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## “I Sorta Felt Like I Was Out In The Middle Of The Ocean”: Novice Teachers’ Transition To The Classroom

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*Abstract: The design of initial teacher education courses is to provide pre-service teachers with skills, processes and knowledge about the practice and profession of teaching. This allows graduate teachers to best service the learning needs of future students. A disposition of inquiry in relation to ongoing teacher learning is a significant aspect of initial teacher education programs. The contribution that teacher education programs make in the transition from pre-service teachers to teacher challenges the experiences that occur during the teacher education program. The impetus for this study was to examine the graduate teacher’s transition to novice teaching and the impact of their initial teacher education course in preparing them for this transition.*

### Introduction

There has been a significant amount of research worldwide examining the classroom preparation of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) and the long-term retention of beginning teachers<sup>1</sup> in the profession. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature investigating the various perspectives of an ECTs professional life including; the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs in preparing teachers (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2008; Kane & Francis, 2013; Schuck, Aubussion, Buchanan & Russell 2012; Veen, Bakermans, Franzen & Van Hoof, 1996); teacher identity (Arvaja, 2016; Samuel, 2008); the effectiveness of mentoring and induction programs (Burke, Aubussin, Schuck, Buchanan & Prescott, 2015; Schuck, *et al.* 2012); factors influencing teacher retention and attrition (Ewing & Smith, 2003, Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Fenwick, 2011; Gallant & Riley, 2014); and teacher registration and professional standards for teachers (Leonard, 2012; Schuck, *et al.* 2012). Together, these studies suggest that many factors affect beginning teachers at the start of their career.

The developmental ‘mastery’ required for teacher proficiency and teaching practice is a complex process involving increased ways of knowing, discipline knowledge, and specialised expertise (Turner-Bisset, 2001). Beginning teachers suffer from ‘transition shock’ as they move from teaching programs into employment as a teacher. This can lead to conformity and dismissing or reducing the opportunities to try reform-based strategies in their practices (Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf & Wubbels, 2001). Despite the extensive amount of research into the career readiness of ECTs, the introduction of support and mentoring programs, and now professional standards that determine the content of

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘beginning teacher’ is used to refer to those who are in a transition phase of beginning teaching and are in their first teaching position, within 12 months of graduating. The term early career teacher refers to those within five years of entering the profession and is consistent with national and international recognition of the beginning stage of a teacher’s career. The term pre-service teacher refers to those who are still undertaking their initial teacher education qualification.

teacher education programs, issues persist for ECTs as they make the transition into the teaching profession (Strangeways & Papatraianou, 2016; Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan, Varadharajan, & Burke, 2017). Therefore, the impetus for this study was to examine beginning teacher's perceptions of their preparedness for teaching and to examine further the transition to teaching and the effectiveness of initial teacher education programs in preparing beginning teachers for the school environment. Drawing from this broader research, the focus in this paper is on the classroom readiness of these beginning teachers and their experience of transition into teaching. The development of professional competence as beginning teachers and work supervisors' perceptions of readiness for teaching is also reported. Given the latest review into teacher education in Australia (Action now: Classroom ready teachers, 2014) such an evaluation is warranted and contributes to the ongoing debates about teacher education policy and the way in which teacher education programs are structured and worked in relation with the school sector (Fitzgerald & Knipe, 2016).

## Theoretical Framework

This research applied a theoretical framework utilising the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model (1986) to highlight the role of practice and practising<sup>2</sup> in the development of expertise. This framework provides a means for thinking about the development of teacher proficiency and is particularly relevant in understanding processes in progressing from pre-service teacher into beginning teacher. The framework draws on the work of Flyvbjerg (2001) in conceptualising the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model of the five levels in the human-learning process in professional practices – novice; advanced beginner; competent performer; proficient performer; expert.

The novice and advanced beginner levels of this framework are specifically relevant to pre-service teacher education. According to this model, novices are trying to develop their understandings of teaching practice in context-independent situations, where concentration is often on remembering the rules for specific skills – however, once several rules for a skill are learned, the complexity of understanding multiple rules of practice impacts on the ability to take on further advice, and continued rules become a barrier to the learning process. Advanced beginners are experiencing real-life situations and contexts to apply their learning to, along with, recognition that certain actions are relevant in certain situations. In this level, gaining experience is based on concrete experiences that are dependent on specific contexts. Learners are beginning to recognise that situationally they may need to bend or break the rules (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Pre-service teachers can typically be understood as novices, within this framework, transitioning to advanced beginners as they progress in their studies and undertake professional experience.

As beginning teachers become early career teachers, there is a shift from advanced beginner to competent performer. Unlike the novice and advanced beginners who are rules-driven, competent performers are personally involved in their actions and as such select a plan of action for each situation, based on interpretation and judgment. Using this model, the purpose of university teacher preparation is to transition pre-services teachers from novice to advanced beginner and to lay foundations for advanced beginners to then move into being competent performers.

Ongoing teacher education through school and professional association-based preparation, as well as further training in higher education institutions, is instrumental in a teacher's development into a proficient performer – those practitioners who have had

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<sup>2</sup> The verb form of practising is purposefully used here to highlight the role of repetition and regularity in performing an activity in order to develop and maintain proficiency of a skill

context-based practice in selecting and performing responses to situations, rules and decision-making. At this stage, drawing on decision-making processes that are more continuous, less sequential and based on situational knowledge and judgement, is more likely. A stronger element of intuitive involvement in the analytical decision-making that informs the performance of practice has a stronger presence. This includes the ongoing professional development through experience, knowledge, and engagement in professional reading – the development of *phronesis*. The final sequence in this model are experts, who have developed and learned to practice in ways that are intuitive, holistic and demonstrate a flowing, effortless, performance in a given situation that addresses problems, goals, plans, decisions and actions without deliberation on the components (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model informed this research study as a theoretical framework for conceptualising the development of teacher expertise, in a way that recognises the role of practising and context, as well as the development and shift toward expertise from pre-service teaching to beginning teaching. The model also allows for recognition that there is still much more required before expert practice is possible (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Pre-service teachers' transition into beginning classroom teachers is an important step in the shift in process from de-contextualised learning about teaching, to a contextualised practice and practising of teaching. As such, this framework provided for this research a key way to frame the role of initial teacher education in developing expertise. The framework has also contributed to the research design, with recognition that those in the transition from novice to advanced-beginner may have much to contribute about their experience and transition, however, their work supervisors may be more proficient and practised in understanding beginning teachers' readiness for the classroom.

### **Initial Teacher Education Programs**

Initial teacher education (ITE) programs are designed to provide pre-service teachers with skills, processes and knowledge about the practice and profession of teaching. Programs are structured in a way that provides a range of learning experiences aimed at developing understandings and strategies that best meet the learning needs of future school students. The quality of learning in initial teacher education programs has an impact on pre-service teachers' preparedness for the classroom experience, the implications of which can be far reaching for their careers and future students (Clarke, Byrnes & Sudweeks, 2015; Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014; Haigh & Ell, 2014; Ortlipp, 2009; Tillema, Smith & Leshem, 2011). Therefore, reviewing the effectiveness of ITE programs is an important on-going process that needs to be undertaken on a regular basis. This research, through interrogating beginning teacher's experiences of the transition to teaching, as well as work supervisors' perspectives, provides additional and valuable insights to the review process.

Beginning teachers who are recent graduates of ITE programs regard understanding the professional responsibilities of being a teacher, such as curriculum planning and teaching units of work as being significant components of a teaching qualification that prepares them well for teaching. Teaching of Aboriginal students, students with disabilities and classroom management may be considered less favourably by beginning teachers regarding preparation for the classroom (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; Ingarvson, Beavis & Kleinhenz, 2007; Lyon, 1989; Schultz & Ravitch, 2013). Teacher education providers aspiring to effect change and guide pre-service teachers in educational reforms need to improve teaching practices modelled at the initial teacher education level (Morrell, Flick & Wainwright, 2004). Otherwise concerns regarding the quality of initial teacher education, such as those highlighted in *Action now: Classroom ready teachers* (2014), will continue to impact providers of teacher education programs.

The impetus for the research study was in response to the latest call for tertiary education providers to defend the quality of teachers graduating from initial teacher education programs (Department of Education and Training, 2014). As such, a research project was designed to examine the effectiveness of initial teacher education programs in preparing and developing professional competence in beginning teachers. However, a broader priority was to utilise this work to develop a deeper understanding of beginning teachers' perceptions of their readiness for teaching and transition into the teaching workforce. This was further enhanced through exploring the work supervisors' perspectives of these beginning teachers' classroom readiness and transition to teaching. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to report on key findings from this research project.

## **Research Design**

This project examined classroom readiness and the transition from pre-service to beginning teacher. Beginning teachers were interviewed using a schedule of questions intended to establish their perceptions of program experience, classroom preparedness, and transition to teaching. Further, to develop credibility and authenticity in the research design, the work supervisors of the beginning teachers were interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of the beginning teachers' transition to teaching. This saw the development of two semi-structured interview schedules used to ascertain 1) the beginning teachers' program experiences, perceptions on their readiness to teach, and perceptions of their transition to teaching, and 2) each beginning teachers work supervisors' perceptions of the beginning teachers' transition to teaching, classroom readiness and how well they had been prepared for teaching.

A qualitative interpretivist methodology enabled the researchers to approach the research design and data collection with a focus on the empathetic understanding "of the everyday lived experience of people in specific ... settings" (Neuman, 2000, p.70), resulting in detailed descriptions and limited abstraction in the reporting of the data. The use of interviews to collect data through a set of guiding questions asked of all participants, allowed for consistency in comparison of participant responses while also enabling scope to develop a depth of understanding of participants' experiences. In this case, the interpretive methodology enabled the goal of the research, which was to explore the perceptions of participants' transition to teaching (or supervision of a beginning teacher) from their own perspective. Further, an interpretive approach in the analysis of the data was utilised through coding data into themes and categories by multiple researchers involved in the project. This resulted in richer interpretations of the participants' experiences of transition to teaching, highlighting common threads of experience across and within the groups of participants (Neuman, 2000).

## **Participants**

The participants involved in this project were drawn from a purposive and convenient sample of beginning teachers, with all having graduated within 6-12 months from teacher education programs that qualified candidates to teach in Primary, Secondary, or F-12 contexts. The participants in this study were drawn from schools in a range of geographical locations and across Victorian Public and Catholic school sectors. After the beginning teachers were recruited, their work supervisors were approached and invited to participate in the research project. The work supervisors were senior staff such as the school principal, deputy principal, head of

department, or worked in a coordinator or lead teacher capacity. This provided credibility and triangulation to the research through scoping a broader range of perceptions and experiences to complement those of the beginning teachers. The inclusion of work supervisors was an important aspect of the research design given their roles as experienced and lead teachers. In relation to the theoretical framework, we found that the perceptions of the beginning teachers (novice to advanced beginner), while valid and worthwhile, were mediated through their limited experience in the classroom. In contrast, the perceptions given by proficient and expert level teachers provided a more nuanced understanding based on their experiences of mentoring and supervising the beginning teachers. Also contributing to this, we found that the supervising teachers drew on their previous experiences of classroom practice and of mentoring and supporting early career teachers to inform their perceptions of the beginning teachers involved in this study.

Approval to conduct this research came from the presiding university, the Department of Education in Victoria, and the four Catholic Education Office dioceses in Victoria, Australia. In total 51 beginning teachers and 28 supervisors were interviewed; some of the beginning teachers interviewed had the same supervisor, as they were located in the same school, while other beginning teachers were working as Casual Relief Teachers and therefore did not have an allocated supervisor. Of the participants, 19 had completed an undergraduate (UG) ITE degree and 32 had completed a postgraduate (PG) ITE degree. All of the beginning teachers who participated in this research were interviewed within 6 and 12 months of their graduation from initial teacher education. Twelve of the participants had graduated in primary teaching, six in secondary teaching, with 33 who graduated with an F-12 or Middle Years (F-10) qualification.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

The authors had been involved in teaching the beginning teacher participants; therefore, a project officer was employed to recruit and interview participants. The project officer was not known to the beginning teacher or supervising teacher participants. Interviews were typically one hour in duration and conducted in person at the school. For interviews with supervisors that were not possible in person, telephone interviews were arranged. Participants gave permission for interviews to be recorded for transcribing. A research assistant was also employed to transcribe and undertake an initial coding of data. NVivo was used to identify themes and patterns in the data. At this initial coding stage, the themes were *a priori* and drawn from key literature as well as the interview schedule, an important element in establishing consistency in data analysis. Following initial coding, the researchers involved in the project utilised the data for more nuanced analysis and *posteriori* coding of the data that drew on themes and ideas which evolved through close reading. At this stage of the research, there were five members of the research team, including the research officer and research assistant. As such, multiple analysts as well as multiple sources allowed the data to be triangulated and provided the results of the study with credibility. The research officer followed a semi-structured interview schedule for all interviews, giving the study further credibility. The decision made by the researchers was not to send the transcripts for member checking.

The discussion in this article focuses on the themes and findings from the interview data that provided insight into novice teacher perceptions on their transition into a beginning teacher role, readiness for teaching and challenges that were faced in the transition from pre-service teacher to beginning teacher. Following initial coding and identification of key themes by the research team, one of the authors undertook further secondary coding of the data to scrutinise and provide a discussion on the beginning teachers' perceptions of their transition to teaching and their preparedness for the classroom environment, looking at the potential insights that this analysis may have on:

- Initial teacher education programs in preparing novice teachers
  - The role of the school context in beginning teachers transition to teaching
- This focus was consistent with the theoretical framework's focus on the transition from novice in a context-independent setting and moving towards advanced beginner through practice in context. The findings from this research will contribute to ongoing discussion regarding the nature and design of teacher preparation programs for classroom readiness and the role of schools in the transition of beginning teachers.

## Findings

### Initial Teacher Education Programs in Preparing Novice Teachers

There were 97 references coded to initial teacher education during the secondary phase of coding. The purpose of this code was to identify what the participants were saying was relevant to how initial teacher education programs had prepared them for teaching. References within this code were analysed and organised into sub-nodes based on three common and related themes – preparation for teaching; perceived program improvements; and, perceived program strengths. Each of these themes is discussed separately.

#### *Preparation for Teaching*

Beginning teachers were asked about how well they felt their programs prepared them for teaching, given their transition to teaching in the prior 6-12 months. The responses were organised to reflect four key themes that emerged:

- Not prepared for the work of teaching by ITE program (13 participants). These participants indicated that they found the transition to teaching difficult and that they had to learn a lot once in the job.
- Prepared, but only because of their own personal attributes or prior experiences as educators, rather than the ITE program (9 participants). These participants indicated that they drew on their prior experience and attributes, such as taking initiative, ability to relate to children and young people, confidence, and a learning mindset, as resources to help them cope with the transition to teaching.
- Prepared, but only because of placements and experiences once teaching (14 participants). These participants identified that they drew on their learning about teaching from placements and the school context once they began to teach, in their transition to teaching.
- Prepared as well as could be given the complexities of teaching work (15 participants). These participants identified that while they could feel better prepared in their transition to teaching, they understood that the complexity of the work of teaching is difficult to teach through university initial teacher education degrees.

Those participants that indicated that they did not feel prepared noted that it was the difficulty and complexity of the work of teachers that they felt their program had not prepared them. In particular, these participants commonly highlighted that in their transition they struggled with classroom management. Underlying this was frequently feeling that they didn't know what to do as well as feeling as though they were not ready for the complexities of teaching, as indicated by the following comment:

*I didn't feel prepared for all the issues. There is so much involved in being a teacher. I'm not sure though if anything can prepare you for what you have to do. You just have to get in and keep on going. It was really hard for me. (PG-4)*

There were several beginning teachers who felt that their preparedness for teaching was because of their personal attributes and experiences, rather than from their program experience. This is evidenced through statements such as:

*In terms of being ready to jump into a classroom, I think I was ready when I made that decision to go back to Uni. And I think that's just being mature though. (PG-11).*

Beginning teachers who had previously worked in schools in non-teacher roles, such as volunteering, outdoor education centres, or employment as a teacher's aide, attributed learning to teach from these experiences and not from the learning in their teacher education program. This aligns with Lortie and Clement's (1975) discussion of learning to teach through an apprenticeship of observation. The beginning teachers in this category had undertaken postgraduate initial teacher education and reflected in several comments that the knowledge they brought with them from their previous undergraduate degree contributed to their feeling of preparedness because they knew the discipline content knowledge well.

Another theme that emerged was from comments made by those beginning teachers who pragmatically suggested that learning to become a teacher only occurred during placement or once employed. It was only when they were able to engage in the practice of teaching – context-dependent practices – that they felt that they were then preparing to be a teacher. Further, there were a number of beginning teachers who expressed that they would have liked more time in schools in order to feel prepared. This was personified through the following comments:

*You can do all the coursework you like in the world but until you're actually in the classroom and taking lessons and learning the ins and outs of a teacher's life, you don't really know what to expect. (PG-2)*

*[We needed] more time in front of kids trying to figure out your own teaching style. I feel like I didn't have any confidence going out into the workforce. Like I knew I did okay but I didn't know who I was as a teacher. (PG-5)*

The final theme that emerged when discussing beginning teachers' perceptions of their program in preparing them for teaching, was an understanding that the programs prepared them as well as it could for what is a complex and multifaceted practice. There was recognition amongst beginning teachers that their programs had provided them with strategies, curriculum planning and knowledge and resources that they were able to use as they transitioned into teaching. Further, many beginning teachers felt that a program could only prepare them to a certain extent, and that experience and ongoing learning was important as they continued to learn as an in-service teacher, as indicated by the following comments:

*I don't know that the degree could have prepared me anymore; but then again, it's one of those things - you've just got to jump in and get on with it. (PG-3)*  
*We were given some training. I felt that it was a little bit limited [but] it was what you made of it. I know by talking to other people in the course who thought things were inadequate; I thought the opposite way because I knew I had done the readings and tried to get the most out of the course. ... It was a short timeframe so I absolutely knew that I had to make the most of the time. (PG-8)*



### *Perceived Program Strengths and Improvements*

The structure, duration and award nomenclature for teaching degrees has undergone significant change and, as a requirement of accreditation, teaching programs now contain specific knowledge and skills including curriculum theory, teaching and learning strategies and theories, classroom management, as well as mandatory study in areas such as literacy, teaching students from a non-English speaking background, Indigenous education, and inclusive education, and a specific number of teacher practicum days (Knipe, 2012). Despite these changes there are still concerns from beginning teachers regarding the learning experienced as part of their teacher preparation program. There were several key themes that came through in participant's discussion of ITE program strengths and areas for improvement, which were distilled to the themes of:

- Program structures
- Program content
- Professional experience

It is important to emphasise here that these are the perceptions of beginning teachers within the context of a discussion about their preparation and classroom readiness. As such, there are differences in perceptions, with some participants feeling well prepared while other participants feel underprepared in the same area. Overall, however, the participants provided relevant and useful information about what they feel they need as beginning teachers in order to feel ready for classroom teaching. Twenty-six of the beginning teachers interviewed, specifically indicated areas where their teacher preparation degree had prepared them well for teaching, citing a number of areas in the program structure and specific program content that they perceived as valuable. Alongside this, however, all fifty-one of the beginning teachers indicated there were areas in their initial teacher education where they felt underprepared and identified improvements that were needed. Supervisors provided perspectives responding to the level of preparation of the beginning teachers they were working with, not to individual programs or degrees.

### *Program Structures*

In relation to the structure of the programs that the beginning teachers had completed within 6-12 months of the interview, the discussion about areas of improvement needed in their teaching programs were often related to a feeling that the program sacrificed a depth of understanding about fewer areas of teaching in preference to covering a breadth of material at a shallow or superficial level. Several participants from postgraduate programs commented that due to the accelerated approach to their teacher training there was little repetition of content, and they didn't feel they were able to develop a deeper level of understanding.

*Things that we talked about [at the start of the course] were not talked about again, apart from the [teaching] standards ... The key skills weren't necessarily mentioned again. And especially the different strategies you need for high school and primary school. (PG-9)*

Several beginning teachers mentioned that there were still a lot of gaps in their knowledge of teaching, with a predominance of theoretical work when they believed that more placement experiences would have helped their learning more. One participant suggested that the support received from lecturers was more useful than content covered in the subjects of the degree.

*I think the support that I got from my lecturers at Uni prepared me more and not necessarily the stuff that we did in class. (PG-10)*

In contrast to this, twenty-three participants discussed the strengths of their programs. These participants identified the strengths as the clear outline and expectations of teaching that they learnt through their program, that they developed an understanding of learning, and that the final year of their degree provided a lot of relevance to their transition into teaching. A number of participants identified that they had great lecturers and felt a part of a community through their studies, that they learnt to apply theory to their practice and found that there was a lot of relevance between the assessment tasks they did in their subjects with what they have experienced in the workplace.

*... going back to being taught the theory and seeing it then in practice, and eventually doing that practice yourself, there were a lot of studies and observations that we did throughout our practicums. But it is these practicums, just 'doing' that makes the learning rich. (UG-5)*

*The course was definitely really comprehensive (UG-4)*

Unanimously, supervisors felt that the beginning teacher participants were well prepared for beginning teaching and had positive perceptions of the preparation that the beginning teachers had received from the university. Several supervisors highlighted that developing rapport between university and the school community was important in the readiness to teach and transition of beginning teachers, something that lays the groundwork for relationship building within.

*They have really close contact with families and carers. They're also making good friendships within the school and they'll go to the staff room and talk with people in their teams. They've fitted in really well. (SU-4)*

### **Program Content**

Many of the beginning teachers identified both classroom management and the development of teaching strategies as areas that they perceived their program needed to cover in more depth. These participants felt that in their transition to teaching they struggled in knowing how to relate to their students, that their understanding was theoretical and that they struggled to put this into practice. A perspective identified by beginning teachers was that classroom management was a skill that could only be learnt through practice, with at least eight identifying outright that this was an overwhelming aspect of their transition to the teaching workforce. Beginning teacher perspectives are further explored in a later section discussing difficulties faced during transition.

Classroom management and teaching strategies were also identified by the supervising teachers as the area that beginning teachers struggle with consistently. Unlike the beginning teacher participants, who felt that they should have received more and better training through their degree, the supervising teachers indicated that developing classroom management practices are ongoing and context-dependent. The following excerpts from supervisor interviews are indicative of this evolution:

*There's been a few times where... sometimes she becomes almost confrontational when sometimes you've got to be sure that you're challenging in the right way. And not coming across as authoritarian, if that makes sense. ... She's got a tricky class and there's not just one child with issues there's a few in there. She's managed them reasonably well and that's probably one area that I've tried to guide her in. To give her some quiet feedback on. (SU-5)*

*With experience you teach slightly differently, you know, there's still a youngness about [the beginning teacher] and I think with experience that will shift slightly ... but I have had that thought a few times when we talk about*

*student management. She knows a lot less... she's got a lot of things in place but, I think, well on one or two occasions, well that comes from experience, maturity. (SU-6)*

In contrast to this were the several participants, five in particular from an undergraduate course, who felt that they had received a thorough understanding of classroom management which focused on helping them learn to understand why children behave in certain ways and how to teach to differentiated learning needs:

*The most valuable lessons I had were probably about classroom management, that course we did which was just incredible to talk about the different practices and see which ones fit into your teaching. And then when you get into a teacher setting, you find that you will use a bit of all of them and you just make your own practice bubble. (UG-3)*

The area of differentiated and inclusive learning taught in the ITE programs were generally identified by the beginning teachers as not being covered in enough depth. Some beginning teachers felt that what they had learnt about individual learning plans were no longer relevant and that in their work as beginning teachers they felt overwhelmed by the range and scope of working with students with additional learning needs and diverse cultural backgrounds. Some beginning teachers felt well prepared to teach students with autism while other beginning teachers felt inadequately prepared, particularly in how to identify and approach the learning needs of students with autism. This is discussed further in a later section on difficulties faced during transition.

In the area of assessment and curriculum, several beginning teachers felt that a strength of their programs was learning how to assess, application of assessment in practice, and learning how to integrate curriculum effectively. In turn, there were quite a few of the beginning teachers who felt that applying the curriculum, planning using the curriculum, tracking student learning and applying a range of assessment practices into the school context was a gap in their programs.

### ***Professional Experience***

Professional experience was considered by both beginning teachers and supervising teachers as the area that prepared the beginning teachers for their vocation. While the supervisors felt that the beginning teachers were prepared for beginning teaching and that the university had provided a sound focus on relationship building in the programs that the beginning teachers had undertaken, the beginning teachers felt that there was more scope for improvement. Specifically, many beginning teachers felt that they had not had enough placements or that their placements didn't cover 'enough', that they would have liked to have done more teaching and seen more schooling contexts in order to feel better prepared. Some participants identified the experiences they had in schools, such as volunteer work or professional experience placements, made them aware of the 'disconnect' between what was taught at university and what occurs in practice. This is evidenced through the following excerpt:

*Look, a lot of things I'm unprepared for... but you're not going to get it at Uni. In a Uni environment and I can get it, you need to be in a school, in a school environment and I actually worked in here as an aid for 28 hours a week or so. To me that was my experience and to me it was like we've got people at Uni saying so you gotta do this but it wasn't matching up to what the school here was doing (UG-4)*

### *Discussion on Perceived Program Strengths and Improvements*

While there are a number of interesting conclusions that can be drawn from this data in relation to what teacher education programs do well and what needs to be improved, it is worth highlighting that what is taught and how it is learned is not necessarily common across all the beginning teachers. This can be seen through contradictions in relation to learning (or not) about teaching students with special and inclusive needs, and classroom management where participants from within the same program felt they were not prepared while others felt that they had received adequate or good preparation.

The most frequent criticisms of the preparation that beginning teachers had received, with all of the postgraduate participants and 15 undergraduate participants raising it, identified that classroom management is a significant issue in beginning teachers' work. This is consistent with previous research that found many teachers felt the way classroom management was addressed in their initial teacher training was not adequate (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, 2014; Dutton Tillery, *et al*, 2010; Merret and Wheldall's, 1993). Further, beginning teachers who felt unprepared or under-prepared frequently spoke of the irrelevance of theoretical and abstract learning in their program and the difficulty that they found applying it to practice, as well as the speed and pace of learning that didn't allow revisiting important elements of teaching and learning. In relation to the programs that participants had undertaken, those who had studied in a four-year undergraduate degree were much more positive about how prepared they felt from their program, with those who had undertaken postgraduate teacher education feeling less prepared by their programs. This is consistent with the findings of Kane, Rockoff and Staiger (2008) who identify that teacher effectiveness improves significantly after the first two years of novice teaching.

### **School Context in Making the Transition to Teaching**

Overall there were 136 references coded to 'Making the Transition to Teaching' during the secondary phase of coding. These were then categorised into key themes showing how participants spoke about their transition to teaching, or where supervisors were interviewed, the transition to teaching that they had observed in the beginning teachers. These themes covered the difficulties faced during transition, the personal attributes that they brought to teaching, and a sense of personal and professional evolution and growth. These are discussed in the following sections.

### *Difficulties Faced During Transition*

There were a range of difficulties that beginning teachers and supervisors raised in relation to the transition to teaching. Several beginning teachers identified experiencing difficulties regarding curriculum and content knowledge and "just getting my head around" (PG-2) the curriculum. This contributed to beginning teachers feeling concerned that their students would realise they did not know as much as they felt they should and that they had to adopt a "fake it till you make it" attitude.

Several participants' expressed surprise at the diverse learning contexts and inclusive learner needs that were encountered in their teaching situation, that they had previously been unaware of or had not encountered. This posed difficulties in their transition to teaching as they were now unable to draw from the practices that they had developed through previous

placements and school-based experiences. An example of this is seen in the following beginning teacher comment:

*I've never really been in a classroom where I have been exposed to so many different cultural backgrounds. So I hadn't really had much exposure to that and dealing with the kind of issues that might arise especially from low socio-economic circumstances. You have so much more appreciation, it's different. Managing students here is completely different. (UG-1)*

Understanding of diverse learners and inclusive learning strategies was linked to classroom management, although the vast majority of participants highlighted varying degrees of difficulty in developing classroom management strategies. This was an area, above all others, identified as one of the most confronting for beginning teachers in their transition. There was a sense amongst a number of participants that classroom and behavior management was something that they were 'thrown in the deep end' and despite preparation at university, including placement, they did not really understand until they were full-time in the classroom, as indicated by the following comment:

*... classroom management is absolute number one thing on the list and I just had to learn on the hop basically. So that was a shock to the system when I started teaching. I sorta felt like I was out the middle of the ocean somewhere going "help". So yeah, it's just crazy. (PG-4)*

There were a number of difficulties highlighted by beginning teachers that could be identified as 'understanding the nuances or minutiae of day to day teaching practices'. These included teacher responsibilities such as writing reports, talking to parents, knowing how to structure parent/teacher conferences, setting up and starting at the beginning of the year. This fitted within a wider discourse of not understanding the breadth of teaching practices and is characterised by the following example:

*... I never realised how much I didn't know until I started. I didn't realise that I needed to do this, and I needed to have this, and I needed to have this set up, like having group structures, all the different types of assessment. I didn't really know any of the assessments that you use at the beginning of the year. (UG-1)*

Within classroom instructional time several beginning teachers and supervisors highlighted that difficulties included an understanding of curriculum and lesson planning, the pacing lessons, as well as knowing how easy or difficult students would find particular concepts. One of the supervisors highlighted the additional work that had to be covered in order to bring the beginning teacher 'up to speed' on the specific curriculum practices at their school, as indicated:

*... As a mentor, I had to explain literally everything, particularly around the documents. The way that we plan is a bit different to the way \_\_\_\_ had planned before. It was definitely tricky, but she did really well and coped very well. We had to work long hours, but now she's got more of an input and she knows a bit more about the curriculum. (SU-1)*

Finally, a key difficulty faced in the transition to teaching was the juggling of work and social life. In particular there was recognition by the participants that the work of teaching was a lot more time consuming than they had realised, with a significant amount of time being spent on preparation and planning for teaching - "It takes up more of my personal life than I would like. As I said, I didn't realise that my life would change so dramatically" (UG-2). There was recognition that teaching was such a complex profession which the beginning teacher had not considered: "You have to learn a lot more than just how to teach. It has been really challenging" (PG-5).

Juggling the demands of teaching was also supported by some of the supervisors interviewed with comments highlighting that aspiring teachers were unaware of how difficult the profession of teaching could be:

*One of the issues with [beginning] teachers we've had over more recent times, the more mature adults coming into teaching are still coming in a little blindly. They're coming in with the belief that, almost a false belief, about what life will be like as a teacher. This is not an easy job and it is hard. (Su-2).*

#### ***Personal and Professional Evolution and Growth***

There was a sense among a number of participants that they had evolved and grown through their transition to teaching. There was mention of growing in confidence, of developing a passion for teaching, of the importance of ownership and identity in having their own class/es, and of developing understandings about important aspects of teaching that they had not previously appreciated, as indicated by the following comments:

*I just think you kind of just grow in yourself knowing that that this is your classroom and your class. (PG-6)*

*I think the transition period depends on what school you get into. That makes it easier. Again... and even though you might not use it, the knowledge that you got from uni is still in the back of your mind. Like one day you might go 'I remember doing that in a module'; so that kind of helps (PG-7)*

*I knew that it was going to be hard work but I didn't realise how much hard work. I think over this year it's made me more determined to be a teacher and it's made me realise how much passion I have for this job (UG-3)*

The supervisors also commented on the growth and evolution that the beginning teachers in their schools had undergone. This suggests that mentors, supervisors and colleagues are an important support for new beginning teachers to assist in being successful in their early transition into teaching, and that this relationship is equally important for mentors as for beginning teachers, as indicated:

*There's been a lot of highlights but I guess the highlight for us has been just to watch her become a teacher. And that has been effortless, and I guess that's what has been probably the highlight - just to see her growth. (SU-3)*

#### ***Personal Attributes Brought to Teaching***

Beginning teachers and supervisors both highlighted a range of attributes that assisted in the transition to teaching. A number of beginning teachers attributed their preparedness for the classroom as being mature in age when they decided to undertake their teacher education program. They attributed experiences, such as working in schools as a teacher aide or in volunteer roles, having had children themselves, or working in other jobs, as giving them the skills and attitudes that allowed them to be resilient and flexible in their transition to teaching. Further personal attributions that beginning teachers identified related to organisation and planning, skills in relating to students and young people, a passion for the work, and a willingness to take initiative in seeking assistance. Several participants indicated that the high professional expectations of the school they had worked in had given them a guide or measure on the level of work that was required to achieve.

Supervisors highlighted several attributes that they felt contributed to beginning teacher's transition to teaching, including conscientiousness, organisation, willingness to

engage in the school community, initiative taking, willingness to take feedback on board, and relationship building and relating to students. This is supported by research findings in other studies such as Bickmore and Bickmore (2010).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The data produced from this study questions the model of teacher education, regarding the way programs are conceptualised, especially in terms of length of the program, implemented and practiced. The findings from this study, in alignment with a broader research agenda on teacher education, supports ideas that teacher education needs to be considered in a different way – some beginning teachers, especially those from postgraduate programs, are failing to see the relevance of their teacher education outside of practical experiences. Some feel unprepared for the classroom, struggle with the classroom management contexts that they find themselves in as beginning teachers and feel that their success as a teacher is a result of their personal attributes and learning that has occurred outside of rather than through their teacher education.

It is important, however, to address limitations, in particular that although this was how the beginning teacher participants perceived their readiness to teach and transition to the classroom, indications from supervising teachers suggest that they found the beginning teachers to be overall competent and capable. Here, the supervisor participants show a mindset that reflects the learning involved in developing experience in the complex practice of teaching. The mindset of the supervisors was much more indicative of the development of expertise articulated in the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model of learning, where expertise is developed through ongoing practice and habituation and the development of practical wisdom and judgement during multiple, varied experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

This is consistent with an understanding of these beginning teachers as novices and advanced-beginners (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The theoretical framework guiding this research provides a lens for understanding the issues and concerns, as well as the triumphs and strengths of these beginning teachers. Understanding their perceptions as beginning teachers as being informed by learning that is very context-dependent, concrete and rules-based is useful in understanding the findings of this research. Further, the findings, particularly of areas of difficulty for beginning teachers, suggest that initial teacher education which focuses on developing a depth of understanding, the development and the application of skills and practices in teaching, will serve beginning teachers well in their transition to teaching. Ball and Forzani (2009, see also Grossman, Hamerness and McDonald, 2009), argue that teaching needs to be understood as *unnatural*, shifting away from conventions of teaching as telling and learning as listening. There is much in the data analysed that supports this idea, particularly where beginning teachers have struggled to understand the intricacies of complex teaching practices as they transition into their new teaching positions. In conjunction with the Dreyfus and Dreyfus framework (Flyvbjerg, 2001) if teacher education is to help facilitate pre-service teachers' transition into beginning teaching, then there should be a focus on utilising an approach where novice and advanced-beginner stages of expertise rely on developing a depth of understandings of the complexities of practice in context (see also Ball & Forzani, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Kosnik & Beck, 2009).

The conclusions drawn from this data provide us with an argument; limitations notwithstanding, that beginning teachers perceive that there is disconnect between teacher education and the teaching profession. The education of new teachers needs consideration that is more comprehensive and a joint task of universities and the profession, which extends beyond small-scale partnerships and brief periods of in-school placements, as well as the

impact of financial, time and systemic constraints. We suggest that the model for initial teacher education needs to be reviewed. Faculties of Education need to be engaged with teaching and learning in schools in order to draw from this knowledge and experience in their teaching of teachers. Reciprocally, teaching staff in schools should be involved in the preparation and delivery of university teacher education in order to develop reflective, informed practices that reduce the perceived gap between theory and practice (Miles, Lemon, Mathewson Mitchell & Reid, 2016). Models of teacher education that take this approach are already being adopted in countries such as Canada, versions of which are being trialled by some universities in Australia.

Looking at this from a broader perspective, however, the research reported here suggests that the on-going theory/practice divide documented continues to be problematic. From a wider systemic perspective, consideration needs to be given in regard to how schools, universities and policymakers collaborate in meaningful ways that serve the quality of the teaching profession, and ultimately the students. How might this be reciprocal and respectful, where the expertise and experience of teacher educators contribute meaningfully in schools and the expertise and experience of in-service teachers contribute meaningfully in universities?

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