The reality of uncertainty:

The plight of casual beginning teachers

ANN MCCORMACK, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE
KAYE THOMAS, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

Whether by choice or necessity, a significant number of beginning teachers are initially employed as casual teachers. Currently schools rely heavily on the availability of these casual teachers and this demand is likely to increase as both new and experienced permanent teachers make choices about their careers in teaching. The issue of teacher retention is important for the future of education and requires an understanding of the factors which shape beginning teachers' career choices and professional development. This paper reports the experiences and concerns of teacher education graduates from a New South Wales university who enter the teaching profession as casual teachers. These perceptions are considered by focus groups of casual beginning teachers, university and NSW Department of Education and Training personnel as they offer suggestions for improving the preparation and induction of casual beginning teachers.

BACKGROUND:

Australian research has shown that regardless of their initial teacher education preparation and experiences, all beginning teachers progress through developmental stages from initial survival to the development of professional proficiency (Dowding, 1998). The initial year of employment or transition phase has been widely researched and recognised as an important segment of a beginning teacher's career, having long term implications for teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction and career length. Gold (1996) states that ‘few experiences in life have such a tremendous impact on the personal and professional life of a teacher as does the first year of teaching’ (p.548). As these teachers make this transition into the workplace they encounter many new challenges, responsibilities and must find a professional place within the school culture (Herbert & Worthy, 2001).

For many teachers this transition occurs through ‘casual, contract or relief’ teaching whereby they can teach in several schools for periods ranging from days, to a term, or
even yearly blocks of time, with the responsibility of teaching another teacher’s class. Casual beginning teachers, and in particular their induction into schools, has attracted very little research in contrast to the other areas of teaching (Galvez-Martin, 1997). Shilling (1991) reviewed the ‘modest’ amount of research on substitute/relief/casual teachers and after examining the sociological aspects of casual teaching concluded that it was seen to be a highly demanding form of teaching, substantially different from regular teaching and characterised by lack of continuity, status or support. This lack of literature was also identified by Galloway (1993) who found that casual teaching occupied a low priority in academic research, government policy documents or reports.

Casual teachers traditionally are employed to replace a teacher who is absent on some form of leave or attending a school supported activity such as a professional development course, excursion or sporting event (Vinson, 2002). In more recent times the growing shortage of permanent teachers in the areas of maths, science, special education and technology has seen many casual teachers not trained in these areas employed to teach these classes. This may be for a short period of time or for an extended time such as a term or year.

The reasons individuals choose casual teaching are varied and include flexibility for family commitments, facilitating a career change, re-entering the work force and as a short term way to earn extra money. However, a large number of casual teachers are beginning teachers who are gaining experience while searching for their first full-time teaching position (Crittenden, 1994; Shilling, 1991).

The working life of casual teachers can be radically different from their permanent colleagues and it can be ‘a highly demanding form of teaching’ (Shilling, 1991). Most casual teachers have to be very adaptable as they are expected to take charge of new classes and teach across many subject areas (Webb, 2002a). They have to deal with the expectations of different teachers and become familiar with the routines of a number of schools. These expectations are often without the support given to permanent staff or preparation time as they are regularly expected to undertake additional duties during their teaching day such as playground duty. Students, especially in the secondary school setting, usually rejoice when a casual teacher enters the room. They try to exploit the situation in an attempt to do as little work as possible while making the task of teaching as difficult as possible (Webb, 2002a).

Shilling (1991) describes casual teachers as working in ‘a marginal situation without the knowledge, status or respect given to permanent staff and often, instead of support from senior teachers they can receive thinly veiled warnings’ (p. 5) about their teaching competence, which provide very little direction or assistance. Casual beginning teachers faced with these situations, together with the lack of continuity and the unpredictable nature of casual work, can experience stress, loss of confidence and ultimately disillusionment with teaching as a career (Webb, 2002a). Crittenden (1994) is uncertain whether new graduates have the necessary skills to cope with the demands of casual teaching and questions how they can be assisted to successfully make the transition into
this role. Extensive research by Webb (2002b) identified common experiences reported by casual teachers. These were low status, different expectations (in different situations), lack of training (for the role), isolation and stress. Developing strategies to address these concerns is needed to assist the casual teacher in their role.

Induction for beginning teachers has been recognised as a crucial part of the transition into the school and classroom (Ramsey, 2000). Effective induction programs should provide a means of minimising the ‘reality shock’ usually experienced by new teachers. For casual beginning teachers this ‘shock’ is also coupled with the uncertainty of ongoing employment. Ideally induction programs should provide a period of learning and professional support for both permanent and casual teachers. Khamis (2000) states that induction is often misconstrued as just orientation to the school, implying a brief administrative process rather than a properly planned and implemented process of ongoing professional development and support. This view is supported by Rolley (2001) representing the Independent Education Union of teachers in Australia who advocates comprehensive models of industrially regulated teacher induction. She comments:

The general experience for the beginning teacher is one of being ‘thrown in’ to the life of a school with a sink or swim philosophy - often with cavalier advice to “forget all you’ve learnt at uni” whilst being given the school or department’s kit of survival strategies. These early years for a new teacher can be exceptionally difficult and professional survival is often based on inner resources rather than systemic, supportive structures (p.40).

Rolley (2001) states that induction is the point at which the issue of quality teaching can be addressed in the most fundamental and practical way to prevent beginning teachers from leaving the profession or ‘stumbling forward without any feedback as to whether their practice is effective or not’ (p.40). The Review of Teacher Education, NSW (Ramsey, 2000) highlighted the relative large size of the casual teacher component of the profession and the importance of preparing teachers who may be required to undertake such work for long periods while awaiting permanent employment. Ramsey (2000) highlighted the need for a range of approaches to be developed to meet the induction needs of casual teachers, about whom often unrealistic expectations are made by employers and schools. There should be the same commitment to quality induction for casual beginning teachers, as for those who gain a permanent position. If this induction is left unattended the professional growth and development of these teachers can be impaired and in the extreme lead to an early career exit.

To assist the professional development of beginning teachers, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) has developed a suggested induction program for beginning teachers. The program offers support to beginning teachers at three levels – state, region and school. Each school has been provided with an ‘Induction of Teachers’ Kit’ to help program implementation. The induction period is perceived as ‘at least a year long process of professional learning during which the beginning teacher makes the
transition from initial (preservice) teacher education to competent permanent or casual/contract teaching practice in a specific school context or contexts’ (NSW DET, Training and Development Directorate, 2001, p.5).

The NSW DET initially provides probationary status to casual and permanent beginning teachers. During the induction phase the principal and the beginning teacher’s supervisor are responsible for assessing and reporting on the progress of the new teacher. The Teacher’s Certificate qualification is available to casual teachers after completion of 195 days casual teaching experience within the previous 18 months, assuming a term block (or equivalent) has been undertaken (NSW Department of Education, 1993).

For the majority of casual beginning teachers who work in a number of schools, the program of induction is often not made available to them and there is no mandated formal program provided by the NSW DET at region or school level (Williams, 2002). In many cases the casual beginning teacher will replace the permanent beginning teacher attending the district induction program. This lack of induction and professional development opportunities together with the day to day challenges of classroom management, different expectations of schools and teachers, lack of status from students and other teachers, offers casual teachers little job satisfaction or control over their work and career prospects (Shilling, 1991; Williams, 1995).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This project aimed to identify and monitor casual beginning teachers’ experiences, reflections, support and problems encountered during the first year of their induction into teaching. The specific aims of the study were to:

1. determine reasons why beginning teachers undertake casual teaching;
2. identify and evaluate induction programs for casual beginning teachers;
3. review the major problems encountered by the casual beginning teachers and determine their present level of job satisfaction;
4. provide suggestions to improve the transition of casual beginning teachers into the workplace.

METHOD:

The participants in this study were graduates from a large regional university in NSW. The university offers three main teacher education programs with the largest number of graduates undertaking the four-year Education Double Degree program for primary, secondary and early childhood students. A one year Diploma in Education is offered for graduates wanting to teach in secondary or primary specialisations and a two year Bachelor of Education program is offered as a retraining program for students with recognised prior learning qualifications.
Questionnaires were sent to 1999 and 2000 education graduates who were teaching in city and country NSW locations. The questionnaire sought information relating to the beginning teachers' experiences, induction and concerns during their first year of teaching. The questionnaire was completed in 2001 with 248 responses received, 73 of these indicating they were casual teachers. Two hour focus group discussions were conducted involving randomly selected graduates from the respondents who were working as casual teachers. These discussions involved groups of four casual beginning teachers from early childhood, primary and secondary specialisations. The discussions were conducted by both researchers and followed a semi-structured format to clarify areas relating to the teachers' experiences identified in the responses to the questionnaires and to give them an opportunity to discuss sensitive issues or concerns and allow for comparative data across subjects. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the university and the NSW DET to help identify ways to improve the transition of casual teachers into the workplace.

The questionnaire data were analysed using SPSSPC and the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The open-ended response data from the questionnaire and the transcripts from the discussions were reviewed for common thematic elements across the groups. When presenting the qualitative data from the participants, comments were identified by referring to their gender and specialisation as follows: F, S representing a casual beginning female teacher in a secondary school or M, P representing a casual beginning male teacher in a primary school.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

**Reason for casual teaching**

The respondents to the initial questionnaire were both primary and secondary beginning teachers with 31% and 35% respectively indicating they were employed as casual teachers (Table 1). This response indicates that over a third of the respondents were working as casual teachers and supports research which reports many new teachers begin their careers as a casual teacher (Crittenden, 1994; Shilling, 1991; Webb, 2002a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Status</th>
<th>% Primary</th>
<th>% Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not teaching</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent full time</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent part time</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The focus group discussions explored the reasons for their casual teaching status with many seeing it as ‘a lifestyle choice’ which allowed them to combine domestic duties, other activities and teaching. One young male teacher explained his choice:

I think for me the reason I casual teach is more a fact of lifestyle rather than anything else......I have other things locally that I want to be involved in and I don’t want to move away and with there not being any permanent jobs that is the way I have chosen to do it. (M, S)

Others explained they were unable to move to take up teaching positions due to their partner’s occupation and family reasons and had chosen to pursue a career as a casual teacher. One mature age beginning teacher explained:

I am working as a casual teacher because my partner has a full time job in the local area and does not want to move, so that is my only option. I do not get many jobs in my own specialisation which is Art, and seem to teach in every other area (F, S).

Whilst many accepted their casual teaching status, others wrote in the open-ended responses explaining the lack of security and disappointment caused by not gaining a permanent teaching position. One teacher wrote:

Teaching whilst being dynamic and satisfying, has turned out to be a nightmare for me because it offers no job security for retrained teachers who are not prepared to leave the area (M, S)

And:

A counseling service needs to be set up for those who do not gain a permanent teaching position. The disappointment of not gaining a position is extreme after 4 years of studying, building hope and a $14,000 HECS debt (M, P).

Many of the casual beginning teachers interviewed indicated that as time went by and they did not gain permanent employment, they were choosing to teach at a select number of schools and across all specialisations or grades rather than move from school to school. One teacher explained her reasons for this choice:

I now only go to 3 schools in the local area because of the issue of knowing faces, knowing where the toilets are and how to find my way around the school. I get a lot of work from these schools as the students and staff know me now which leads to fewer problems management wise. I have chosen to go to specific schools so my own safety zone is protected (F, S).

This ultimately can have the effect of preventing some schools in the ‘more difficult areas’ finding casual teachers to employ and these schools historically have the greatest need for casual teachers (Williams, 2002). In addition, by teaching outside their area of specialisation or grade the casual teachers risk losing their specialist content knowledge and skills, and may be limiting the learning opportunities of the students they are teaching.
Induction

A common concern highlighted by the teachers in this study was the lack of induction and professional support they received as a casual beginning teacher. Table 2 indicates that a lower percentage of primary and secondary casual beginning teachers, when compared with their permanent beginning teacher colleagues, were provided with the professional support as recommended by the NSW DET Induction program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional support</th>
<th>% Primary</th>
<th></th>
<th>% Secondary</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher induction kit</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction by principal</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction by other members of executive</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal link to mentor</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at formal induction sessions</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal support by colleagues</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While most percentages are low, the table does indicate that a greater percentage of secondary casual teachers have received induction, in comparison to their primary colleagues. This could be the result of the school structure in the secondary schools where teachers have free lessons to discuss issues and plan lessons and secondly, the head teacher administration organises the employment of casual teachers and their duties. In comparison primary teachers have little free time to assist casuals and the employment of casual staff is often undertaken by the school clerical staff. During the discussion with the casual primary teachers the importance of the clerical staff was highlighted by a teacher who said:

I think personally the most important person in the school you can get to know is the clerical staff as they are the ones who help you out with photocopying, keys, craft material and which teachers rely on as a buddy. Some teachers don’t want to know you because you are just a casual. The clerical staff are the ones who often ring you back to work again so it pays not to get offside with them (F, P).

Very few beginning casual teachers in this study had attended formal induction sessions or had formal links to a mentor as indicated by the low percentage responses for these two areas of support (see Table 2). In many cases, the casual teacher was employed to take
the classes of the permanent beginning teacher whilst they attended induction and professional development activities. It is assumed that the lack of continuity of employment in one school did not allow the allocation of a mentor for the casual beginning teacher. During the discussions the casual beginning teachers stated their interest and desire to have someone to advise and guide them. One teacher said:

When you walk out of university your learning begins all over again, it really does. You sort of have some basic ideas but it is a whole new world when you get into your class on your own. As a casual I would have liked some type of mentor program, someone to talk things through with or give advice (F, P).

When the primary casual teachers were linked to a mentor they valued their professional support highly as shown in Table 3 where ‘formal link to mentor’ was rated the highest value followed by ‘informal support of colleagues’. However, there was a significantly lower value placed on ‘informal support of colleagues’ for primary casual teachers when compared to permanent teachers. This again could be the result of the casual teachers working in a number of schools which might prevent the building of close collegial relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 - Value of professional support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of professional support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher induction kit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction by principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction by other members of executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal link to mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at formal induction sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal support by colleagues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= low support - 5 = high support
* significance at .05
The secondary casual beginning teachers had less opportunity to access DET teacher induction materials, make formal links to mentors and attend formal induction sessions (see Table 2), however, those that did rated their value significantly lower than their permanent colleagues. This lower value could be due to their lack of continuity of teaching at a particular school and the absence of an ongoing support network which offered assistance to them as they moved between many schools to teach.

Many teachers in the study indicated that they chose the schools where they were prepared to casual teach on the basis of the amount of support and recognition they received from their colleagues. Many recognised the important role school leadership plays in developing the tone of the school and staff support for casuals. One teacher explained:

I think a lot comes down to the leadership of the school, their behaviour and expectations of staff and students. I find I can tell a lot if the Deputy is interested in what is going on and is firm with students then I have a lot nicer day when I know I have support (F, P).

Another teacher felt the basis of many concerns faced by casual teachers was their status within the teaching profession and the lack of support and recognition generally given to the role casual teachers play in the education system. She expressed her feelings by saying:

The better support you are given the better you survive and that is where I feel the system has been let down. They do not acknowledge the role of casual teachers within the school system as a whole. I think the school system has a huge problem with discipline but it is even worse when you are an unknown within a school (F, S).

Researchers have identified the situation where casual teachers are frequently expected to perform the jobs of their full-time colleagues without the backup and support given to permanent teachers, as a common feature of casual teaching world wide (Crittenden, 1994; Galvez-Martin, 1997; Shilling, 1991). Shilling (1991) further observed that this causes casual teachers to operate in ‘a marginal situation’ without the knowledge, status or respect given to permanent teachers. Tannenbaum (2000) acknowledges the important role of the principal, clerical staff and permanent teachers in developing a strong school wide support system for casual teachers. This system should include ‘well known policies and procedures, high expectations of student behaviour and a well thought out and consistent communication system among all school staff’ (p.72).

**Problems and job satisfaction**

Classroom management and discipline problems were common concerns faced by most of the casual teachers in this study. For many this was exacerbated when they taught in different schools each day as they did not have the opportunity to get to know students, staff or school procedures. These teachers often received ‘mixed messages’ from the
school staff. At times, the message was 'just survive the day the best way you can', which was interpreted by the casual teacher as 'babysitting' rather than teaching. At other times, the message was to 'complete work left or don't expect to be called back to teach at the school again'. In many instances, casual teachers report being told to keep the students in a room, quiet and under control. It was perceived that this criteria was used to judge the casual teacher’s level of competence. One teacher explained it by:

As a casual if you complain about management issues you are seen to be incompetent so it is pretty much a case of do as you like without having to involve anyone else. It has to get really bad before you contact someone else and bring them into the situation (F, P).

Students in schools also contributed to the low status experienced by casual teachers with many students adopting a defiant approach to a casual teacher who is unfamiliar to them. This added to classroom management problems and teacher stress. One teacher explained:

We face great stress when students are abusive and the moment they see your face walking towards the classroom there is celebration because their regular teacher is not there and they think they have 40 minutes of free time. It makes the going really tough and is hard to tolerate all day (F, S).

Other problems such as lack of resources, inability to follow-up work, teaching outside their area of specialization and lack of rapport with staff and students were faced by beginning teachers undertaking day to day casual teaching. One teacher explained:

Working as a casual teacher in a different school each day is very isolating and unrewarding as you are not treated as a valued member of staff and cannot interact as you would like with staff and students (F, P).

Block teaching of days, weeks or a term at the same school was the preferred model for the majority of the beginning casual teachers who saw this as allowing them to get to know school routines and resources; to build relationships with students and staff; to plan, teach and assess units of work; to gain feedback and, use a range of teaching skills. It was through this type of teaching experience that the casual teachers in this study gained the greatest satisfaction and professional growth. One teacher expressed her preference for block teaching in the discussion by stating:

Blocks are great as you know where you are going the next day, not waiting for phone calls and getting dressed quickly while trying to find some resources and be at the school in 15 minutes. You also get to know the children's names, develop a rapport with the other staff and parents, see some outcomes for your efforts and finally feel valued as a teacher (F, P).
Another teacher describes her experience in an open-ended questionnaire response:

I am pleased to be in a job-share situation where I have two permanent days each week at the same school and other days as they arise at the school. This provides stability and a sense of continuity. I am working with highly supportive and experienced teachers and can do so much more as a teacher who attends the same classes on a regular basis (E, S).

The casual beginning teachers in this study consistently highlighted the lack of information as to their rights and responsibilities as a casual teacher as a major area of concern. On gaining casual teacher status they received a departmental number but no other written information or advice as to procedures, rights and expectations. Most were unaware of the teacher induction resources provided to each school by the NSW DET (refer to Table 2) and the process for their eligibility for the award of a Teachers’ Certificate.

The above findings support the literature which cites classroom management as a common concern of casual teachers (Crittenden, 1994; Galvez-Martin, 1997; Williams, 1995). Williams (1995) concludes that the presence of a casual teacher is often seen by students as an invitation to misbehave and that work given to them during their permanent teacher’s absence is not valued. Other concerns of casual teachers highlighted in the literature are isolation, powerlessness and role ambiguity (Galloway, 1993; Shilling, 1991). Shilling (1991) notes that casual teachers often mitigate these problems of their work by teaching in a single school or limited number of schools, enabling them to establish some sort of relationship with the students and staff and thereby increasing the respect and status they are afforded.

Although the casual beginning teachers in this study had a number of concerns regarding their work in schools they were generally satisfied with their current teaching position (Table 4) with mean scores in the moderate to high range. There was, however, a significant difference between the means for permanent and casual primary teachers, with casual primary teachers having the lowest level of satisfaction in the study. This could be explained by the reported high expectations of other school staff, lack of mentor or staff support and the feeling of isolation highlighted by the casual primary teachers in the discussion groups. In comparison the secondary casual teachers acknowledged the value of the support when given by other staff and the head teacher of the faculty, particularly in the area of classroom management where there was usually someone in the staffroom to discuss an issue with or send a student to if required.
Table 4 - Level of satisfaction from current teaching position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>3.201</td>
<td>.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECONDARY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.539</td>
<td>.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1= very low - 5=very high
* significance at .05

During the discussions the primary beginning teachers explained their commitment to teaching and their real desire to teach, however, their frustration with their current casual status and lower level of satisfaction with this role (Table 4) could lead to an early career exit for this group of teachers. Although the discussion sample was small, it was evident that the beginning teachers who had followed a 4 year double degree initial teacher education program were more committed to gaining permanent employment than those who had undertaken a one year Dip. Ed. program who were generally resigned to a future of casual teaching. However, for many beginning teachers the prospect of long term casual teaching does not offer enough continuity or job satisfaction and they will seek a change of career in the future. One beginning teacher explained her feelings:

Teaching is all I have ever wanted to do, now I think if I have to do casual teaching for the next 10 years I won’t be around. I just don’t find it rewarding enough (E,F).

The literature reinforces the growing role casual teachers are playing in schools as a result of staff shortages and in-service training associated with ongoing curriculum reform (Shilling, 1991). Clearly, the challenges facing casual beginning teachers have similarities and differences to that of permanent beginning teachers. Their specific needs should be acknowledged to prevent an early career exit and the loss of a valuable and important part of the teaching workforce.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout NSW, school systems rely on casual teachers to relieve and replace permanent teachers absent from their classrooms for a wide range of reasons. The results of this study have shown that most casual beginning teachers are not given the same support and formal induction and professional development as their permanent colleagues. They received little information as to their rights and responsibilities, and mature age casual beginning teachers felt schools assumed they were experienced and competent, with the result being that even less support was offered to them. Rather than
being linked to mentors in schools, participants in this study relied on other casual
teachers and informal groups of peers from initial teacher education courses to provide a
support network. This lack of formal support has had a major impact on the pattern of
employment undertaken by these casual teachers with most preferring to limit the
schools in which they are prepared to teach to the few that provide support and
acknowledge their contribution to the curriculum. Most participants in this study agreed
that the attitude of the school principal and executive directly influenced the level of
support and induction provided to the casual beginning teacher.

This study highlighted many of the problems commonly faced by casual beginning
teachers. The participants identified a preference for block casual teaching which enabled
the problems of classroom management, non acceptance by staff and students, lack of
continuity of teaching and lack of feedback from students, staff and parents to be
reduced. Greater opportunities for sound teaching practices, support and meaningful
relationships were possible. Day to day casual teaching often provided a confusing
situation where the casual teacher’s role was divided between survival in terms of
managing the class behaviour and having students complete the work required by the
absent teacher, often leading to difficult, lonely and unrewarding teaching experiences.

Several recommendations for assisting and improving casual beginning teachers
emerged from this study involving a united approach with initial teacher education,
school regions and schools cooperating together. The recommendations were ideas
generated during the focus group discussions, initially by the beginning casual teachers
and, secondly, by university, union and DET representatives. The looming teacher
shortage and the early departure of many new graduates from the teaching profession
suggest that changes are needed to support this significant group of new teachers.

Firstly, at tertiary level, it is important to ensure beginning teachers are prepared for
casual teaching during their initial teacher education programs. While some preparation
is provided, the graduates suggested the following to strengthen their preparation:

1. More information provided about the nature of casual teaching. Guest speakers
   including current casual teachers, system and union personnel to provide a
   broader perspective of the role and suggestions to assist.

2. Broader practicum experiences to encourage a greater focus on whole school
   curriculum and teaching experiences in as many areas as possible. This would
   provide beginning teachers with a wider knowledge base and school experience.

3. Opportunities for secondary graduates to undertake elective courses in other
   specialisations, particularly those experiencing staff shortages such as
   mathematics, English, design and technology and science.

Secondly, the overwhelming call by casual beginning teachers for induction and support
reflects its importance and highlights the extent of its absence. Suggestions for improving
the support from the employer, in this study the NSW DET, were as follows:
1. A professional development program which focuses on the specific concerns of casual beginning teachers held on designated student free staff development days at the beginning of each term when casuals are not required in schools.

2. Provision of specifically trained teachers in schools to provide advice, mentoring and support for casual beginning teachers.

3. The appointment of a local consultant to support the needs of the casual teachers and the development of communication for local casual teachers through newsletters, regular meetings, district website and schools data base.

4. Professional development for school executive to raise awareness of casual teacher induction needs and support.

Finally, at school level, many casual teachers indicated their best teaching experiences were in schools with a strong support system led by the principal and school executive. Schools should have:

1. Principals who ensure that their casual beginning teachers are given the same opportunity for induction and linkage to mentors as their permanent peers.

2. School executive staff who reinforce the requirement for permanent teachers to leave meaningful lesson plans, resources and information to assist casual teachers and where possible allow the casual teachers time to familiarise themselves with these before entering the classroom.

3. A number of casual teachers appointed to each school thereby overcoming the problem of lack of familiarisation and non-acceptance by students and staff.

Since this study was conducted and the results first reported the NSW DET has attempted to address some of the issues highlighted. The NSW DET has developed an early career teacher website which has information and suggestions for casual teachers. The NSW DET has also created the Casual Teacher Plan to assist public schools find casual teachers. This plan involves a website with advice relating to all aspects of casual teaching and contact with Casual.Direct, a fully automated casual staffing system, and the establishment of the Teacher Relief Scheme, which aims to engage temporary teachers to assist schools to cover longer term temporary vacancies (Watkins, 2002). The tertiary institution involved in this study has extended their professional experience programs to encourage all students to undertake practicums outside the local area and has developed a comprehensive professional preparation program, which includes information and ideas specific to casual teaching.

From the results of this study we can conclude that casual teachers undertake a difficult job in circumstances where they are not provided with the support given to permanent teachers. The work of casual beginning teachers is different to that of their permanent colleagues, as they are often seen as ‘babysitters’ and given little feedback or professional support. However, as a shortage of teachers looms and the demands of
teaching increases, the value and role of casual teachers is becoming more apparent (Vinson, 2002). The need to nurture and support casual beginning teachers in their time of uncertainty as they make the transition into the workplace is important for the future of school education and the ongoing development of the teaching profession.

REFERENCES


Herbert, E. & Worthy, T. (2001). Does the first year of teaching have to be a bad one?
A case study of success. Teaching and Teacher Education, 17, 897-911.


Williams, C. (2002). Interview with Cheryl Williams, Academic Associate Teacher for the University of Newcastle and the Department of Education and Training.