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Supporting beginning teachers in urban environments

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CHAPTER 1

General introduction

Teacher retention is a considerable problem in many countries, in particular in urban areas (e.g., Ingersoll, 2003; Olsen & Anderson, 2007). In the Netherlands, the four major cities (Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague and Rotterdam) have more problems in fulfilling teaching jobs than other parts of the Netherlands (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, 2012; Participation Fund, 2012). In the school year 2010-2011, the unfilled vacancy-intensity, which is the percentage of vacancies relative to the total employment, was higher in the four major cities than elsewhere in the Netherlands, with Amsterdam ranks highest (Participation Fund, 2012). It also appeared that the outflow of beginning teachers from primary schools is higher in the four major cities than in other parts of the Netherlands (Vrielink, Ruis, & Van der Ploeg, 1997; Berndsen, Gemmeke, Hello, & De Weerd, 2004). The high drop out of beginning teachers is a problem in the Netherlands, because the need for new teachers will increase in the coming years when a large number of teachers will reach the retirement age (CAOP, 2012). In 2020, a great shortage of teachers in primary education is expected, especially in the largest cities of the Netherlands (Centerdata, 2013). For a variety of reasons, including violence and cultural differences, teaching in urban schools is difficult and challenging (Groulx, 2001; Haberman, 1995; Hooge, 2008; Smith & Smith, 2006). This can lead to an outflow of teachers from these schools and from education in general.

This research focuses on *how beginning teachers can be better equipped for teaching in urban environments, so the chance that they leave teaching after a few years decreases*. Several studies showed that both professional development programmes outside the school and guidance in the workplace itself ('induction') can contribute to the quality and retention of teachers (Gilles, McGlamery, & Davis, 2009). Teachers who participated in support programmes remain longer in the teaching profession and are more successful in their career than teachers who have not participated in such programmes (Gilles, Davis, & MacGlamery, 2009). Nevertheless, it is unknown how to best support and retain teachers in urban environments. Despite several initiatives intended to professionalise and motivate

teachers to teach in urban schools, there are still teacher shortages in urban areas and beginning teachers are more likely to leave urban schools compared with non-urban schools (Berndsen, Gemmeke, Hello, & De Weerd, 2004; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Ingersoll, 2003).

This dissertation reports on different ways of supporting beginning urban teachers. The study starts with an exploration of the specific problems of beginning urban teachers. Thereafter, a professional development programme that aims to better equip teachers for teaching in an urban environment was evaluated. Finally, the study focused on induction in the workplace itself, in particular on the elements of induction that are of great importance for beginning urban teachers.

Conceptual framework

In this study, several lines from the literature come together; research on teaching in urban environments, research on teacher quality and research on teacher professional development.

Teaching in urban environments

Research showed that beginning teachers are more likely to leave urban schools compared with non-urban schools (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Ingersoll, 2003). A major cause of the early outflow of beginning teachers from urban schools is that teaching in an urban environment is difficult and challenging for teachers. Beginning teachers in urban contexts have to deal with the issues that apply to all beginning teachers, such as classroom discipline and a high workload (Abbot, Moran, & Clarke, 2009; Veenman, 1984). In addition, beginning urban teachers have to deal with typical challenges of an urban context, such as dealing with cultural diversity and dealing with an unsafe atmosphere in and around the school (Groulx, 2001; Knoblauch & Woolfolk, 2006).

In contrast to most studies on urban teaching, in this study urban teaching is not only conceptualised as teaching in ‘disadvantaged’ primary schools where students come from culturally diverse and low socio-economic backgrounds. In our study urban teaching also refers to teaching in ‘more advantaged’ primary schools where most students are of Dutch heritage and have highly educated parents, and to teaching in

‘mixed’ primary schools where the student population is a mix of both Dutch pupils and students from culturally diverse backgrounds. This broad definition is used in this study because these different types of primary schools are characteristic of the situation in many large cities in the Netherlands (Hooge, 2008).

Teacher quality

Teaching in an urban environment places heavy and diverse demands on the quality of teachers. This study focused on teacher quality as assessed in terms of the teachers’ competences, professional orientation and self-efficacy.

Teacher competences

As for the quality of teachers, we were in the first place interested in the competences required for working in an urban environment. Teaching in an urban environment demands specific competences of teachers. American research shows that teaching in large cities demands of teachers that they can handle cultural diversity and language deficiencies of children (Olmedo, 1997; Smith & Smith, 2006). Besides, research shows that teachers in urban environments must have collaborative skills; they should be able to build effective relationships with both people in the school (like colleagues) and outside the school (like parents) (Voltz, Collins, Patterson, & Sims, 2007). However, about the Dutch situation is little known at this point; it is not clear what specific problems and competences the work of teachers in the major cities of the Netherlands includes. Although there are several initiatives, from for instance the university teacher training colleges, to formulate competences for teaching in Dutch urban environments, these initiatives are not based on scientific research on teaching in urban environments.

Professional orientation

In today’s society, teachers are expected not only to perform well within their own classroom but also to demonstrate professionalism that extends beyond the classroom. Thus, an extended professional orientation is an important criterion for teacher quality (Mahieu, Forest Diet, & Peene, 1999). Hoyle (1980) distinguishes ‘restricted professionalism’, in which teachers focus primarily on their own classroom and base their actions on experience rather than on theory, from ‘extended professionalism’ in which

teachers are involved in the school organisation and have an interest that extends beyond the classroom. There are indications that job satisfaction of teachers is positively promoted by shared responsibility and mutual support of the team of teachers, which is typical for extended professionalism (Mahieu et al., 1999).

Self-efficacy

Finally, this study focuses on the teachers' self-perceived quality. The study follows the literature on 'teacher efficacy', which is defined as "the teacher's belief in her or his ability to organise and execute the course of actions required to successfully accomplish a specific task in a particular context" (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). Self-efficacy affects not only teacher effort but also the extent to which the teacher can flexibly cope with mistakes and stress from dealing with demanding situations (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Research also indicates that teachers with low self-efficacy are less motivated to experiment with pedagogical innovations/challenges and are more likely to experience burnout than are teachers with high self-efficacy (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2002). Consequently, teachers with lower self-efficacy are more likely to leave the teaching profession because of burnout. Siwatu (2011) found that starting teachers have lower self-efficacy regarding teaching in urban areas than regarding teaching in suburban areas. In other words, beginning teachers believe that they are less capable of teaching in urban schools. According to Siwatu (2011), it is conceivable that teachers in urban areas who doubt their capabilities to manage daily challenges may be the ones who will leave the teaching profession after a few years of teaching.

Teacher professional development

Several studies have shown that professional development programmes can improve teacher quality and teacher retention (Borko, 2004; Gilles, Davis, & MacGlamery, 2009). Teachers who participated in professional development programmes remained in the profession longer than teachers who did not participate in such programmes (Gilles et al., 2009). Professional development programmes could also contribute to teacher retention in urban schools.

Although there is agreement regarding the importance of professional

development programmes, it is not clear what form of professionalisation is most effective for teachers. There is a growing consensus that programmes situated in the workplace are more effective than those situated outside the workplace, though there exists no unequivocal evidence to support this conclusion (Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012).

Recent research shows that the content of a professional development programme appears to be more relevant than the form, and programmes that primarily focus on daily teaching practice seem to have a greater effect on the development of teachers than programmes with a more general focus (Van Veen et al., 2012). A study on new forms of professional development for teachers found that networks of teachers that allow teachers of different schools to exchange and discuss their experiences are promising ways for professional development and job motivation of teachers (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). However, previous research has not taken into account the effects of professional development programmes in different contexts. A specific context in which the professionalisation of teachers must be further investigated is that of the urban educational context (Freedman & Appleman, 2009). Despite several initiatives aimed to professionalise teachers to teach in urban schools, there are still teacher shortages in urban areas and beginning teachers are more likely to leave urban schools compared with non-urban schools (Berndsen et al., 2004; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Ingersoll, 2003).

Professional learning communities

Although several studies showed that professional development programmes can contribute to teachers' quality and retention (Borko, 2004; Gilles, Davis, & MacGlamery, 2009), it also appeared that it is not self-evident that the effects of professional development programmes will be maintained in the longer term. Previous research showed that professional development interventions should be permanent and lasting to become and remain effective, for instance by creating follow-up activities (Yoon, 2009; Desimone, 2009).

According to several studies, the creation of a professional learning community (PLC) in schools is a promising way to promote continuous professional development of teachers (Little, 2006). PLC's refer to close relationships between teachers, usually with the implication that these relationships are oriented toward teacher professional

development (Little, 2006). Strong PLC's are characterised by an overall vision in which the learning of teachers is considered to be relevant by both school leaders and teachers (Little, 2006). There is a collective focus on and shared responsibility for student learning, collective control over important decisions and collaboration between teachers (Grodsky & Gamoran, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Little, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Teachers in strong PLC's have access to new knowledge about teaching and learning and to the expertise of colleagues from in- and outside their school. They give each other feedback on individual performance and on aspects of classroom and school practice (Little, 2006). Preconditions for the creation of strong PLC's are enough time, materials and space, and access to the expertise of colleagues (Little, 2006). Furthermore, school leaders play an important role; their role is to cultivate PLC's (Stoll, et al., 2006).

Several studies showed positive relations between PLC's in schools and the ongoing professional development of teachers (Little, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Wilson & Berne, 1999). There are also indications that the success of professional development programmes is dependent on the quality of PLC's in schools. At the same time, there are indications that when a school supports teachers' participation in high-quality professional development programmes, this in turn may also strengthen PLC's (Little, 2006).

Although many studies stressed the importance of PLC's in schools for the (ongoing) professional development of teachers and for the success of professional development programmes, little is known about the characteristics of and activities in PLC's that contribute to the sustainability of professional development interventions.

Context of the study

The first two chapters of this study consisted of an evaluation of a professional development programme ('Mastery') for beginning urban teachers. This 'Mastery' programme aimed at preparing beginning teachers for the challenges of teaching in urban primary schools in the Netherlands. The programme which was developed collaboratively by teacher education institutes, had a twofold purpose: to increase the *quality* of teaching and to contribute to the *retention* of beginning teachers in an urban educational context.

The 'Mastery' programme was focused on the acquisition of skills necessary to

meet the challenges of teaching in a complex urban environment - such as collaborating with professionals both inside and outside the school environment, dealing with aggressive behaviour and language deficiencies of children, communicating with parents of different cultural backgrounds - and on developing an extended professional orientation. The programme comprised four modules: 'school and environment', 'safety', 'language' and 'cultural diversity'.

The programme lasted one year and consisted of the following three components: group meetings (these involved theoretical input from experts regarding the four urban themes, opportunities for sharing and discussing experiences and group assignments that connected theory with practical situations), classroom application (participants apply newly gained insights to their teaching practice and discuss their experiences during group meetings) and lectures (in which experts explored substantive themes and linked them to research results). Additionally, supervision was organised, offering a context for beginning teachers to share experiences and expertise.

The city of Amsterdam

The main part of the study was conducted among beginning teachers and principals from urban primary schools in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. Although the number of inhabitants in Amsterdam (approximately 780,000) is not high compared to cities in other countries, Amsterdam is, often as part of the Randstad, considered to be a global city. Schools in global cities are confronted with different types of student populations: there are schools that primarily serve children with a high socio economic status and a native background (the so called 'advantaged schools') and schools with primarily children from a low socio economic status and sometimes also culturally diverse backgrounds (the 'disadvantaged schools'). 'Mixed schools' can also be found, where the student population is a mix of both disadvantaged and advantaged pupils (Hooge, 2008). For our study, we included teachers from both disadvantaged, mixed and advantaged schools because these schools are characteristic for global cities and teachers must be equipped and supported for the situations in these different types of schools. In Table 1, several characteristics of primary education in Amsterdam are presented.

Table 1

Characteristics of primary education in Amsterdam

Teachers	
Gender	The majority of the teachers in Amsterdam are female, 20% of the teachers are male.
Age	Only 5% of the teachers are 24 years old or younger, almost 30% of the teachers are between 45 and 54 years old.
Schools	
Size	An average school in Amsterdam has 293 pupils, the largest school consists of 759 pupils and the smallest school has 57 pupils.
Performance	The average results of the Cito-test (which is a end of primary school test that is annually administered to final year primary school pupils in the Netherlands) in Amsterdam are lower than the average results nationally (534.3 and 535.6 respectively). In 2008, 42 of the 200 primary schools in Amsterdam were evaluated as (very) weak by the Dutch national inspectorate. A cooperation of the municipality and schoolboards was set up to improve the quality of primary education in Amsterdam. In October 2012, only 12 schools were evaluated as (very) weak.
Students	
Distribution boys/girls	In Amsterdam, the distribution of boys to girls among the students is equal.
Students' cultural background	The total student population of the primary schools in Amsterdam consist of students with a native background (37%), students with a non-Western background (52%) such as Moroccan (18%), Turkish (8%), Surinamese (9%) and Antillean (2%) students, and students with non-Dutch Western backgrounds (11%). 21% of the primary schools in Amsterdam have less than 25% students with a non-Western background, 23% of the schools have between 25-50% non-Western students, 18% of the schools have between 50-75% non-Western students, and 39% of the schools have more than 75% non-Western students.
Students' economical background	55% of the primary schools in Amsterdam have less than 25% students from lower SES, 31% of the schools have 25-50% students from lower SES, and 14% of the schools have between 50-75% students from lower SES.

Sources:

Dienst Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling (2012). *Kwaliteitswijzer 2011-2012*. Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam & BBO Amsterdam.

Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs. Retrieved from

http://www.duo.nl/organisatie/open_onderwijsdata/databestanden/po/Leerlingen/default.asp

Problem statement and research questions

As previously stated, the central question of this research project was: How can beginning teachers be better equipped for teaching in urban environments, so the chance that they leave teaching after a few years decreases? This central research question was broken down into the following research questions:

1. What are the problems that beginning teachers encounter in urban primary schools?
2. What is the (long term) contribution of participating in the ‘Mastery’ programme to the quality and retention of beginning teachers in an urban environment?
3. Which characteristics and activities are typical of school organisations in which teachers reported positive longer term effects of the ‘Mastery’ programme?
4. What are characteristics of the support structure and – culture at schools where teachers judge positively or less positively about the support they receive?

Method

To answer the first research question, an exploratory study was conducted using in-depth semi-structured topic interviews with 15 beginning teachers from Dutch urban primary schools. A qualitative research method was selected because we were interested in the perceived problems and the meaning of these problems for the teachers.

The second research question was investigated by using a quasi-experimental design. The contribution of participation in the ‘Mastery’ programme to the different dependent variables was measured using a knowledge test and questionnaires (pre-, post- and retention measures). Multilevel modelling was used to analyse the data. Measurement occasions (level 1) were treated as nested in teachers (level 2). The independent variables in the analyses were condition (‘Mastery’ condition or control condition) and measurement occasion, while the dependent variables were competences, professional orientation, self-efficacy, job motivation, and career choices. To gather complementary information regarding teachers’ evaluation of the programme and to obtain a detailed understanding of the active elements of the programme, interviews were conducted and analysed qualitatively.

The third research question, about the PLC characteristics and activities that are

typical of school organisations in which teachers reported positive longer term effects of the ‘Mastery’ programme, was investigated through interviews with ten teachers who reported positive effects of the ‘Mastery’ programme in the longer term and with their principals. This qualitative method was chosen because we wanted to obtain a detailed understanding of the PLC characteristics and activities that were meaningful for the teachers in that sense that the activities helped the teachers to maintain and/or enhance the longer term effects of the ‘Mastery’ programme.

To answer the last research question, a descriptive study was conducted using 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight beginning teachers and 11 principals from 11 primary schools in Amsterdam. A qualitative research method was chosen because we were interested in the participants’ experiences of the support structure and culture of their school. By using a qualitative method, the participants were able to describe their experiences in detail.

Relevance of the study

The study presented in this dissertation is relevant both from a practical and theoretical perspective. The study provides an overview of some prominent problems faced by beginning urban teachers in different types of urban schools. In contrast to previous studies on urban teaching, this study focused not only on urban schools with disadvantaged student populations, but also on schools with more advantaged and mixed student populations, which makes it possible to get a good overview of the diversity of teaching in urban schools and the diverse problems that urban teachers might experience. The results could be used to develop adequate preparation and support for beginning urban teachers.

Furthermore, the study provides theoretical insights by identifying several elements of professional development and induction programmes that are valuable for beginning urban teachers. The study showed which elements of professional development programmes, professional learning communities and the support structure and –culture of schools are important for beginning urban teachers.

The research provides theoretical and empirical knowledge about the organisation of valuable support practices for beginning teachers in urban environments. The focus in the study was on the European urban educational context, in which little research has

been done before on urban teaching. The results of the study can contribute to the knowledge of teachers educators, educational support services, schools, school boards and researchers about the organisation of valuable support practices for beginning urban teachers. Increased knowledge could lead to a more effective organisation of support practices for beginning urban teachers, which - in turn - could lead to an improvement of the quality and retention of beginning urban teachers.

Outline of the dissertation

The general aim of this dissertation is to provide insight in how beginning urban teachers can be better equipped for teaching in urban environments. In order to achieve this aim, four studies were conducted.

Chapter 2 reports on an in-depth study of the problems encountered by 15 beginning teachers who worked at a primary school in Amsterdam or Utrecht (Research Question 1). Semi-structured interviews were used to find out what problems beginning teachers perceived in urban primary schools. The study provides an overview of prominent problems faced by beginning teachers in urban schools.

Chapter 3 reports on an evaluation of a professional development programme ('Mastery') that aimed to improve the quality and retention of beginning teachers in an urban environment (Research Question 2). The contribution of the Mastery-programme to 66 primary school teachers' competences, self-efficacy, professional orientation, job motivation and career choices was examined by using a quasi-experimental design and interviews. A knowledge test, questionnaires and interviews were used to determine the contribution of the Mastery-programme to the dependent variables. These instruments were used to perform measurements on three occasions, namely: a pre-test, a post-test and a retention test to examine the short-term as well as the long-term effects of the programme. The results of the short-term effects are presented in chapter 3, the effects of the long-term effects in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 reports on the long-term effects of the Mastery-programme (Research Question 2) and the PLC characteristics and activities that were undertaken in school organisations where teachers reported positive long term effects of the programme (Research Question 3). The long-term effects were investigated in a quasi-experimental design, whereas the PLC characteristics and activities were examined through interviews.

Ten teachers who reported positive long term effects of the Mastery-programme and their principals were interviewed.

Chapter 5 contains a report on a descriptive study of the induction of beginning teachers at urban primary schools (Research Question 4). This study aimed to gain insight into the support structure and culture for beginning teachers at urban primary schools. Beginning teachers and principals from 11 urban primary schools were interviewed about the support structure and culture at their school. The sample included schools where beginning teachers judged positively or less positively about the support that they received. Based on a comparison between the schools where teachers judged positively or less positively about the support practice, valuable elements of the support structure and culture were identified.

Chapter 6 presents and discusses the main results of the studies in this dissertation. Furthermore, the limitations of the study and implications for future research and educational practice are considered.

Schematic overview

Figure 1.1 provides a graphical overview of the research project reported in this dissertation.

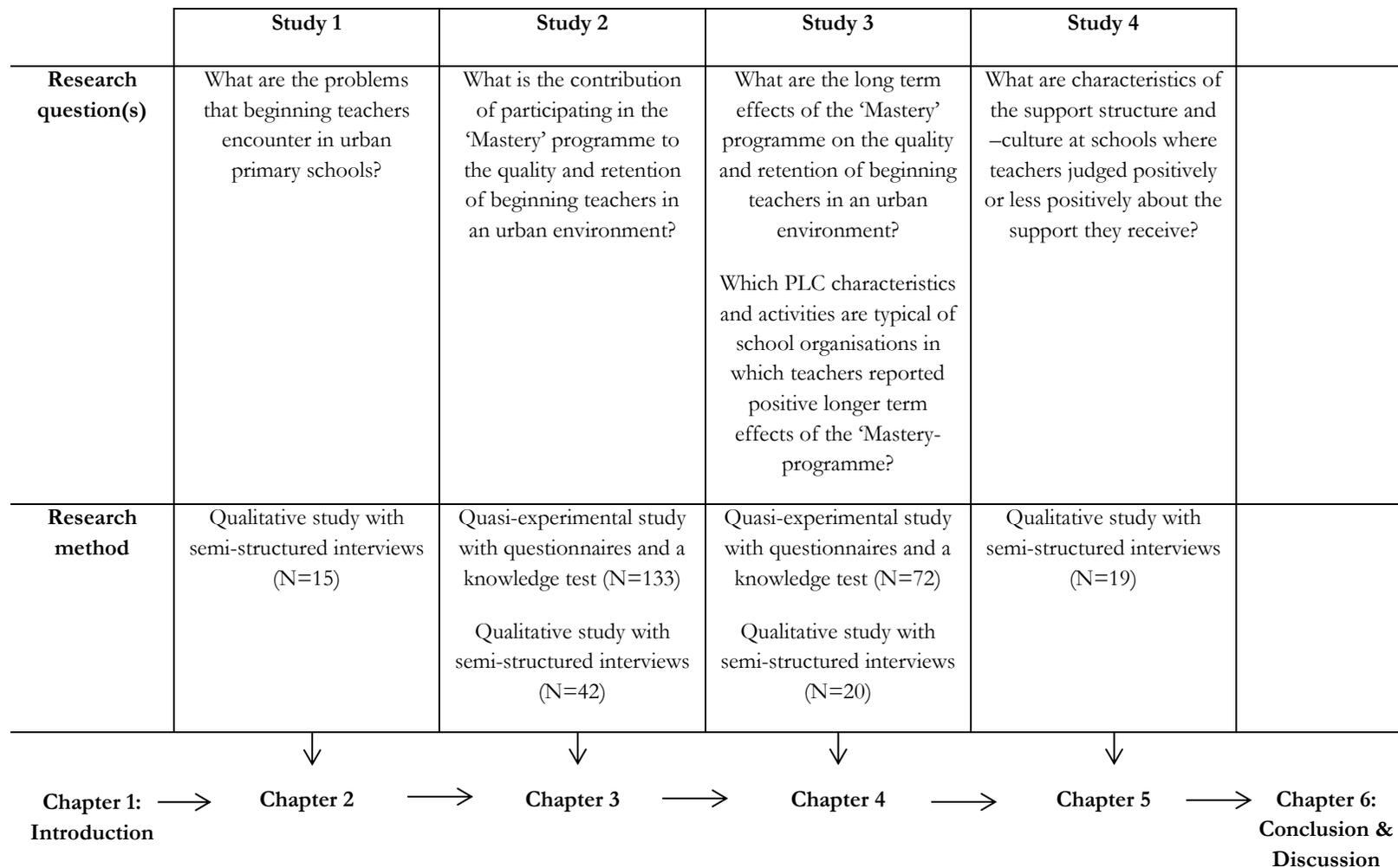


Figure 1.1. Graphical overview of this dissertation.