

## Beginning secondary drama and English teaching

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*ABSTRACT: This paper explores the pre-service and beginning teaching experiences of secondary teachers of drama and English. The attrition rates for teachers are generally high but evidence (Anderson, 2002) suggests that there are special strains on teachers who teach drama and English. This paper uses Hargreaves and Fullan's (1992) tripartite schema to arrange and explore the two teachers' experiences of beginning drama and English teaching. The teachers identify subject identity, pre-service preparation, practicums and their contexts as important in their development as beginning teachers. The paper concludes with a discussion of the complex forces that encourage and discourage English and drama teachers at the beginning of their professional lives and suggests changes to improve their training and induction to teaching.*

*KEY WORDS: Drama education, professional development, beginning teachers.*

### INTRODUCTION

The beginning phases of any teachers professional journey is a time of survival (Ryan, 1986, p. 13). Consider then, the special pressures that act upon beginning teachers in particularly onerous roles. In secondary schools English teachers are faced with extensive and complex assessment demands. In drama at primary and secondary level teachers are often asked to take responsibility for the schools public performances program (Anderson, 2002, p. 92). For teachers of drama and English<sup>1</sup> the survival phase, and all the difficulties and challenges that go with that phase are exacerbated by these extra role expectations.

In research conducted in 1999 (Anderson, 2002) I interviewed teachers to explore their perceptions of their professional development journey<sup>2</sup> including beginning teaching. The research took the form of a series of interviews that were developed into narrative vignettes<sup>3</sup>. The secondary teachers in the study, Mel and Tom<sup>4</sup> reflected from their differing perspectives on the difficulties encountered as first year teachers. Mel was a first-year-out secondary teacher in Sydney's West.<sup>5</sup> Tom had eight years

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<sup>1</sup> In my experience, most drama teachers in New South Wales train and teach in English and drama methods.

<sup>2</sup> I have used the metaphor of the journey to encompass and examine the theoretical perspectives that address what is sometimes called "teacher professional development" and or "teacher development" to explore Tom and Mel's professional lives.

<sup>3</sup> A discussion of the methodology is available in other places (Anderson, 2002, and Anderson, 2002a, p. 87-95).

<sup>4</sup> All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

<sup>5</sup> When the study began, Mel was at a comprehensive high school in Sydney's West. During the year, the school changed and is now only accepting only Year 7-10 students. A number of schools in New South Wales have been grouped as Year 7-10 only. These schools feed a senior college. During the study, Mel moved to a senior college that is attached to her former school.

experience as a secondary drama and English teacher in Sydney's North and West. Before I relate their experiences of beginning teaching I would like to review some critical perspectives on the early phases of the teacher's journey. Tom and Mel's reflections will convey some of the pressures faced by secondary drama and English educators. While this discussion will isolate factors that relate specifically to the teaching of drama and English, there are many factors that overlap with the other aspects of a teacher's role. Initially I would like to explore the scale of the problem facing beginning teachers, generally, through a review of beginning teacher attrition data.

## BEGINNING TEACHER ATTRITION

Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992, p. 209) report that the dropout rates for teachers in the first year is over 30% and that the most able are those most likely to leave teaching. They identify the more personal dimension of the problem:

This is not only a horrendous waste of time and energy expended to educate short-term teachers, it is in many respects a sad tale of lost opportunities, of insensitivity to suffering, and of intellectual blindness and institutional rigidity (1992, p. 209).

Gold asserts (1996, p. 549) that 25% of beginning teachers leave in less than two years and that nearly 40% leave in their first five years of teaching. The most recent American figures show a worsening of this situation. *No Dream Denied* (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003, p.10) reports that 14% of teachers leave the system before they have completed one year and 46% have left the profession before teaching for five years. Figures in New South Wales reflect less dramatic but nevertheless concerning attrition rates. In 1991<sup>6</sup> in NSW government schools, 7.25 % of teachers left the profession in their first year and 21.14 % left teaching in the first five years (Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1998, p. 240).

The high attrition rates indicate profound difficulties for beginning teachers. This is of special concern at a time of teacher shortages (Baird, 2001, p. 5). The survival and welfare of beginning teachers is not only an issue for them personally, their survival and growth, it has important implications for the health of schooling systems generally and students specifically.

The difficulties experienced by beginning teachers have consequences, not for sales quotas, but for children. A first-grader does not learn to read and falls behind. A seventh-grader has trouble with his teachers and begins to give up...Students are primary victims when beginning teachers fail (Ryan, 1986, p. 7).

The next section presents some theoretical perspectives on the beginning teacher journey that may begin to explain these high attrition rates.

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<sup>6</sup> These are the last available figures on beginning teacher attrition. The latest figures are not generally available as they are politically sensitive.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE BEGINNING TEACHER'S JOURNEY**

The following theoretical positions provide an important background to a developing understanding of the beginning phases of teacher development. I have chosen to explore the theories of Ryan (1986), Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992) and Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) as their approaches provide some explanation of the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by beginning teachers.

According to Ryan (1986) there are three stages in the teacher's journey: fantasy, survival and mastery. The first phase of the beginning teacher's journey is the fantasy stage where:

...the person starts to think seriously about becoming a teacher...As pre-service teachers get closer to entering their own classrooms, the fantasies often change character. Dark fantasies or bad dreams come more often. Frequently pre-service teachers will feel anxious about their future career even though they continue to have pleasant fantasies about their future (Ryan, 1986, p. 11).

Bullough (1992, p. 76), commenting on the same stage, argues that teachers are often "euphoric" as they test their teaching schema and establish "seemingly self-confirming relationships with students". The euphoria subsides when role confusion and management issues begin to loom and the "great confrontation" (Ryan, 1986, p. 11) of the survival stage begins. Central to this fantasy stage is the influence of teacher education courses including practicum. Students assume that "direct classroom experience" is the most important part of becoming a teacher (Bullough, 1997, p. 80). In this phase the fantasy is explored and mostly broken as the survival stage takes hold.

Gold (1996, p. 558) identifies a time between fantasy and survival that she calls the "loss of a dream" (1996, pp. 554-558). She argues that beginning teachers approach their placements and first teaching assignment with "a dream" but that this dream may be eroded by class management issues, poor pre-service training, poor practicum placement, poor initial teaching placement and poor support from colleagues and school administrators. The inexperienced and often unconfident beginning teacher seems to be vulnerable in this dream stage and often does not make it through the next and most confronting of stages in Ryan's estimation – the survival stage. In the survival phase the new teacher is:

...fighting for his or her professional life, and often for a sense of worth and identity as well. For most beginning teachers the survival stage is the biggest challenge of their lives (Ryan, 1986, p. 13).

Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) divide the teacher's development into three overlapping areas, namely:

1. Professional development as self-understanding
2. Professional development as knowledge and skill development and
3. Professional development as ecological change.

This framework provides three areas of experience that are crucial in a beginning teacher's development. They argue that to understand development a broader view is required. In their conceptualisation they focus on:

...forms of teacher development and understandings of teacher development that are more humanistic and critical in nature: forms that take account of the person in teacher development as well as the person's behaviour, and which address characteristics of the system as well as the skills of the individual (1992, p. 7).

Their approach features an understanding of an individual that the stage theorists are unable to provide. Their approach does not compartmentalise the personal and the professional, but acknowledges that there are important interrelationships that influence development. Furthermore it signals the importance of the education system and skills of the individual rather than broad developmental steps passed through by all individuals. In short it focuses on the individual teacher in context and provides a framework for the understanding of that teacher's experience of teaching and in this case beginning teaching. I will use their tripartite schema to organise and frame my discussion of Mel and Tom's experiences as beginning teachers of drama and English.

## **BEGINNING TEACHERS AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

In the early phases of a career, the teacher reflects on emerging aspects of their own teacher identity in a developing understanding of themselves as teachers within a subject and schooling context (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p. 217). This understanding of identity and context is a strong force in the growth of self understanding. Mel had come to the teaching of drama and English with reasonably set approaches to the expectations of teaching in each subject area. Consistent with Bullough's analysis (1992, p. 76) Mel had a growing sense of her identity as a drama and English teacher. She identified herself as being "practical". Significantly she did not feel she could be as "practical" in her English classes.

### **Mel**

*The drama and English teaching environments are completely different. Sitting down in a classroom, as opposed to being up and active. I think I desperately needed the practice in the drama but the English was good because of the preparation we had at university. So from all that pre-teaching experience I think I have the ability to work from reflexes and be flexible. When I sense in a classroom and I'm sure everybody, no matter how experienced, or inexperienced they are, can feel when something's not quite working and the kids go, "what?" I feel I am able to notice that and say, OK, we will put it away, let's do something else.*

*When the kids get bored, I mean you cannot control the whole class if they are all bored. The old system of writing on the blackboard and getting the kids to copy it down or putting up an overhead and sitting down and doing your marking hasn't worked for me, so I couldn't do it anyway. It does not feel right. It does not sit on my shoulders well and I like to be active and up and about. I see many teachers around in different schools who are able to stand at the door and have the class working quietly. I don't feel that I can work like that because I enjoy being up and I like being able to say to the class this is what I want you to do, and this is why, and now give me feedback, and then actively interact with everybody in the group.*

*I think, drama education is a way of, of opening up children, students, opening them up, waking them up, making them aware of issues, things that they might think or feel. So that could be personal, that may be related to something that is happening in the media or in their immediate surroundings. Drama education is also a way of exposing kids to something that they have not been exposed to before. Getting students to try something just a little bit new, a little bit different and getting them active with people around them, encouraging their own personal development.*

*Drama is more rigorous than English in a lot of ways because I am more energetic and more in tune with what's going on in the drama lesson and I focus a lot more on little things because I know my stuff in drama. It is more when you put it in a practical situation I teach the kids to pull things apart and figure out where they can make their improvements and where they can look at things. I think the kids have more energy in drama, even those that did not choose it in the beginning. They find at the end of it that it is a very draining and satisfying subject, but at the end they say, "I did it", which is very satisfying for them. I love watching kids develop in drama because it is just so obvious when you see them at the start and they're so embarrassed and then they are like I can do that Miss.*

## **BEGINNING TEACHING AND KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Pre-service**

As Gold (1996, p. 555) argues the development of skills in classroom management becomes a priority for the beginning teacher. Significantly, school-sponsored professional development has often focused on the development of narrowly based skills (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p. 2) and ignored the other, perhaps more intangible and insoluble issues in teacher development. The most important site of knowledge and skill development for the beginning teacher occurs in pre-service training. Here Mel reflects on several issues in her pre-service university preparation. (As will be discussed below, Mel and Tom did, however, value the practicum highly as a way to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence in the classroom.)

#### **Mel**

*My preparation at Uni in the Diploma of Education was a bit patchy. I had some good training in English but the drama part was not very practical and I do not think we learned as much as we could have. I really learnt the most from English and from the pracs and I think at Uni, we needed more pracs. They try to make you afraid, instead of giving you confidence, they said, "don't do this", instead of saying "this is the way to handle this situation". There is a lot within the job that you do have to be careful of particularly relating to child protection and I think they wanted to make me afraid of things like that. I know they were trying to make me aware but at the same time, they were making me afraid.*

*You do not know what has hit you until you are out there on prac, going shit, I have to do something here and I have to learn to cope with this and that and not be embarrassed. When I first came into schools, I found that I was almost afraid of the children. I was withdrawn because I was so used to being in that comfort zone at uni. I think you need to be taken out of your comfort zone enough times, so you have the*

*authority to tell these kids to sit down and do the right thing so that you are in a position to teach these kids something.*

*What we needed was what our English lecturer did for us. She put us through the lessons ourselves. She would get up in front of everybody and say, "this is what I want you guys to do today", and we had heaps of fun with it. Then she would say you can use this technique in your classroom and she would tell us how to organise it and it would make sense to us. Sometimes she would teach the lesson that she was trying to talk about, or would talk about lessons that you could do. The English lecturer would give you specific examples of how you could go about things. It was very active and interesting.*

### **Tom**

*My Diploma of Education was a waste of time and I did not learn anything. The lack of theory in the Dip Ed. we did was probably the big disadvantage of the course and it still affects my teaching. We did bits and pieces, probably at Year 11 level, we got bits and pieces that we put it in our folder and forgot about. The only drama part I had to do was an elective that was part of the English curriculum. I enjoyed it and, I thought it was easy. We did things like developing sculptures and photographs and making photographs move from one frame to another and I thought I've done this before and I really enjoyed that, but apart from that it was only really English and history that I was doing. Apart from that, the Dip Ed. was a waste of time.*

### **Practicum**

Tom and Mel's experiences of teacher pre-service preparation highlight some important themes. Mel's experience of interactive and exciting tutorials that intellectually engaged her were rated highly. Conversely Tom's experience reflects a lack of theory in his pre-service preparation. While in the main the beginning teachers found their preparation unsatisfactory (Anderson, 2002, p. 56) they commented favourably on their English and drama method preparations. For Mel and Tom, however, the practicum provided them with the most useful experiences in knowledge and skill development.

### **Mel**

*The university provided no preparation for me. The Diploma of Education was OK because we had the practicums, and the prac teachers that I had for drama were fantastic. I suppose it was the way that they ran the practicums. They said watch a few of these lessons, have a look at how the lessons are going and observe, and then do it yourself. Also being at two completely different schools, that was great too. The prac saved me, big time, big time.*

*When I was out in Western Sydney with Yvonne, she would write a report, one of those reports that they give me at the end. She would write a report for every lesson, give it to me, and talk about it at the end of every lesson. She would sit there, watch it and then you would talk about it. She would say things like, "well you spent too long getting people organised, you did this round the wrong way and you should have done this instead". I learnt a lot from this because she's sitting there and talking to you about it. It was not like other supervising teachers who said things like, "I'm going to watch you and at the end of the next two weeks, I'm going to write a report on you." She was very actively involved with your development. I was left to do whatever I had to do in English. It was a good experience, just being up there and*

*out there. I didn't have people saying to me, you're doing this wrong and that wrong, and I didn't like the way you did that, they just said, "oh, we think you're great". They watched just a few lessons. But I thought I was doing OK and I was comfortable with it.*

### **Tom**

*The practicums were good. I ended up at the high school I went to as a student so I already knew what I was in for. It was a good experience and I think probably that prac gave me the foundation to cope with some of the difficult schools I eventually taught at. I think I could have been more prepared for teaching if I had more time for reflection based on my observations and keeping them in a log.*

*It also would have helped if I had not been thrown straight in at the deep end. The practicum was very sudden and intense to begin with. There was very little chance to reflect on what we were involved in or what we were about to do. I was on a five-week block, I had two days of observation and the third day I was expected to teach and that to me was not enough time to prepare for effective teaching. You had to work hard to prepare yourself for the practicums. I was not prepared enough to cope with classroom strategies. Often you do not know what will work until you are in the classroom.*

*My main supervisor at on my first prac was brilliant. She was what I imagined teachers were like. She taught effectively and intelligently and provided good feedback for me. She was dedicated and spent a lot of time at school, making sure she was well prepared.*

## **BEGINNING TEACHING AND ECOLOGICAL CHANGE**

The seeds of development will not grow if they are cast on thorny ground. Critical reflection will not take place if there is neither time nor encouragement for it. Teachers will learn little from each other if they work in persistent isolation (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p.13).

The role of the teacher's ecology and their access to change within that ecology is central to the experience of beginning teaching. As Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) contend, growth will not occur for the beginning teacher if there is not time for critical reflection and they are consistently isolated. Mel, in her beginning year faced some of these issues. This situation may have arisen because of her role as a beginning teacher but mostly because she was the only drama educator on staff<sup>7</sup>. In this narrative vignette she is struggling with the physical ecology and demands of the school.

### **Mel**

*There are some days like, like week B out of the cycle when I've got a 6-period day, and I've got lunch time rehearsals for the musical and we've got an after school rehearsal for the musical and a meeting in the morning before school. It is very tiring*

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<sup>7</sup> This is not an unusual situation in NSW. Many drama teachers in NSW have no other colleagues teaching drama at the school. This can be empowering but it can also lead to the isolation Hargreaves and Fullan (1992, p. 13) warn of.

*and in those few weeks, I had a few naps in the afternoon after I got home. I was exhausted and I never thought teaching such short hours would wear me out so much.*

*I have to be a little bit more organised as I go to and from class though, because I have three spaces, English room, drama room, staffroom, and they are a long way apart. The music rooms are right up the very back of the school so if I'm up there for any reason, particularly if it's the musical or something extra curricula like that, when the bell goes I have to be organised. I have to have everything planned, I have to get all the way back down here and get all my stuff together and then get to class and that makes me a bit late sometimes. So, I have to get my organisation and pre-planning skills worked out.*

*There are teachers involved with the musical that have not pulled their weight. So, it has been just myself and another male teacher that have done all the work. These other teachers say, "that's fantastic, that's great", but they never do anything. They do not do anything but they think they are doing everything and that bugs me. They are dead set certain that they are doing all the work and that the other guy and me are just doing all the little bits for them. We were there for four days during the holidays and working hard after school and at night times and at meetings and in our free periods. These people trying to take all the credit have really annoyed me. The musical got a lot of attention for drama from the kids.*

There was a clear difference in this research between beginning teachers and experienced teachers in the area of ecological change (Anderson, 2002). The experienced teachers were able to interact with their schooling ecologies to bring about changes in their own teaching situations. An understanding of their ecology allowed them to be pro-active. The beginning teachers, however, found changing their ecologies very difficult and seemed to be constantly reacting to their contexts rather than changing them. In Mel's case she reacts by urging herself to "be more organised" to cope with the logistical demands of teaching. The more experienced teachers worked to change the situation rather than reacting to them (Anderson, 2002).

As a drama educator Mel became responsible for the school musical. She did this with seemingly little staff support. Recent concerns about the overloading of beginning teachers surely apply doubly to drama educators. How do these teachers have "... space to deal with, reflect on and acquire knowledge about the range of complex issues that confront any beginning teacher" (Ramsey, 2000, p. 67) when their time is consumed with performing arts activities? Perhaps more consideration could be given to the expectations of beginning drama teachers facing these pressures. For Mel who taught English as well, her load was exacerbated by the marking demands of her English programme.

Mel's experiences are in line with other reports (Ramsey, 2000 and Gold, 1996) that argue the importance of an understanding of context in the lives of beginning teachers. While more experienced teachers proactively engage with their ecologies, beginning teachers are often more reactive to their surroundings and situations, often to their own detriment. The other concerning issue for beginning drama and English teachers is the demands that their teaching subjects exert on them at the most crucial stage of their development. Heavy assessment demands and public performance responsibilities will necessarily reduce the time available for them to critically reflect on their growth into the profession. Perhaps more could be done by schooling systems



and beginning teacher mentors to recognise and respond to the extra demands beginning drama and English face.

## **CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON BEGINNING TEACHING AND DRAMA**

### **Self-understanding**

Mel's identity seems well developed as she enters the profession. She sees herself as "practical" teacher. In her drama teaching her identity seems secure and well constructed through her identification of herself as "practical". However, her identity as an English teacher appears less developed. This raises some concerns for the beginning educator. Mel's reflections suggest that she has received the message, perhaps from pre-service education, from her peers or the community, that English teaching is not "practical"<sup>8</sup> and she feels constrained by this aspect of her identity as an English educator. This has the effect of confining her teaching to "sitting down". This is of some concern as this limited view of English pedagogy, despite effective practicum and pre-service experiences, may be an obstacle to her as a developing English teacher. In this instance her subject identity seems to be an encouragement to her growth as a drama educator and a restricting influence on her as an English educator.

### **Knowledge and skill development**

Tom and Mel both recalled problems with their pre-service preparation. They rated the practicums as more useful but the familiar problems of inconsistent supervision and practicum preparation that did not fully integrate with university preparation persist. Ramsey's report on teacher development in NSW echoes Mel and Tom's experiences:

The present practicum model in teacher education courses is failing to prepare effectively future teachers for the challenges they will face. Individual classroom experiences, divorced from the larger context of the school and sometimes with only limited supervision, cannot be considered as offering high quality workplace learning (2000, p. 10).

The lack of effective practicum placement and practicum experience is also identified by Gold (1996, pp. 554-558) as one of the important factors in the "loss of the dream" which signals the beginning teacher's fantasy turning into reality and leads to many teachers leaving the profession. A successful practicum is a vital part of effective teacher pre-service education. Tom and Mel remembered their practicums as highly effective and for Tom the practicum was the most effective preparation for the classroom.

The teachers in this study identified teacher pre-service education as problematic. If beginning teachers are to survive the loss of the dream in the sometimes harsh realities of classrooms and schools, pre-service education will have to be more effectively integrated with the practicum. It must provide a solid theoretical basis and

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<sup>8</sup> There is no reason why the English syllabus in NSW could not be taught "practically" (in Mel's terms). Some teachers would argue that it must be taught in a practical way to meet course outcomes.

be underpinned by substantial professional practice placements in varied schools. If tertiary education fails to engage with this problem teacher preparation will continue to suffer the irrelevance and ineffectiveness that characterised the pre-service experiences of these teachers.

It must be said also that teacher preparation is working in some respects. Tom mentioned positive drama education (Anderson, 2002, p. 103) preparation while Mel described her English method training as highly effective. Tom and Mel also reflected on other non-education tertiary courses that provided good preparation for teaching. These are causes for optimism. However, there is much work to do to make teacher pre-service education more effective and relevant to the needs of beginning teachers and the schools they will eventually teach in.

### **Ecological Change**

The ecology of schools can be demanding on any beginning teacher. This occurs mainly because the beginner is unsure and unskilled in changing his or her own context (Anderson, 2002). This was further exacerbated in Mel's case as she had taken on public performance expectations in addition to the heavy demands of her English and drama teaching load. She felt unsupported in carrying the demands of the school musical, leading to fatigue and stress. Knowing that beginning teachers are unlikely to be skilled or able to change their contexts, perhaps schools and schooling systems should provide more effective mentoring and other support to assist teachers navigate their new ecologies, cope with ecological change and reflect on the early phases of their careers.

### **Beginning Drama and English teaching**

As this study has shown, there are special pressures on beginning teachers of drama and English. But beyond these teachers and beyond New South Wales, there are important implications for drama and English educators. The lack of support for beginning teachers and the high attrition rates are a worldwide reality (Gold, 1996). The lack of support is surely more intense when the teacher is identified as the "drama person" with all the extra expectations that the role entails and further exacerbated if the beginning teacher is also expected take on the demands of an English teaching load, as most are. If the community is to retain and encourage these teachers at the most vulnerable stage of their career more effort is required. Maintaining the current high attrition rates will perpetuate the wastefulness of losing competent teachers and ultimately will damage learning opportunities for students in drama and English.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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