The liminality of new foundation phase teachers: Transitioning from university into the teaching profession

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This paper explores novice foundation phase teachers' descriptions of their experiences in the liminal stage between being a student teacher and entering the professional world of the early grade classroom. The term "liminality" was popularised by anthropologist Turner (1969), building on the early work of Van Gennep (1960), in his work on rites of passage. The fluidity of the liminal period is characterised by instability and uncertainty with a diversity of factors affecting different novice teachers. In a generic qualitative study, based on individual, semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, findings show that the new teachers appeared to be somewhat unrealistic and/or unprepared in their expectations of what they would encounter in this period. The novices struggled to settle into the practice of a school classroom and largely blame the inadequacy of their teacher education programmes. They also cite the demands of tracking their young charges' learning and the lack of support from senior teachers as compounding factors for the difficulties they faced. These issues may have serious consequences for the retention of teachers in this important phase of schooling and therefore require the attention of both teacher education and school managers.

Keywords: early grades; foundation phase teachers; liminality; novice teacher; primary school teachers; *rite of passage*; teacher induction

Introduction

Teachers can play an important role in preparing a country's children for a fast-changing world, especially in an emerging economy like that of South Africa (Schleicher, 2016). According to Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005:1), teacher preparation programmes should be designed to keep "the changing world" in mind. This is also the view of Van der Berg (2015:38), a social economist who spends much time studying educational outcomes in South Africa. He recently reiterated the importance of teachers in the primary school, pointing out that they are the ones who teach young children the very tools for learning. In the last five years the Department of Higher Education and Training has invested liberally in research and training of foundation phase teachers, heeding the call that there are too few teachers in this category and that their pre-service education needs to be overhauled to suit the needs of the 21st century. Educational researchers, such as Henning (2015, pers. comm.) argue that a strong basis of early reading, and solid mathematics and science concept development, can lead to an increase in the number of school graduates able to pursue careers in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines. However, new teachers, particularly those in the very early grades, find it hard to face the challenges of everyday classroom practice (Henning & Gravett, 2011; Kennedy, 2016) and, despite their interest and their hard-earned qualification, exit the profession, oftentimes after only a few years. In the foundation phase, teachers may find it particularly daunting to cope, possibly due to the very particular needs of young children, who are just learning to adapt to the demands and structure of the classroom environment.

Students in foundation phase teacher education often find the lure of this phase to be strong, even romantic. The same students, once they have completed their degrees and start teaching, then relate how hard they find it to attend to many children, some of whom are not ready for the challenges of learning in a formal classroom situation. They seem not to expect young learners to be 'so individual'. They also do not fully understand the implications of an inclusive education policy (Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel & Tlale, 2015), which requires of them to be adaptive teachers who recognise the diverse learning needs of individual children.

The struggles of new teachers are also recounted by South African school leaders and managers (Naidoo & Petersen, 2015) in their attempts to retain suitably qualified new teachers (Gravett, Henning & Eiselen, 2011; Whitelaw, De Beer & Henning, 2008). There are different reasons why novice teachers struggle to access and settle in the profession of the early primary school and why only some persist. Some teachers leave simply because they feel they fail the children in the early grades (Spaull, 2015). The responsibility of leading children into literacy (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich & Stanovich, 2004; O'Connor & Geiger, 2009) and numeracy (Papic, Mulligan, Highfield, McKay-Tempest & Garrett, 2015; Spaull & Kotze, 2015) and teaching them to operate in a structured school environment (Skouteris, Watson & Lum, 2012) can simply become too much. Novice teachers have to move very rapidly from being students who have only just mastered taking responsibility for their own learning, to where they have to assume responsibility for all of their young charges' learning.

The 'Liminality' of New Teachers who are "Betwixt and Between" Teacher Education and the School Classroom

I use the idea of "liminality", which was popularised by anthropologist Victor Turner (1969:359), building on the early work of Van Gennep (1960), on *rites of passage*. The concept "limen" in Latin means threshold, and

best describes the positioning (liminality) of new teachers who are "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969:359) the world of university and the world of the classroom. I argue that this liminality, this transition period (Adey, 1998; Brock, 2000; Dow, 2003), is a normal, essential *rite of passage* into the teaching profession. Like any other novice's journey into a profession (Harris & Adams, 2007), it takes time for new teachers to pass through this phase and become enculturated into a school. However, I also argue that it is the intersection of their own liminality with that of their charges that affects early grade teachers, more than others. Foundation phase teachers work with children, especially those in the first grade, who are in a state of liminality, betwixt and between (Turner, 1969:359) informal learning and formal education, and who are entering a new phase of childhood as an early grader (Henning & Dampier, 2012). There is already much research internationally on what new teachers need in order to access the teaching profession; they have to learn about the tasks that characterise teaching as a professional practice (Ball, Sleep, Boerst & Bass, 2009) and they have to traverse the climate and culture of an existing school environment (Gruenert, 2008). New teachers' needs are thus myriad (Goodwin, 2012), and range from setting up a classroom and addressing parents, to the need for instructional support and time management (Fry, 2007), classroom management and discipline (Melnick & Meister, 2008) and how to interact with colleagues (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006). There is also a strong argument in the teacher attrition literature (Huberman, Grounauer & Marti, 1993) that many new teachers struggle with personal and emotional issues and preparedness for the profession. What is probably hardest for novices is the struggle for voice, space and 'footing' (Ribeiro, 2006) in the *rite of passage* (Van Gennep, 1960) into an established school community. It is a time of "professional vulnerability" (Lasky, 2005:899), where they are impacted by the "interplay of structure, identity and agency." As new teachers, with ambiguous status, they are "neither here nor there, […] they are on the margins, in an indeterminate state" (Turner, 1969:359).

Beginner teachers meet existing teachers at the threshold of entry to the particular school environment and the "old timers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:33) then have to make a decision, where they can either allow or reject entry. Thus, once the new teachers cross the threshold of everyday school practice for the first time, they become "liminal entities" (Turner, 1969:359), who are considered to possess no status or rank, and who are subject to the rules and obligations of that community and its culture (Lortie, 1975). According to Turner (1969:359), it is only when they move into the period of "reaggregation" that they will assume the

rights, status and obligations of a professional teacher. Thus, for new primary school teachers, the transition period is a time of immense adaptation and adjustment. They have to learn how to apply what they have learned about the young child-in-learning from university coursework in practice in a school classroom. This includes learning how to influence the development of children's knowledge, skills and dispositions (Richardson, 1996), and, as described by Lampert and Clark (1990), an understanding of operational strategies for pedagogical reflection.

One of the greatest challenges for first-time teachers in this regard is that they tend to view children as established school learners. Their first shock comes when they encounter large numbers of young children in a typical South African first grade classroom, for whom they have sole responsibility - most of whom have very little idea of how to function in a formal school environment. It is often then that they realise that they are meeting many individual children from different homes and histories, and they have to form relationships with each one of them and their parents/caregivers (Berry, 2004; Whisnant, Elliott & Pynchon, 2005). Over and above that, they have to make sure that they deliver a very demanding curriculum (Henning, Moloi, Nduba, Smit, Mabelane, Phasha, Sedebi & Pather, 2006) and prepare the children for the high stakes national assessments (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2012) in a mere nine months of active school time.

Further issues also affect the duration of individual young children's *rite of passage* into formalised schooling. In South Africa, one is language, where the policy of home language instruction in the first three grades predominates. Schools however, have to make pragmatic choices about the primary language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and it is here that the clash between the rhetoric of educational policy and the reality of the school classroom (Jansen, 2002) can directly influence new school teachers. Often the school's LoLT is not the same as many of the children's primary languages and teachers may then face an uphill battle in leading all children simultaneously into the worlds of literacy and numeracy (O'Connor & Geiger, 2009; Taylor, Draper & Sithole, 2013). Research on the intersection of language and instruction in the early school years is ongoing (Van Laren & Goba, 2013), but in the absence of large scale, longitudinal research in this area, there is little consensus in the literature to guide the pedagogical choices of novice foundation phase teachers. Small wonder, then that some just give up after settling their student debt. This paper reports on my attempts to understand what a sample of new foundation phase teachers experience in this liminal stage.

Method

This study was designed as a generic qualitative study (Merriam, 1998), as I was interested in understanding the challenges of new teachers in the liminal period of transitioning from the familiarity of student-hood for the unfamiliar world of the primary school classroom. Interviews were conducted with 10 novice foundation phase teachers to get their individual perspectives. Access was facilitated through the local district education office. The interviews were conducted by a doctoral student in the research project at a time which would not impinge upon school teaching. Ethical clearance was granted by the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee as part of a larger UJ research project.

All novice teacher participants had a four-year Bachelor of Education degree (from Johannesburg-based universities), are licenced by the South African Council of Educators, and have between one and five years of teaching in urban schools. These schools were mainly from the top two categories of a five-category scale of school resources. We were not able to source novice elementary school teachers in the lower three categories of schools – here the primary school teachers were over 55 years of age. Semi-structured individual interviews provided novice teacher participants with the opportunity to tell stories of their early transition into the teaching profession, the struggles they face/d and how they coped (or not) in this liminal period. This approach is in line with similar studies in this area (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Sandelowski, 1991), in which participants describe their experiences in their own words (Patton, 2002:47). Both the study design and semi-structured interview format, with one main question, followed by prompts and probing questions, allowed for an openness in exploring the personal and professional challenges experienced by the novices. Prompts, for instance, included questions related to the nature of their socialisation into the school community and the level of support offered to them at school level. The following research question directed the research: how do novice teachers describe the liminal period between leaving their university studies and settling into the teaching profession?

Individual interviews were transcribed by the interviewer as they occurred. Both the interviewer and I read through these transcripts a number of times and together composed an initial summary of the key issues they contained. Thereafter, each of us analysed the individual interviews using a form of open coding to identify smaller units of text that could stand on their own meaningfully in line with procedures associated with qualitative content analysis (Merriam, 1998). For instance, I colour coded similar occurrences across the set of transcripts and began to link comparable ideas and concepts. One example of how this was effected was with respect to 'struggles with connecting university coursework with classroom practice: discipline': with an extraction of the following from the interviews "I learned strategies on behaviour modification at varsity, but I don't know how to discipline the learners" (P5). We both worked through the transcripts several times, after which we were in a position to recognise common elements that were apparent across interviews. These were clustered into provisional categories that could be compared to each other for similarities and differences and were then linked conceptually to form the outcomes of the research. In this process, we crossed checked our analysis several times before finalising the outcomes.

Results

The fluidity of the liminal period of transitioning to the school environment is characterised by instability and uncertainty often with a diversity of factors affecting different novice teachers. In this study, the new teachers themselves appeared to be somewhat unrealistic and/or unprepared in what they should expect in this period. I highlight the three main findings that predominated in participants' descriptions of this liminal period: Blaming teacher education for the difficulty in the transition from university to the school environment, the lack of induction and support from schools and the administrative burden of tracking and reporting on children's learning.

Pre-Service Teacher Education: The Main Culprit for Novices' Unpreparedness

All the novices described the transition from their university studies to the school environment as overwhelming and unsettling

> *... I was not prepared for coming into the classroom. You just can't find your feet. You feel very uncomfortable about the basic things ... . I didn't know what to do and how to prepare my classroom* (P2).

From the teachers' responses, it appears as though most felt that they were not properly prepared by the university and thus struggled with their transition into the school.

Novices' main struggles were with connecting university coursework with the school situation. This is a common refrain in the international teacher education literature (Korthagen, 2011). In South African, the so-called practice-theory divide is also one of the most prominent critiques against university teacher education (Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2015). A common example hereof is captured in this participant's description of the teaching of reading:

> *... we had been taught different reading methods at varsity, but when we got into the classroom there*

was just no time to practise those methods. I felt like I learned all these methods and couldn't use them (P5).

Another big issue was with the utility of the theoretical lenses they had learned in their teacher education and its effect on specific teaching methods as evidenced by the following utterance:

> At varsity ... we learn this theory works like this and this theory works like that. When in actual fact it doesn't [...] when you go into a classroom it's totally different from what [lecturers] say it is (P3).

The participants also implied that their teacher educators were no longer in touch with current school and classroom conditions to prepare them adequately for practice:

> ... thinking of my lecturers, the ones in the foundation [elementary] phase, um, they still have a very idealistic idea of what happens in the classroom ... (P2).

Specialised Induction and Support during the *Rite of Passage*: A Missing Link?

There was, however, a realisation that many of the new things about being a teacher could only be learned through experience, in schools, which a participant described as a process of "finding my footing." She used the following metaphor:

> ... for me it's the same as you learn how to drive a car. You've always got to learn it with a person who can drive next to you. But you only really learn how to drive when you actually in the car and you've got your licence. So, I feel it's the same thing teaching. You go through everything at university, ... you have to implement it, that's where you really, really learn how to be a teacher. And that's why it takes the help of senior teachers in the school and quite a few years, I'd say about four years until you really feel like "Okay, [...] I kind of know what's happening."

It is in this context that an appropriate induction process and continued support, directed by senior personnel in the school is important. It appears to be one of the key factors in the school context that most influences novices' ability to traverse the challenges of the liminal period, gain access to the profession and assimilate into the school context. As part of this, managing the relationships with older or senior experienced teachers is paramount. However, contrary to the notion that a school principal and/or head of department would either lead and/or direct induction, this does not seem to have been the experience of most of the participants: *you are expected to be a professional teacher but no one at the school, especially the managers, show you how ...* (P9).

The principal would say, *"welcome, we're glad you here and we're glad you've chosen this school"* [...] *But it turns out to be: "here's your key, there's your class, there's your files, enjoy." Um, so at least I knew where to park and where my class was.* [Laughs] *... At least six months have gone by when the HOD comes to me for the first time in the year and says: "So are you Okay? Have you settled in? Are you coping? Have you got everything you need?" By then it's too late ...* (P1).

There was one exception in this small study with the new teacher reporting: [...] *my current HOD has shown me ... her ability to teach, she has shown me her ability to lead, she has taken the time to ... show people how to do things, to explain stuff like a work schedule ... sometimes I would have to go back for second, third explanations and she made herself available* (P5).

All novices struggled most with traversing the power dynamics in the school situation, quickly becoming aware that they were on the bottom rung of the pecking order of the school staff, all in a threshold position, trying to find their footing. For example, participants recalled how powerless they often felt in many situations:

> [...] *the junior teachers are cliqued together and the senior teachers are on the other side* (P4).
> *There is a power dynamic with older, experienced teachers. So, they are closer to management and they get what they want. I don't have much respect for how the management operates* (P8).
> *So I try to get along with relatively everybody, you know, and I try to help out here and there. But it also means that I get sort of walked over, because you feel like this person is older than you. So I just do what they tell me to do to get it done with* (P6).

Participant 2 also described the following: *"In our phase meeting, if you express your ideas, then the senior teacher will say*: *"No, I don't like it". So even though you are excited and you want to help, your ideas get shunted [sic] down; because you are new – what do you know?"* This is not uncommon in the liminal period when neophytes are expected to be silent, as they are considered to be *tabula rasa* (Turner, 1969:364) on which the knowledge and insight of the group must be inscribed. One new teacher also described how she was moved to a new grade three times without having the opportunity to settle, as *"the older teachers got first choice"* (P9).

Compounding the Instability of the Threshold Status: Tracking Pupils' Learning

An additional stressor was the burden of administration in a very demanding and prescriptive curriculum. This is not new in South Africa, with many studies reporting on the exceptionally high administrative demands on teachers to track and report on their pupils' learning. In this study, one teacher said:

> ... *we sent out our letter with all our assessments. For Language, we've got to have four tasks. For Maths, we have to have three tasks and for Life Skills it's one task. Under each task in the Language, there's four, five pre-activities, which is five mini-tests. Times that by four, it's twenty, just for Language [...] for one child!* (P9)
> .... *I'm barely, barely coping now* [...] *every single day you've got three sets of books to mark. And one set of a class of forty can take anything from forty-five minutes to four hours to mark. You've still got*

> *to prep each day, so that you are ready for the class the next day* [...] *and that can take anything from ten minutes to an hour, two hours depending on what you need to prep* (P1).

Many also lamented the need to accommodate the ever-changing directives from the local education district office, in addition to the in-service training.

Discussion

The data of this study of 10 Gauteng-based new teachers reveal their discomfort at having to take responsibility for the learning and progression of many young children. It is thus not unexpected that their primary discourses are those of unpreparedness and inadequacy in the reality of the classroom situation. Participants' disillusionment at being disavowed of the often romanticised picture of the idealised, surrogate to young children is clearly evident in descriptions of feeling out-of-depth and overwhelmed.

It is also normal for the new teachers, in this time of unsure footing, to blame their teacher education programmes and their university lecturers. This reaction has been reported on in both South African (Gravett et al., 2011) and international literature (Bromfield, Deane & Burnett, 2003). The "reality shock" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001:20) of stepping into teaching is understandable, given that graduates have to learn to implement, simultaneously and in an integrated fashion, with a number of children, what they have learned over four years of study at university. For instance, they are required to know which methods and frameworks to apply in-the-moment with a group of children who are in a period of liminality as they are betwixt and between childhood phases (Henning & Dampier, 2012).

In participants' stories, there is an indictment on pre-service teacher education. It seems as if most programmes do not teach novices how to cope with the challenges they will experience in the liminal period that occurs between attaining a teacher education qualification and practicing as a teacher. Students need to be better prepared for the discomfort, disequilibrium and ambiguity of the liminal period that marks the *rite of passage* transition (Van Gennep, 1960) from university studies to the classroom. In anthropological terms, in the liminal period, neophytes are expected to be "passive or humble", to "obey instructions […] without complaint" (Turner, 1969:359) in order to be "fashioned anew to cope with their new station in life" (as professional teachers). Thus, it is entirely normal for novices to be expected to learn like apprentices in the everyday practice of school life as a teacher (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

This stance, however, presupposes two elements. One, does teacher education prepare students well enough to look through the doorway to the other side of the threshold? Teacher education programmes for the early grades have to teach students conceptual knowledge for teaching (learned in coursework) and knowledge of teaching (learned in the context of work) (Feiman-Nemser, 2008) in order for them to understand what young children struggle with, and how they learn and advance. This requires an integrated approach. Kessels and Korthagen (2001) argue that using concrete experiences or student concerns to introduce 'formal' conceptual knowledge greatly assists in this integration. From this study, it seems as if this is a neglected aspect in these novices' teacher education programmes.

In addition, new teachers require a solid understanding of children's development (Ragpot, 2013) to develop the pedagogical dexterity to match teaching methods to each child's developmental stages in the first three grades of school. Such knowledge is acquired by learning about children's development in practice in tandem with their growing pedagogical knowledge. The real issue for an emerging economy like South Africa, which puts great stock in teachers to improve educational outcomes for all children, is whether this occurs to a satisfactory degree in teacher education programmes. From the descriptions of the neophytes in this study, this would seem not to be the case. The majority of the participants thus cannot see the usefulness of their conceptual knowledge once they step into practice (Korthagen, 2011).

A second issue is the lack of support in schools. In this period of "marginality" novices are in a "zone of indeterminacy" (Roy, 2003:163). They are in a time of having to learn how to fit in and adjust, a time of "transition and transformation", where they are betwixt and between, no longer a student but not yet a teacher either (Turner, 1969:359, 1987). A novice is a person in a state of liminality, where s/he cannot participate in activities that constitute the daily life of a teacher because the rules they know and understood as a student teacher no longer apply. Novice teachers are newcomers in an established community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), subject to rules they do not completely understand, and practices that are unfamiliar. In the period of liminality, the novice teacher will have to undergo a *rite of passage* to gain entry into the world of the professional teacher. As for any novice, the process of enculturation would be easier if there was someone to show the way and to make the unspoken rules explicit. For novice teachers to learn in apprenticeship, there necessarily has to be an "expert (teacher) who shows the apprentice how to do a task and helps the apprentice to do so" (Collins, Brown & Holum, 1991:2). This seems to be missing in the schools in this study.

International research on novice attrition (Kelly, 2004; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2001) shows that almost a third of new teachers leave

after three years, and that almost half leave after five years. A similar situation exists in South Africa, with the attrition rate being pegged at between 3% (Green, Adendorff & Mathebula, 2014) and 4.5% (Simpkins, pers. comm.). If South Africa is to improve educational outcomes, it is likely that part of what is required is more specialised forms of induction and support for new primary school teachers. Like their young charges, who are supported by their class teacher in the few months of adjustment to formalised schooling, so too, new early grade teachers also require a specific kind of support in this crucial *rite of passage*. It is only with this kind of support that the novice can traverse the liminal period successfully to emerge as a teacher who understands the specific rules, obligations and traditions of the profession and school.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that beginner teachers in the primary school are particularly vulnerable to dropout from the profession for a number of reasons, most of which have to do with being in a threshold stage in their trajectory. In talking to many new teachers, and confirmed by this research, I am inclined to conclude that if teacher education programmes do not prepare new teachers for the challenges of the indeterminate liminal stage of their movement from being student-teachers to novice teachers, they are likely to be flummoxed by the transition. This may prompt early departure from the profession, before they have even crossed the professional threshold. They may even see themselves aspiring to an 'elusive profession.'

From this inquiry, I have been further convinced that first-time teachers have to be led to an understanding that when they leave the university and enter the school, culturally, they are betwixt and between (Turner, 1969:359) two very different educational spaces. This is part of their *rite of passage* into professional life, and must be recognised as an important cultural transition period during which they will learn new ways of being and becoming (Fataar, 2010). If teacher educators do not prepare new teachers to understand that their insecurity, uncertainty and disequilibrium are entirely normal in the changeover from university to the school classroom, they are failing in one respect. But, it is not only in pre-service teacher education, where support for the liminal phase can be garnered. It is also in the school that specific induction and support for new teachers is crucial. School managers and leaders should be more proactive in co-ordinating and planning consistent and systematic induction, which could include some reflection on the cultural *rite of passage*, with its discomforts. Established senior teachers also have a very specific role to play in easing the way of

newcomers into the profession, with many schools putting into place induction and mentoring programmes for new teachers. However, in this study it appears that despite the existence of such programmes and the ideals it hopes to achieve, many seasoned teachers often act in ways that novices perceive as detrimental to managing the challenges of this liminal period, and thus, to them remaining in teaching.

Most importantly, through the lens of Turner's (1969, 1987) model, it seems as though the intersection of the liminality of new early grade teachers and the liminality of their young charges is insufficiently understood and under-researched in the teacher attrition and retention literature. In South Africa, if one factors in aspects such as the perceived mismatch between educational policies on language of learning and teaching and the reality of children's learning in the early grades, the adjustment period of the new foundation phase school teacher can be exacerbated. Thus, while we are somewhat successful at attracting students into foundation phase teacher education programmes and thereafter into schools, without adequate preparation for the difficulties they will experience and support for them once they are in schools, the many obstructions and obstacles new teachers face may prompt an early departure from the profession. In an emerging economy like South Africa, this is particularly worrisome. If we fail to address issues of specialised, on-going support for new primary school teachers, we risk not being able to make an impact in an area of schooling crucial to improving educational outcomes and skills development for South African children (Henning & Gravett, 2011).

Note
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