

Learning about teaching, learning while teaching, and becoming a teacher

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ABSTRACT: The quality of New Zealand initial teacher training programmes, along with the quality of graduates from different providers, has been a matter of policy and public debate in New Zealand over the last few years. This paper synthesises the results of a series of studies of the adjustment and professional development of beginning teachers. In particular, it identifies the transition from new to “savvy” teacher, the tension between the models of teacher education held by teachers and teacher educators, and the role of the school in facilitating the professional development of the new teacher. The findings are linked to previous research and the implications for initial and continuing teacher education identified.

KEY WORDS: Beginning teachers, initial teacher education, teacher development.

In my third year at College...I felt that our teacher training was very theory based and that teaching practice sessions were not long or “real” enough. It was only after I started teaching that I realised that a lot of things I thought unimportant at the time are important for the classroom

INTRODUCTION

It is probably inevitable that the preparation of the beginning teacher will be found wanting to some extent (Northfield & Gunstone, 1997). Learning about teaching during initial teacher education is different from learning about teaching while teaching (Loughran, Brown & Doecke, 2001), and a further distinction can be made between learning to teach and becoming a teacher (Carter and Doyle, 1996). Beck and Kosnick (2000), when discussing the role of associate or supervising teachers in initial teacher education, identify two broad conceptions of learning to teach. The first construes learning to teach as being akin to an apprenticeship, where students are socialised into the everyday activities and realities of the practitioner, whereas the second, which they label critical interventionist, focuses on encouraging the learner to critically question and reflect on everyday practices and beliefs. The knowledge a teacher gains while meeting the everyday demands of their job is often referred to as “craft knowledge” (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996; Desforges & McNamara, 1979; Rigano & Ritchie, 1999). In an ideal world student teachers would appreciate the significance of craft knowledge before graduating.

Much of the writing on teacher education implies that learning to teach within programmes of initial teacher education tends to be oriented to critical intervention. Zeichner & Gore (1990) argue that there is the distinct possibility that the process of learning while teaching can be inhibiting. They reason that the everyday demands of teaching can restrict the novice teacher’s ability to implement innovative ideas

(Loughlan et al, 2001). As McIntyre (1990) writes, initial teacher education must synthesise the different kinds of knowledge, i.e. the craft knowledge and the formal knowledge of the teacher educators.

THE BEGINNING TEACHER STUDY

The Beginning Teacher Study (Grudnoff & Tuck, 1999a) involves the systematic tracking of graduates from a large New Zealand College of Education. The three-year degree prepares them to teach in primary and middle schools. We have followed up over 400 graduates from our initial teacher education programme from 1999 through 2002. The participants in this three-year degree pre-service are preparing to teach in primary and middle schools. The follow-up involves, in the first instance, surveys posted out to schools four months after the graduates begin teaching. These surveys seek a graduate's perceptions of the quality of their initial teacher education programme and their supervising teacher's perceptions of the quality of the graduate's teaching. In addition to the postal surveys we have interviewed two cohorts of 20 graduates and their supervising teachers at the end of their first and second years of teaching.

THE INITIAL PERIOD OF TEACHING

The supervising teacher's responses to the postal surveys indicate that they have high regard for their beginning teachers on the following general dimensions: "working knowledge of curriculum, understanding of how children learn, managing learning and teaching, communicating and interacting with students, collaboration with colleagues, and reflecting on practice and commitment to professional development". The graduates, in the same postal surveys, also have high regard for the quality of their initial teacher education programmes (Grudnoff and Tuck, 1999b, 2000). This is all somewhat at odds with the tenor of submissions to a recent parliamentary select committee which were critical of teacher education and the quality of graduates, although many focused the blame on previous government policy in the late 1990s which led to an increase in the number of providers from six Colleges of Education/Schools of Education in Universities to the thirty plus that exist today (Haines, 2003; Evans, 2003).

The analyses of the responses to the rating scales and closed questions in the surveys did not, however, provide us with particularly useful insight into the challenges faced by the beginning teachers in their first two years of teaching. It was the interviews with the two cohorts of 20 graduates and their supervising teachers that illuminated the nature of these challenges. The following sections in this paper are derived in the main from two earlier papers. (Grudnoff and Tuck, 2001, 2002).

The first few weeks of teaching were for many graduates a time of considerable stress, and one is reminded of William James's characterisation of the early world of the child as a booming buzzing confusion. Some beginning teachers referred to being "overwhelmed", "under pressure", "so busy and tired", "having to be on the ball all day and every day". They commented, "It never stops", was "very hectic" and that it was "a time of information overload". Others referred to the experience of having the

sole responsibility for a class of students as “scary”. Supervising teachers also reported the initial period of teaching as being very stressful for many of the graduates.

The College is not unique as a teacher education provider; it *prepares* students for teaching, but it does not provide a programme that acculturates the novice into the everyday activities of the job of teaching in a particular school. When questioned about the first days of teaching respondents indicated that the experience of some of the graduates was akin to culture shock. The stress associated with the initial period of teaching is, of course, not a recent discovery (Huling-Austin, Odell, Ishler, Kay & Edelfelt, 1989; Sanford, 1988; Veenamn, 1984). However, a recent study suggests that in New Zealand it may be the sources of stress rather than the overall levels of stress that distinguish between beginning and experienced teachers (Hawe, Tuck, Manthei, Adair, & Moore, 2000).

What causes the levels stress in the initial first few weeks? A fifth of supervising teachers, when responding to an open question in the surveys, asked that the beginning teachers be better prepared for “the day to day reality of teaching”, “the realities of the classroom”, and “the nitty gritty of classroom teaching”. The supervising teachers construed the pre-service preparation as overly theoretical, with one of the supervising teachers going as far as to suggest that, “The College needs to get real, and employ current teaching practitioners so that students are getting up to date practical training that can be used in the classroom”. This suggestion was not inconsistent with that of more than half of the beginning teachers, who expressed a desire for more supervised teaching experience within the pre-service programme, and better use of the time allocated to teaching experience in practicum. By better, they meant having “real teaching experience” while on practicum. Many also described the pre-service education as “too theoretical” and “not practical enough”.

Most of the new teachers regarded having insufficient appropriate resources at the beginning of teaching as a key issue. They had developed banks of resources and activities during their pre-service programme, but for many of the new teachers these banks were insufficiently comprehensive and failed to meet the needs of particular students in a class. Thus, “I needed more resources and activities” and “I should have spent more time on making resource. Would like good books for this level.”

The beginning teachers recognised aspects of the pre-service programme as relevant, but sometimes added a rider, for example, they valued the opportunities to plan units of teaching and develop resources provided within the pre-service programme. However, some of the beginning teachers and their supervisors contrasted the relatively limited scope of the pre-service exercises in planning for teaching and learning with the nature of the programmes in schools, which were more expansive and more oriented to the long term. Similarly, nearly all of the supervising teachers rated highly the generic knowledge of curricula that their beginning teachers brought to the school, but a third then qualified this judgement by expressing concern over the ability of the first year teachers to organise their class and to structure and sequence ongoing classroom activities.

A beginning teacher is very likely to be confronted with both information and task overload: “Had to learn new administrative routines”, “New challenges every day”, “So much to learn”. Associated with this they frequently reported insufficient time

to meet all of the demands within the school day and difficulty in prioritising: “Trouble finishing what was planned”, and “Need to learn to prioritise”.

One could be excused for assuming that the outcome of new workers being confronted with high levels of task and information overload would be withdrawal from the occupation, but not one of the graduates in the two cohorts followed-up over two years left teaching. At the end of the first year one first year teacher reported, “coming out of the crest of a big learning curve”. Some of this learning was described as “trial and error”. A reading of the transcriptions of the interviews at the end of the year indicated that the new teachers were then reasonably confident of their ability and place in the school, and looking forward to the next year. Quotes from three teachers illustrate the nature of the changes: “Improved hugely of course. Just been able to get things across”, “Have developed out of sight as a teacher, not the same person as beginning of year” and “Learnt a lot of things that I will do differently next year”.

The supervising teachers also report a transition from apprentice to colleague: “Reliant in the beginning, but is now her own person”. The beginning teachers talked of a similar change; a movement from being the “new kid on the block” to good “working relationships with other teachers”.

LOOKING BACK AFTER TWO YEARS OF TEACHING

Two years on the new teachers reported that they now understood the nature and function of school policies and systems: “More aware of politics of school-can choose to focus on my own job”, “Now understand ideologies of school”, “Much more aware of what is happening around me in the school”, “I pick my battles”, and “I now understand the work that goes into maintaining school”. They also were much better at prioritising tasks because they “Now know what needs to be addressed”, have “Realised I just can’t do everything”, “Learnt what to leave out of class activities”, “Developed short cuts – deliver quality teaching with less effort”, and now “Know what has to be addressed immediately”. As a result they were using time more effectively: “Much better at managing time – I can take on more”

The second year teachers talked of being more responsive to the learning needs of children: “Meeting learning needs of children so much better”, and “Now have a good knowledge of where children are – provide much better feedback”. Associated with the focus on student’s learning needs, they perceived themselves as less pedantic and more flexible: “Now able to make quick adjustments to class”, “I am now much more flexible – less pedantic”, “Willing to experiment with things in class”, and “I am now flexible, if something unplanned is valuable I let it run – don’t cut things off at the knees”. They also perceive themselves as having realistic expectations” for children: “I have higher expectations for children”, and “I now have more realistic expectations of pupils”.

The trauma of the initial period of teaching was by then well behind them. At the end of the second year the teachers were confident teachers in a rewarding and enjoyable job: “I am confident – teaching is enjoyable”, “This year-awesome, “Loving teaching – got my confidence”, “Teaching is now rewarding”, “Now fun teaching.

When asked to identify “highpoints” many expressed satisfaction with the success of contributions across the school and the success of class programmes: “Success of my management unit”, “Having the class really hum”. Relationships with colleagues and being part of the group were also significant sources of satisfaction:” Relationships with my tutor teacher and staff a high point”, as was “Just being part of staff and part of the school”. However, nearly all discussed their role in the achievement of students as particularly satisfying:

“The children are a huge inspiration; every day is special with the children...watching children move from emergent to confident readers”, or Having a child say, ‘I got it’”.

Sources of dissatisfaction included the demands of assessment and recording for accountability, e.g. “Demands of formal assessment a low point” as was “Keeping on top of reports and record keeping”. Another issue of concern was aggressive students, including, “An abusive bully – had to physically restrain him” and “Aggressive behaviour of certain children. Nothing seems to work”. Relationships with parents were also a source of frustration and dissatisfaction for some, either because parents were reticent to become involved or were too involved in their children’s schooling: “Response of some parents a real disappointment – they wont come. I know they are tired – working – and grateful, but a disappointment not being able to involve them actively in their children’s education” and, by way of contrast, “Confrontation with parents – every week a different issue”. Not surprisingly, given their satisfaction from seeing children learn, the failure of children to make progress was a frequently reported source of dissatisfaction:

“Worry about children not achieving”, “Most disappointing when you cannot see progress in children”, “It’s a tragedy...lack of success with children who come to school tired”.

REFLECTIONS AND CONJECTURES

By the end of the second year of teaching, the beginning teachers were regarded as competent and in most cases excellent colleagues. After a relatively traumatic initial period of teaching, the new teachers had come through “a steep learning curve” to becoming confident teachers. The supervising teachers perceived them as “fitting in” and being a valued member of a team. In the words of one supervising teacher: “Like one of us. Forget she is only a second year.” In two years they had moved from outsider to insider (Nuich, 1995), from new to savvy teacher, and they and their supervising teachers believed they were facilitating children’s learning and making a contribution across the school. The beginning of this transition was identified in the interviews at the end of the first year, and completed during the second year.

A number of themes run through the analyses. A major one is the tension between the pre-service provider’s and the supervising teacher’s construction of teacher education.

The supervising teachers and the first year teachers make a clear distinction between theory and practice. From their perspective there is too much talk about teaching and not enough “real” teaching experience in the pre-service programme. They have a strong commitment to acquiring craft knowledge and believe teacher education should be more focused on the everyday activities of classroom teaching.

The current pre-service programme explicitly acknowledges that teaching practice is an essential element, and has a similar position to that of McIntyre (1990), that is, time in schools is not in itself a productive activity. The assumption is that teaching practice should both inform and be informed by understandings gained in generic and curricula courses within the programme (Auckland College of Education, 1996, p. 6). The students in the three-year degree spend a considerable period of time, at least 21 weeks, in schools. During the final seven-week block, the student has the responsibility for managing the teaching of the class for at least three weeks. Moreover, this seven-week period is split across two semesters; so that the students will experience both the end and the beginning of a school programme. Despite the period spent in schools and the rationale, which recognises the key role of practice, the programme is still perceived by practitioners as overly theoretical!

The tension between the practitioner prioritising “craft knowledge” (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996; Desforges & McNamara, 1979; Rigano & Ritchie, 1999) and the pre-service institution prioritising or placing equal emphasis on “critical intervention” (Beck & Kosnik, 2000) cannot be ignored. If the pre-service programme fails to address this issue, it is possible that the ability of the beginning teacher to be innovative and critical will be inhibited (Loughran, 1996). But at the same time, like Loughran, we would argue that pre-service teacher education programmes must do more than socialise novices into the everyday realities of the occupation. The pre-service programme must ensure that graduates have a critical understanding of teaching from a number of standpoints.

It is impossible for a number of reasons for the students in a pre-service programme to experience the responsibilities of a teacher in a particular school. Teaching experience in a pre-service programme is a structured activity, and it is slotted within the overall programme of a competent and experienced teacher. Moreover, the demands of a particular job will always to some extent be a function of the characteristics of a particular class, the politics of a particular school, and its “professional culture” (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman & Liu, 2001). The pre-service programme believes it ensures that its students appreciate the significance of elements of craft knowledge and create banks of resources and activities. However, it is instructive to reflect on the comments of a first year teacher, “I did not appreciate fully the importance of this when I was out in schools while at College.”

It is essential for student teachers to recognise early on in their pre-service programme the sequential structure and nature of school programmes. This should foster the necessity to develop a long-term orientation to planning as opposed to the planning of smaller units such as lessons. Students in pre-service education programmes are very familiar with schools – they will have had on average spent a minimum of 12 years in compulsory education. Unfortunately, as ethnographers note, familiarity is a two-edged sword; it often blinds us to the significance of everyday activity. It may be more difficult than we suspect for the student in a pre-service teacher education

programme to suspend the beliefs and understandings gained from the standpoint of a pupil, and adopt the standpoint of the teacher.

There is a discontinuity between learning about teaching and learning while teaching. In the current model, pre-service institutions accept *primary* responsibility for the former and the schools accept *primary* responsibility for the latter, especially in the first two years of probationary registration. The provider has a commitment to teaching as a profession and preparation for that profession, but each class and school is relatively unique. To some extent the discontinuity between the standpoints of the teacher educators and teachers is inevitable. Often initial teacher education programmes involve a dualism in which the universities or colleges of education focus on the theories, skills, knowledge and dispositions through course work and schools provide the setting in which such learning is applied (Britzman, 1991). The provider of pre-service education should not accept this dualism. Rather they need to maintain a commitment to good teaching as being both reflective and evidence-based (Hattie, 2003) while at the same time ensuring their students acquire important “craft knowledge”, because as Brown (1995) notes, students have to acquire such knowledge. In an ideal world the teacher educators and the schools will be involved in a partnership and have a shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching and good teacher education.

Unlike many transitions to full-time work, beginning teachers are given immediate responsibility for a full range of tasks and roles within the occupation. A significant mediator of stress and adjustment in our research is the supervising teacher, who in many cases adopted the dual roles of colleague and mentor. There is considerable evidence in our studies that these teachers play a key role in scaffolding the development of “craft knowledge” and knowledge about the everyday politics and systems of the school.

At the end of the second year, the beginning teachers had made the transition from competent beginning teachers to “savvy teachers”, who selected, prioritised and identified what needed to be addressed immediately and what could be let go. They were “slicker” with everyday tasks, had developed shortcuts, appreciated they could not do everything, and knew what they could safely ignore. Their everyday activity was no longer predominantly top down, i.e. implementing school programmes. Now they “make quick adjustments within class”, “experiment”, “make more decisions based on what is happening in the class” and “don’t cut things off at the knees” because of the demands of prior planning. They now used the school programmes, flexibly taking into account the needs of their children.

The professional culture in which this development occurs and is fostered is very similar to that described by Kardos et al (2001) as an “integrated professional culture”. Teachers work not as isolated units but collaboratively in teams. Teachers meet regularly to plan and share ideas. In fact, a critical indicator of the transition from outsider to insider (Nuich, 1995) was captured in the following comment from a supervising teacher about Glenda, her Beginning Teacher, in the second year: “Reads lots, continually upgrading, feeds into *her* syndicate”. Glenda was now perceived by her supervising teacher as an active colleague in a syndicate of teachers. The teachers in this school had a collective responsibility for the education of the pupils. As Kardos et al (2001) comment, the new and experienced teachers did not in this culture

exist on separated parallel planes. Rather they participated in common planning activities, and had a shared commitment to improving practice.

Rozenholtz (1989) has called schools in which teachers work collaboratively to achieve common goals, and in which they have a shared understanding of the nature of their work and relationships, as “learning enriched”. The second year teachers gained considerable satisfaction from the quality of their relationships with colleagues. It does appear as though having a mentor located within an integrated professional culture, which is embedded within a “learning enriched” school, is a major component in the professional development of the new teacher. This conclusion is similar to that reached by Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu and Peske (2002) in their study of first and second year teachers in Massachusetts.

The pre-service programme ends on graduation from College. However, the professional development of the new teacher has in one sense just begun. The study suggests that the professional culture of the school and the supervising teacher have critical roles in scaffolding the new teacher’s professional development over the first two years of teaching. This learning while teaching builds on the foundation laid in the initial teacher education programme. Schools and the pre-service provider are partners in a common enterprise, with the latter *emphasising* learning about teaching while the former *emphasises* learning while teaching. Neither is sufficient in itself; rather both need to inform and be informed by the other.

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