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# **A WAY FORWARD TO MANAGING THE TRANSITION TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The high attrition rate of beginning teachers in Australia and overseas is well-documented. This trend is easily understood as many beginning teachers enter the profession with little support or mentoring (Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), 2002; Herrington & Herrington, 2004; Ramsey, 2000). Continual calls for more comprehensive approaches to teacher induction in which universities and employing bodies share the responsibilities of the transition to professional practice (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) have, to date, largely been ignored. This paper reports on a trial project conducted at a university in south-east Queensland, Australia that addresses these shortfalls. The aim of the project is to facilitate and support the development of high quality teachers and teaching through an extended model of teacher preparation. The model comprises a 1+2 program of formal teacher preparation: a one-year teacher education course (the Graduate Diploma in Education), followed by a comprehensive two year program of workplace induction and ongoing professional learning tailored to meet graduate and employer needs. This paper reports on graduating students' perceptions of their preparedness to teach as they transition from the Graduate Diploma in Education program to professional practice. The study concludes that innovative programs, including university-linked, ongoing professional learning support for teacher education graduates, may provide the way forward for enhancing the transition to practice for beginning teachers.

## **KEYWORDS**

Teacher education, professional learning, teacher induction, professional development, beginning teachers, teaching, teacher preparation

## INTRODUCTION

High attrition rates for beginning teachers are not surprising as transition experiences for many beginning teachers are inadequate with induction programs poorly designed and implemented and largely unsupported (DEST, 2002; Herrington & Herrington, 2004; Ramsey, 2000). While it is acknowledged that there are some systemic approaches to induction by employing bodies, teacher induction programs are commonly left to the schools in which beginning teachers are employed. Hence, in these cases, teacher induction relies 'on the support of principals and the goodwill of staff' (DEST, 2002, p. 21). It is highly contestable however, that schools have the resources (time or staff) to undertake this critical aspect of professional development in a consistent and effective way (Ramsey, 2000; DEST 2002).

Universities are well-positioned to assume key roles and responsibilities for induction into the profession as they have a vested interest in ensuring their teaching graduates make an effective transition to professional practice. In the current competitive environment, university programs are jostling for both student numbers and industry recognition, where often the performance of their teacher graduates are used as evidence of the quality of specific programs. It may be argued that formal teacher education preparation offered by universities should begin with pre-service teacher education programs and extend through to include induction programs (Ramsey, 2000). However, the current reality in Australia is that initial teacher education and the induction of beginning teachers generally exist as independent processes.

### *Transition to teaching as a socially constructed experience*

Learning occurs when people engage in social interactions with each other and through interactions with their environments (Palincsar, 1998). Beginning teachers learn through the social interactions with multiple learning experiences and communities. These interactions include the range of experiences throughout their teacher preparation program, the school communities that they experience while on formal Field Experience and also the new school communities that they enter when they take up positions as teachers after graduation. In other words, immersion in these various contexts facilitates the professional learning of beginning teachers. However, entering any new context requires time to understand and negotiate the skills necessary to function effectively within it. Effective learners do not merely transfer behaviours from one context to another, instead they reflect on how to apply their present knowledge and skills in this new context.

## CONTEXT

A one-year Graduate Diploma in Education course at a university in Queensland, Australia provides the context for this paper. Currently in Australia, Graduate Diploma programs for teacher education comprise one year of full-time study equivalent plus field experience in schools. These programs are designed to enable students who already hold a university degree to acquire the qualifications they need to enter the teaching profession.

One-year Graduate Diploma teacher education courses have been criticised for their limited opportunities to develop pedagogical skills and understandings of contemporary school contexts (Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). However, while there are some criticisms of the one

year teacher preparation programs, there is evidence to suggest that the graduates of these programs emerge with greater depth of discipline specific knowledge in comparison to teachers who graduate from the four year undergraduate programs (OECD, 2005). Graduate Diploma graduates also bring to the teaching profession a broader base of knowledge, experience, expertise and maturity. The prior experiences and life skills of one-year graduates, which often include parenthood and work with young people, as well as employment experience and expectations from other work places, add a depth of understanding and rich skill set (Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). So an appropriate response to the criticism of one-year programs may be that, rather than extending the actual length of these programs, enhancing the quality of the teaching graduates may be achieved through enhanced connections between pre-service teacher education programs, induction processes and ongoing professional development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2005).

This paper reports on a section of a pilot project that attempts to address some of the shortfalls levelled at current approaches to teacher preparation. The project aims to facilitate and support the development of high quality teachers and teaching through an extended model of teacher preparation. The model comprises a 1+2 program of formal teacher preparation: a one-year teacher education course (the Graduate Diploma in Education), followed by a comprehensive two year program of workplace induction and ongoing professional learning tailored to meet graduate and employer needs. In light of the discussions and concerns outlined in the broader literature discussed earlier in this paper, this model is considered to have the potential to transform teacher education and also the transition to the profession for beginning teachers.

The professional learning opportunities offered in the pilot project, comprise a series of modules developed around three clusters of practices critical to teachers' work: teaching and learning, relationships, and reflective practice. The clusters were selected as they mirror the three areas underpinning the Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers. The Professional Standards were developed by the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT), the statutory authority for teacher education and teacher registration in Queensland, for teacher registration purposes and describe "the abilities, knowledge, understandings and professional values that teachers in Queensland demonstrate as they provide meaningful and high quality educational experiences for students" (QCT, 2006, p. 2). To obtain and retain teacher registration, teachers must demonstrate attainment of the professional standards.

While the topics for the professional learning modules were developed around the three clusters of teachers' work described above, the content within the professional learning modules was determined from data collected from Graduate Diploma in Education students as they prepared to graduate from their teacher education programs.

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

The primary source of data for this qualitative study was a questionnaire. Thirty-four graduating students from the Graduate Diploma in Education course at the same university in south-east Queensland, Australia, completed the questionnaire. The students had recently completed their final semester of study in the program and were about to transition into professional practice. The purpose of the questionnaire was to reveal students' perceptions

(Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) of their preparedness to teach and of their perceived ongoing professional learning needs as they left the Graduate Diploma in Education program and entered professional practice.

The questions in the questionnaire that related to students' ongoing professional learning needs focused on the three clusters of teacher's work that provide the framework for the QCT's Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers. Students were required to rank order the dimensions of each of these three clusters in the questionnaire in order of the perceived urgency to their current professional learning needs and to justify the perceived importance. These responses were used to inform the development of the series of professional learning modules that graduates undertook as part of their ongoing professional learning in the 1+2 model described earlier in this paper. Further questions in the questionnaire focused on revealing the aspects of the Graduate Diploma in Education program that students perceived as contributing most to their transition to professional practice.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data from the questionnaires was coded, then compared and grouped in a procedure similar to that outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). The data was examined iteratively and emerging themes noted. The extended responses from the questionnaires supported the emergent themes and assisted in providing overall views of students' perceived ongoing learning needs and of the contributions of the Graduate Diploma in Education to their transition to practice.

## **RESULTS**

Three key themes that emerged from the study will be discussed in this section.

### ***1) Teaching graduates seek an expanded repertoire of practical skills to take into the classroom***

The questionnaire data indicates that new teaching graduates are eager for an expanded set of practical classroom strategies. While many of the graduates expressed confidence in their fundamental understandings of their profession, they still sought practical skills in applying this knowledge to practice (Lempp et al., 2004). While there were a few graduates concerned about their foundational theoretical understandings, most of the responses indicate a broader concern for acquiring more practical skills to make the transition effectively. In their study, Pietsch and Williamson (2010) found also that in the very early stages of transitioning to practice, beginning teachers focused almost wholly on transferring and integrating their content and pedagogical knowledges into practice rather than focusing on concerns beyond the immediate classroom. The findings of these studies suggest that, while teacher preparation programs provide strong foundational understandings and skills (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005), effective teachers must continually construct new ideas, skills and practices throughout their careers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

### ***2) Teaching graduates report the most powerful learning occurred while on Field Experience***

The data indicates that the graduates believe the most significant professional learning occurred during their formal Field Experience in schools. Current literature suggests that an effective transition to practice requires a range of work integrated learning opportunities (Reeves, et al., 2004) to facilitate an understanding of the day to day requirements of the profession and also serves to act as initial 'professional socialization' into the values and attitudes of the profession. The findings of this study support the view in that these graduating teachers perceive that powerful professional learning occurs through the range of interactions they experience in their Field Studies sites. This practical approach is lauded as it is thought to ensure the quality of graduates, their professional occupational competence and their capacity to be able to apply their learning to work contexts (see DEEWR, 2008; DEST, 2002) as well serving to smooth these graduates transition to practice.

### ***3) Teaching graduates consider their own professional learning will be ongoing***

While transitioning to practice, graduates consider their own professional learning to be ongoing. While some literature problematises this notion, positing newly graduated teachers to be in deficit – viewing themselves as still 'becoming' rather than fully fledged teachers - this paper seeks to challenge this position. Instead, we believe that the notion that new graduates see themselves with much to learn is a natural and logical consequence of the new positioning of the teaching profession itself. Instead of being troubled by this emerging finding, we celebrate it.

## **DISCUSSION ABOUT TRANSITION TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

Current literature suggests that an effective transition to professional practice has specific requirements. These being; mastery of the key skills of the profession (Billett, 2009) competent generic 'soft skills' to assist the professional socialization, such as communication, problem solving and conflict resolution; a mentor or supervisor to support and direct learning (McInstry, 2005), and prior experience of work placement and/ or work integrated learning opportunities (Reeves, et al., 2004) to lessen the possibility of 'reality shock'. Alongside these fundamental requirements, is the view that a new graduate will also undertake 'professional socialization', involving the gradual assimilation of the values and attitudes of the profession (Prince, Boshuizen, van Der Vleuten & Scherpbier, 2005).

While we acknowledge the study is small scale and any attempt to generalise the findings should be treated with caution, we wonder if the distilled themes might be evident in other cohorts transitioning to professional practice. As such we are wondering if, during transition to professional practice do, other new graduates identify similar themes.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the findings of the study support previous research relating to teacher transition and induction. It reinforces that coordinated and coherent programs of ongoing professional support with greater continuity between pre-service teacher education and induction are required to facilitate the transition of teacher education graduates into the profession. Further, our study has revealed that this group of graduates at least, desire support of the most practical kind identifying strategies for behavior management as their most pressing learning need. It is interesting to note that they perceive that the main source of their ongoing professional learning is through workshop-type activities and professional learning days rather than from

their teaching colleagues. Perhaps universities and other stakeholders may need to consider more strategic ways that may facilitate the socialization of teacher education graduates into the profession. While it is acknowledged that practical strategies and work-based learning opportunities, such as field experience, play a critical role in the learning of teachers, ways to enhance and deepen the connection between theory and practice in undergraduate programs require further consideration. It may be that the 1+2 model described in this study may provide the framework for further development in these areas. Certainly, the nature of university-linked ongoing professional learning support for graduates warrants further investigation.

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