders have the skills to create the kind of culture in which change is embraced and teachers are encouraged and supported to change class levels. Two of the participants had experienced such a culture and said that they knew they would be asked to change levels in these schools. Bronwyn described this as a "given" and Debbie believed this was because her principal felt teachers "became stale". When schools have a culture such as this it creates a myriad of opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their practice, makes good connections between teachers, and builds strong teams (Carlyon & Fisher, 2012).

Teachers who change to a new class level face challenges which may include new ways of planning, forming relationships with different age groups, and understanding new cultures (Bullough & Baughman, 1995). The participants described how they were supported and Debbie talked about how she was "encouraged to spend time in the Year 7 and 8 classes before I moved and I started looking at the resources and asking questions of the teachers in the area". Likewise Bronwyn said, "You are able to go and spend time in the class and observe other teachers too" and Abby said, "We worked quite closely together … it made the transition quite easy". In the study it was evident that accomplished mentors had empowered the participants to change class levels and supported them to cope with the challenges associated with the change. It was evident that mentors were sensitive to the teachers' individual needs and were able to help them "develop and sustain expertise" (Kitchen, 2009, p. 54).

Concluding comments

The study showed that when teachers change class levels they feel compelled to engage in critical reflection on their teaching practice and pedagogy. Engaging in critical reflection helps teachers to find ways to adapt and adjust their practice, and create personal solutions to the challenges that different class levels present (Larrivee, 2000). As Brookfield (1995) asserts, critically reflective teachers know that teaching well "requires a continual willingness to rethink and experiment with teaching" (p. 265). When teachers change levels and critically reflect in this way this provides them with opportunities for personal and professional growth (Katz, 1995; Moir, 1999), and they can benefit in terms of improved teaching practice and being more capable at managing different learning environments.

However, the study also showed that changing class levels can be challenging for teachers and, as the participants found, can place teachers in positions of vulnerability (Bullough, 2005; Newell et al., 2009; Seah, 2003). Therefore, it is essential that teachers are given good support to ensure they are able to manage the challenges and successfully change levels. School leaders and mentors are well placed to support teachers to negotiate the change and cope with the challenges of changing class levels.

In conclusion, by focusing on the experiences of four teachers who each changed class levels in their primary schools, the study illustrated that changing levels can provide a platform for shaping pedagogies. The study showed that changing class levels can benefit teachers in terms of improved teaching practice and a greater ability to manage different levels. Finally, the importance of support was highlighted as being integral to help teachers manage the challenges associated with changing class levels.

In light of the findings reported in this article it seems pertinent to suggest that all teachers are encouraged to change class levels at some stage of their career as a way to refresh, challenge and critically reflect on their pedagogical decisions and practice. It also raises the following two questions that I consider justify further investigation with a larger cohort of teachers:

1. What outcomes are generated for teachers and other stakeholders from teachers changing class levels?
2. What influence does leadership and school culture have on teachers changing class levels?

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