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Teacher decision-making on post-16 provision in response to reform

Conference Abstract

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Schools in England must navigate constant change due to numerous education reforms. They must react in ways that satisfy relevant stakeholders, in a context of constrained budgets and a growing emphasis on accountability measures. Reforms influence different aspects of the school system, and curriculum and qualification changes in particular are a major concern for teachers (NASUWT, 2017). A recent reform in England was the decoupling of the AS and the A Level qualifications. The reform meant that, rather than the AS Level contributing 50% towards the A Level, it became a standalone qualification (Ofqual, 2018). It is crucial to study the impact of this reform because A Levels are high stakes, the results of which determine admission to university.

In this qualitative investigation, we explored how teachers responded to this reform, by analysing their decision-making processes for post-16 provision. This research is one of the first attempts to examine the impact of this reform. While survey research provided an overview of responses (UCAS, 2018; Vitello & Williamson, 2017), our research complements this by illuminating the processes behind the trends. Our research also complements interview research done by Ofqual (2018), but analyses the impact through a different theoretical lens. Furthermore, it contributes to literature on schools' reactions to reforms and how decisions are negotiated (e.g. Clement, 2014; Goodson, 2001).

We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with teachers involved in post-16 decision-making at a diverse range of schools in England. Despite the small number, the teachers were highly engaged, leading to rich insights. Data collection occurred soon after the reform, when many teachers were still deciding what to do. This enabled us to capture their ambivalence and analyse their decision-making in action. The transcripts were analysed through a lens of decision-making theories (drawing from economics and philosophy) and educational change theories (e.g. Goodson, 2001), using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings showed that teachers, as decision-makers, had to navigate competing demands to make decisions about post-16 provision in response to the reform. We theorised that decision-making occurred through a process of bounded rationality, within an overarching philosophy of utilitarianism (Bentham, 1983; Simon, 1957). Their aim was to maximise benefit for the majority of students, but their decisions were bounded by factors such as resources, personal belief systems, and the availability of information.

The decision process was difficult and many teachers exhibited ambivalence, characterised by a tension between pedagogical and practical factors, and uncertainty over the future of AS Levels. This resulted in some teachers having to enact the reform in ways they did not feel committed to, which as Goodson (2001) explains, contributes to a difficult change process. Some teachers expressed frustration in response to the reform, and in some cases opposed it by maintaining pre-reform models. Others had changed their provision, but lamented the loss of benefits the pre-reformed system had provided. In line with research by Clement (2014), however, some teachers adapted to the reform in positive and creative ways.

Our research shows how the reform was "refracted through each school context" (Goodson, 2001, p.49), leading to different responses. As Richardson and Pearce (2018) noted in the context of e-assessment, "efficiency is not pedagogy", however, financial constraints and accountability pressures in some schools shaped their decision-making. Similar to Vincent's (2018) research showing how schools enact policies rather than implement them, leading to divergences between what was intended and what is practised, schools may respond to reforms in ways not intended by policy makers. It is important for teachers and policy makers to reflect on the enactment of this particular reform to assess the outcomes, and this research will help them to do so.

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