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Preparing to teach: Perceptions of graduate entry teacher education students

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Abstract

International reviews of teaching and teacher education have highlighted the importance of quality teachers in improving the outcomes of students. Teachers may enter the teaching profession through a variety of pathways. Currently in Australia, one pathway is through graduate entry teacher education programs in which people who already hold university degrees outside of education can undertake one-year formal teacher preparation programs. It may be argued that graduate entry teachers value add to the teaching profession as they bring with them a range of careers and wealth of experiences often beyond those of teachers who enter the profession through traditional four-year Bachelor of Education programs. This paper reports on a study that investigated the preparedness to teach of a group of graduate entry teacher education students as they prepared to exit from university and enter the teaching profession. The study concluded that this group of graduating teachers perceived that the field experience components in their formal teacher education programs contributed most to their beginning professional learning. The study revealed also that this group of graduating teachers sought further professional learning opportunities in the canonical skills of teaching. These findings may be used to inform the design of future teacher education programs.

Keywords: transition to profession; reflective practice; professional standards; teacher education; teacher induction

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, reviews of teaching and teacher education have agreed that the skills and attributes of high quality teachers have a profound positive impact on student outcomes (Williams & Forgasz 2009). One group of teachers that has the potential to add to the pool of high quality teachers comprises graduate entry teacher education students. Currently in

Australia, there are two main pathways into teaching: through four-year Bachelor of Education programs and through one-year graduate entry programs. Graduate entry programs are designed to enable students who already hold a university degree outside of education to attain a teaching qualification and so enter the teaching profession. The context for this paper is a graduate entry course: the Graduate Diploma in Education at a university in eastern Australia. The Graduate Diploma in Education comprises one year of full-time study equivalent plus field experience in schools.

Over recent years, the one-year Graduate Diploma graduate entry teacher education courses have been criticised for their limited opportunities for teacher education students to develop more sophisticated pedagogical skills and knowledge and understanding of contemporary school contexts (Skilbeck & Connell 2004). While it could be argued that extending the actual length of these programs would enhance the level of knowledge and skills of the teaching graduates, another argument is emerging that looks to the structure of the existing programs and of developing stronger links between pre-service teacher education programs and the ongoing professional development of teachers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2005). While there are some criticisms of one year formal teacher preparation programs, there is evidence that suggests that the graduates of these programs have an expanded set of discipline specific knowledge in comparison to teachers who graduate from the four year undergraduate programs (OECD 2005; Williams & Forgasz 2009). Another arguable advantage that the graduates of the one-year programs bring to the teaching profession is that they are representative of a broader cross-section of the community. Their prior experiences and life skills, which often include parenthood and work with young people, as well as employment experience and expectations from other work places and high motivation, add a depth and range of knowledge and skills not often found in graduates from the four year programs (Skilbeck & Connell 2004; Williams & Forgasz 2009).

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the preparedness to teach of a group of graduate entry teacher education students and to reveal also their immediate professional learning needs as they prepare to graduate from the Graduate Diploma in Education and enter the teaching profession. The findings of this study may inform teacher education programs about how to better prepare graduate entry students for successful transition to teaching. The findings also provide information on the kinds of professional

learning opportunities that need to be offered to beginning teachers to support their transition to the profession.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Thirty-four graduating students from the Graduate Diploma in Education course at the same university in south-east Queensland, Australia, provided the data for this study. The graduate entry teacher education students had recently completed their final semester of study in the course and were about to transition into professional practice. The participants comprised twenty-six females and eight males with ages ranging from early twenties to over fifty. This study had ethical approval granted by the university ethics committee and participants gave informed consent by completing the questionnaire.

Data were collected in this qualitative interpretive study through the use of a questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to reveal graduate entry teacher education students' perceptions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2011) of their preparedness to teach and to reveal their perceived ongoing professional learning needs as they prepared to exit from university and transition to the teaching profession. The questionnaire comprised questions clustered around three key aspects of teaching: teaching and learning; relationships; and reflective practice. Further questions focused on revealing the aspects of the Graduate Diploma in Education program that the graduate entry teacher education students perceived as contributing most to their transition to professional practice and asked also about further professional learning that they needed to aid this transition. Open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to provide opportunities for the participants to extend and substantiate their responses. A sample of the questions in the questionnaire is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample of questions from questionnaire

At this point in time, how prepared to teach are you?

Currently, in what area/s of professional practice do you believe you need greatest development?

What specific professional learning opportunities would you like in this/these areas?

Think about your time in the Graduate Diploma in Education program, what other experiences do you feel should be added to the program to facilitate your transition to professional practice?

What aspects of the Graduate Diploma in Education program do you feel have contributed most to your transition to professional practice? Please explain why.

The responses to the questionnaire were collated and then analysed through an iterative process in which the data were read repeatedly to search for patterns and themes (Miles and Huberman 1994). Each researcher analysed the data independently. Following this, the researchers compared the analysed data and made changes to the emerging themes where it was deemed appropriate by both researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three key themes that emerged from the data will be discussed in this section. These are that graduate entry teacher education students

- seek further canonical skills to take into the classroom;
- acknowledge the contribution of Field Experience;
- desire ongoing professional learning

Graduate entry teacher education students seek further canonical skills to take into the classroom.

Analysis of the questionnaire data revealed that this group of graduate entry teacher education students wishes to further expand their set of practical classroom strategies. While many of the graduates perceived a high level of preparedness in their fundamental knowledge and understandings of their profession, they still sought practical skills in applying this knowledge to practice. While there were a few graduate entry teacher education students concerned about theoretical understandings, most of the responses indicated a broader concern for acquiring more practical skills to make an effective transition to teaching. In another study, Pietsch and Williamson (2010) found also that 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.

Overwhelmingly, the canonical skill set that was identified as the most problematic and immediate was behavior management. This finding is supported by the literature (see Charles 2004; Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, Le Cornu 2007; Pietsch & Williamson 2010) and experiencing unease about having adequate skills to manage behavior in the classroom is a common issue for both new graduates and experienced teachers alike (Charles 2004).

Behaviour management is a critical element of the repertoire of practice of teachers. For it may be argued that all the other fundamental skills of teaching such as; knowing what to

teach (curriculum), knowing how to teach (pedagogy) and knowing what students have learnt and how to get them to the next stage (assessment), can only be effective if a teacher can successfully manage the behaviours of students in the classroom.

The findings of this study suggest that, while teacher preparation programs prepare teachers to develop strong foundational understandings and skills (Norman & Feiman-Nemser 2005), effective teachers must continue to develop new ideas, skills and practices over the span of their careers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford 2005). Thus, in a profession that is well recognized for undergoing continual change and being in constant flux, it is not surprising that newly graduate teachers want a larger set of 'tools' in their professional toolkit to support their transition into the classroom. It could be argued that it is a desire for professional competence (and arguably survival) that is driving their further professional learning needs as they transition into professional practice.

Graduate entry teacher education students acknowledge the contribution of Field Experience.

The data indicated that this group of graduate entry teacher education students believed their formal Field Experience in schools contributed most to their preparedness to teach. As part of the Graduate Diploma in Education programs, students are required to undertake 55 days of field experience in schools. During their field experience, or practicum as it is known in Australia, teacher education students teach in school classrooms under the supervision of registered teachers. The role of the supervising teacher is to provide guidance and support to the teacher education students and also to assess the teacher education students' ability to teach.

Current literature suggests that an effective transition for professionals 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 social constructivist view in that these graduating teachers perceive that powerful professional learning occurs through the range of interactions they experience in their Field Experience 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 as well serving to smooth these graduates transition to practice.

The finding that this group of graduate entry teacher education students perceive their experiences in the field to be most useful in making a smooth transition to the profession is to be expected. Teaching is a profession of ‘applied knowledge’ that requires constant problem solving, experimenting, risk taking and reflecting while in action. Each classroom raises unique situations in which the teacher must customize a personalized response. Like so many of the other applied professions, proving professional competence requires high levels of engagement on a daily basis. Having a suite of practical applications and responses is critical for transitioning effectively to the profession. Thus, the perception that professional learning opportunities in Field Experience are most valuable to a smooth transition is understandable.

Graduate entry teacher education students desire ongoing professional learning

This group of graduate entry teacher education students expressed further desire to participate in continued professional learning across a range of areas that include catering for student diversity in the classroom, assessment, curriculum planning and establishing positive professional relationships. Formal pre-service teacher preparation programs provide teacher education students with core knowledge and broad understanding of teaching and learning and lay a foundation for future ongoing professional learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). However, teachers must continually construct new knowledge and skills in practice throughout their careers rather than acquiring a finite set of knowledge and skills in their totality before entering a classroom.

The graduate entry teacher education students in this study perceived that their own professional learning has merely commenced and needs to be ongoing. While some literature problematises this notion, positing soon-to-be graduating 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 teacher education students about to graduate 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.

Current literature suggests that an effective transition to professional practice has specific requirements. These being; mastery of the canonical skills of the profession (Billett 2009), competent generic ‘soft skills’ to assist the professional socialization, such as reflective

practice, communication, problem solving and conflict resolution (Hummel & Koelmeyer, 1999), 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’. Graduate teachers must be equipped to engage in and negotiate on-going professional learning. As Rorrison (2008) states, “learning to be a teacher is a great deal more than learning to teach” (p. 1).

CONCLUSION

In regards to preparedness to transition to the teaching profession and professional learning needs, the paper has identified three key themes. The group of graduate entry teacher education students in this study revealed that they:

- seek an expanded repertoire of canonical skills to take into the classroom;
- perceive Field Experience as contributing most to their preparedness to teach and
- perceive their own professional learning needs to be ongoing.

While we acknowledge the study is small scale and any attempt to generalise the findings should be treated with caution, the findings reinforce that opportunities for ongoing professional learning, with greater continuity between pre-service teacher education and in-service professional learning, are required to support 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.

Learning to teach is an ongoing process which begins with pre-service teacher education, and continues into the profession as a beginning teacher progresses from novice through to established, advanced and leadership stages (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). Universities and other stakeholders may need to consider more strategic ways that may facilitate the transition 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.

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