Creating graduate, university and employer links through research in supporting the professional work and learning of newly-qualified teachers

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The paper gives details of a study motivated by a need commonly-expressed by staff in faculties of education in four NSW universities and of the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), namely to have a better understanding of the views of newly-qualified graduate students as they begin their employment as teachers. The working party that resulted designed a jointly-funded, cross-sectoral study. It developed a survey instrument that was administered by each of the universities to graduates generally of the previous two years. The study explored graduate teacher views of their initial teacher education programs, their perceived level of competence upon graduation, their experiences with induction programs, and their perceived competence after a year or two of teaching. Responses were aggregated to give the DET and the participating universities a picture of the outcomes across all graduates as a basis for discussion, further analysis and future planning. Outcomes for specific cohorts of students were returned to the relevant university to serve as a basis for follow-up work investigating specific issues through focus group discussions. This paper provides an overview of the study and its outcomes, and its impact on policy and program development.

INTRODUCTION

It goes almost without saying that there is increased interest, and not before time some would add, on beginning teachers and beginning teacher development. An aging profession, which will see a substantial loss of experienced teachers over the next decade, labour market shortfalls in geographic and disciplinary areas, as well as the need for succession planning within school systems, not to mention a different orientation of younger people to careers and lifestyles, have combined to send a wake-up call to the
teaching profession and the communities it serves both throughout Australia and overseas. (See, for instance, Ramsey, 2000; Vinson, 2002). The issues are universal; the solutions contextual. There are major questions to be resolved on the recruitment, preparation, induction, retention and the continuing professional development of teachers as well as succession for leadership. These issues led Dr Gregor Ramsey to observe in his report to the NSW Minister for Education and Training in the review of teacher education in NSW that:

There are two critical points at which extensive attention is needed...The first is the need to improve the transition from teacher-in-training to fully-fledged teacher, using mentoring, internships and better induction...The second is the development of professional leaders to take teaching forward and to manage schools effectively in an educational development sense. (Ramsey, 2000 p.14)

The world of beginning teaching traverses each of these domains. It requires leadership skills of principals and school executive to establish a nurturing professional environment, liaise with university partners, and take personal responsibility for retention and growth of beginning teachers. It requires of experienced and accomplished teachers a willingness to mentor and take personal responsibility for the renewal of the school and the profession. And, it requires of beginning teachers, a willingness to engage in further professional learning, and with the substantive issues of the profession they have chosen. Rather than being a subset of the educational continuum, the world of beginning teaching is being seen, more than ever before, as an integral and vital part of it, to a point where, it would not be an exaggeration to say, that the future of the profession now rests. It is an area calling for collaborative research effort.

The NSW Department of Education and Training has a commitment to working with universities wherever it is possible to do so in undertaking research that benefits policy and program development (Brock, 2001). In the area of beginning teacher development, the Department, through the work of its state office directorates including the current Professional Learning and Leadership Development Directorate, the Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate (2002 - 2003), and the Training and Development Directorate (up to 2001), has sponsored doctoral and post-graduate research (see, for instance, Carter, 1999); funded conjoint appointments of practising teachers with universities to work in, and research the nexus between, initial teacher education and induction (see, for instance, Williams 2002a; Williams 2002b); supported pilot studies investigating innovative approaches to teacher education (see, for instance, Cambourne and Kiggins, 2001); undertaken joint reviews of aspects of teacher education programs (see, for instance, Martinez and McCulla, 1999); initiated ARC Linkages Projects focused on initial and continuing teacher education programs in and for rural communities (Green, 2002); and, investigated on-line teacher professional development focused on mentoring beginning teachers (Hunter and Balding, 2001).

While the research literature is quite confident in identifying good practices around induction and mentoring of beginning teachers, far less is known about the lived
experiences of beginning teachers themselves as they engage with their local contexts. Even the term 'beginning teacher' could be held to be pejorative. 'Neophyte' sounds pretentious, especially when one considers its classical origins as meaning a 'converted heathen'. 'Newly-appointed' discriminates against those starting their careers on a casual or contractual employment basis. Recognising this problem of nomenclature, the term 'new teacher' is used for ease of reference through this paper.

New teachers enter teaching via a number of entry-level pathways including university graduation; a period of casual teaching; overseas training; retraining as a mature-age graduate; re-training after a career in another area of teaching; re-entry to the profession after a period of severance, and so forth. It raises the question of what are the experiences of these graduates as they enter or re-enter employment as teachers? What are the perspectives they share in common, and what is it in their experiences that is different?

METHODOLOGY

Recognising that graduates from initial teacher education programs make up the bulk of those entering the profession led the University of Sydney, University of Newcastle, Macquarie University and the University of Technology to work with the Department’s (then) Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate to establish a jointly-funded project to track the experiences of recent graduates of the four universities. The study utilised a sample survey that was co-designed by representatives of the universities and the Directorate who formed a working group for the project. Each university sent out the survey to its recent graduates of the previous year or two. Results were aggregated by an interstate and independent data analysis service under a contractual arrangement. Each university administered its own survey and had the results returned to it for that cohort. The Department and all participating universities jointly shared the aggregated outcomes of responses from all universities. No attempt was made to compare the outcomes from one university with that of another. The survey tracked new teachers in both government and non-government schools.

Some 674 graduate teachers responded. Although the response rate was less than desirable (around 24% of the sample), the intention was to open up issues worthy of further exploration, followed up in the first instance, by focus group discussions initiated by the universities, and then by later research. The outcomes of the initial explorations are presented in part in papers by Ewing and Smith (2002), Griffin and Deer (2002), and McCormack and Thomas (2002). The study made contact with graduates over a two-year period (three in the case of the University of Sydney) providing a useful perspective on the experiences of new teachers. The Department was able to look across the results of all four universities to identify some common themes. Each university used the study as a springboard to initiate follow-up or related studies. The outcomes of the study contributed directly to program planning within the Department and within the universities.
The survey instrument sought information on the background of respondents and views on the following:

- reasons for choosing teaching as a profession
- reasons for choosing a particular course and institution to complete studies
- the extent to which the initial teacher education program was a suitable preparation for employment as a teacher
- the types of professional support that assisted with induction into teaching
- the quality of induction support
- professional growth during the first years of teaching.

Questions under each were addressed for the most part using a five-point scale with provision in a number of instances for comment. Comments that were provided were further analysed by each university to identify trends and issues impacting on course development in the university and its relationships with schools.

FINDINGS

Given the limited response rate to the survey, findings clearly needed to be viewed with some caution. With this in mind, the working group found that a useful way of interpreting the data was to look for any ‘surprises’ and for outcomes that might not have been expected given a reading of the general literature on new teacher development that could form the basis of follow-up investigations.

1. Background of respondents

As might be expected, the majority were female (79%). Some 49.7% completed their studies in 2000; 32.8% in 1999; 13.7% in 1998 and 3.8% in 1997. More than 8 degree pathways were in operation, with a majority undertaking a BEd (21%), a degree and Dip. Ed. (19.9%), a double degree (19.5%) or a M Teach (16.9%). Of interest was the age distribution, with 22.2% being aged 36 or more and 54.1% in the 24-35 age group.

Of the overall cohort, 80.8% were teaching (50.8% permanent full time, 6.5% permanent part-time and 23.5% casual). 8.9% of respondents were not teaching while 10.3% described their current status as a teacher as ‘other’. 33.9% had been in their school for more than one year. 52.3% were trained as secondary teachers, 41.4% as primary and 6.3% as early childhood teachers.

Of the respondents, 83.8% were teaching primarily in the area of their qualification. Of significance, 206 respondents (30.5%) indicated they had spent time casual teaching with 41.3% of these respondents indicating that this had been for more than one year. 204 respondents (30.2%) indicated they were either teaching in a casual block (51%) or as a day-to-day casual (39.2%).
Some 78% of respondents were teaching in either Sydney (57.6%) or in a regional city (20.4%). A further 10.9% were teaching in a large country town the equivalent of (say) Bathurst and 11.1% in a small country town. The majority of respondents were working in Government schools (around 64.3%). Of the remainder, 17.9% were teaching in independent schools, 11.1% in Catholic schools, and 6.8% in ‘other’ institutions.

The pattern of dispersal is significant, given the proportion of new teachers teaching in rural and remote areas, compared to metropolitan areas, and calls for research efforts that develop precise cartographies of dispersal of new teachers across states and territories, and how this relates to the universities where initial teacher education programs were undertaken.

2. Reasons for choosing teaching as a profession

Using a five-point scale for responses (ranging from not important through important to extremely important) respondents commented on 12 areas identified through the literature as significant in choosing teaching as a career. As might be expected, areas identified as important to very important were: working with children/young people (90.3%); having a satisfying career (96.6%); promoting student learning (95.1%); contributing to society (90.7%); helping others (93.6%); and, enjoying opportunities for personal/professional growth.

Areas where responses were spread more evenly across the five-point scale included work hours which accommodate a personal lifestyle (mean 3.1); having a lifetime desire to teach (3.15); opportunity to work within a community (3.02); sharing academic knowledge with students (3.39); and, having a portable and flexible qualification (3.42).

3. Reasons for choosing the course and institution at which studies were completed

Using categories drawn from the literature, respondents were asked to rank responses in priority order. The outcomes indicated that the following were important: ‘other’ (20.9%); proximity to home (14.6%); reputation of course (14.6%); recommendation by friend/acquaintance; philosophy underpinning course (10.8%); availability of specialist subjects (9.5%); prestige of institution (8.1%); knowledge of someone who has completed or is completing studies in that university (5%); and, it was the only institution offering the course.

Clearly the ‘other’ category was worthy of university follow up in this instance.

4. Perceptions of initial teacher education

On a scale of very low to very high, with moderate as the midpoint, 80.8% rated their commitment to teaching as high or very high (mean 4.21). 60.6% rated the relevance of their teacher education program as high or very high (mean 3.65). The overall satisfaction with the teacher education program was seen as very high by 9.6% of the respondents and as high by 39.2% (mean 3.39).
5. Induction

Of some considerable significance was the variation in the degree of support with which new teachers were provided and the value they accorded to it. Almost one-third of the sample reported that no teacher induction material had been provided. Of those that did have access to material, the reaction was mixed with regard to its perceived value on a scale that ranged from very-low to very-high (mean 2.84). 38% of the sample thought its value either very low or low, while 28.8% valued the support as high to very-high.

A similar finding was recorded with regard to induction provided by the principal with almost one-third reporting non-involvement and, for those in the sample where there was some involvement, a mean of 2.85 as to its value. A similar pattern was observed in the induction support that was provided by the school executive (mean 3.13), with responses once again covering the range from very low value (11.2%) to very high (14.2%).

The importance of contextual and cultural factors in the school can be seen in responses to the question as to whether or not there was a formal link to a mentor and, if there was, the value that was placed on it. Some 285 responses of the 674 respondents reported that none was provided. A further 71 did not respond to the question. Of those that did, the value that was accorded to it was as follows: very low (14.2%), low (18.6%), moderate (23%), high (20.1%) and very high (24.2%), with a mean of 3.22.

A similar spread of responses was revealed in relation to attendance at formal induction sessions, with 235 respondents indicating that none was provided (with an additional 71 not responding), and responses spread across the five categories (13.9% very low, 20.1%, 25.5%, 26.4% and 14.1% very high; mean 3.07).

A clear exception was the value placed on informal support by colleagues where only 33 respondents indicated that it was not provided (no response 56), and 67.8% indicated that it was of high, or very high, value (mean 3.92).

Of the 554 respondents who gave information on the duration of induction programs, 31.6% indicated it was a single session; 25.5% that it was multiple or irregular sessions; 13% that it was regular sessions as part of an induction program in terms 1-2; and 11% as part of systematic sessions throughout terms 1-4.

A broad observation that might be made on the findings in this section is that, while good practice clearly exists, its implementation could best be described as 'patchy'. There was also a point of tension here, worthy of further investigation, with the literature arguing on the one hand for a structured approach to induction, and contextual and cultural factors coming into play in each workplace. (See, for instance, McCormack and Thomas, 2002; Williams, 2002b).

There was also a broader set of questions that needed to be resolved. What exactly is meant by the term ‘induction’? Induction to what and for what purposes? How and in what ways does it differ from ‘orientation’? Does lack of clarity, or presupposition as to what one believes others share as a definition, account in part for the variation in
responses just as much as contextual and school cultural factors do? What do new teachers understand and expect of ‘induction’? What is it schools provide? How and in what ways is this consistent with or at variance to expectations in teacher education programs? What expectations do teacher education programs hold for induction?

6. Perceived quality in the elements of induction support

Respondents were asked to give an opinion on the quality of induction support in a number of selected areas using a five-point scale (very low-moderate-very high) with additional provision to also record that the support was not provided. Most of the responses suggested that the support was valued as ‘moderate’. Of significance in the overall sample of 674 responses was the number in each category who indicated that support was not provided. On average, around 115 respondents did not make a response to each question, probably reflecting the view that they had not been involved in any formal induction program. The areas in the survey, and the responses from the recorded lowest to highest value, were as follows.

- Using appropriate information technologies (Mean 2.52; ‘Not provided’ 176)
- Lesson planning (2.56; 262)
- Subject matter knowledge (2.6; 197)
- Identifying individual differences (2.6; 147)
- Ability to evaluate your teaching (2.62; 167)
- Reporting on student outcomes (2.70; 137)
- Being reflective of your own practice (2.71; 155)
- Programming (2.76; 190)
- Student assessment (2.76; 132)
- Implementing teaching and learning strategies (2.82; 136)
- Ability to relate to students (2.82; 156)
- Classroom management (3.0; 102)
- Relating to staff and the community (3.02; 95)
- Legal responsibilities (3.11; 96)
- School policies (3.18; 48)
- Education policies (3.28; 72)
- School routines and procedures (3.36; 43).
In broad overview, it could be observed that new teachers felt most comfortable about the support they had been given in their orientation to the school and in developing their personal relationships with colleagues and the school community. They felt less comfortable in matters relating directly to the teaching/learning process. If this holds true, it could be observed that orientation to work within an employing authority and to the comings and goings of the specific school’s routine may be better handled because of the assuredness with which they can be approached. There is little room for interpretation in policies and administrative procedure. It also raises the question that, if teaching and learning are (or should be) the heart and soul of teacher education programs, why does there appear to be a lack of assuredness among new teachers as to what amounts to their core business?

One response might be that the nuances of the teaching and learning process vary from individual to individual, especially if one takes the view (as did Ramsey, 2000) that there is a period of professional growth from graduation to achieving the standards appropriate for certified or registered entry to the profession after a probationary period. It follows that induction does not need to, and should not, try to cover all aspects of teaching and learning, for to do so would only be to replicate what has occurred in the teacher education program. Rather, the essence of induction is to pinpoint those areas of development for the individual that are the basis of further professional growth. This requires good school leadership, skilled supervision and mentoring, individual development plans, and appropriate support materials and structures for the new teacher.

An argument could also be put that the whole area has been made more complex and uncertain than it need be by the profession’s inability, until recently, to articulate the standards and attributes it requires of its graduate teachers, as well as the professional standards required for ongoing employment as a teacher. These issues are being addressed in NSW through the work of the NSW Institute of Teachers.

7. Perceived entry-level professional competence

An apposite question from the interpretation of the results in this study was the extent to which new teachers felt they had grown professionally in their first years of employment.

On graduation, 43.3% of respondents perceived their level of teaching competence as high or very high (mean 3.9). 34.9% felt ‘competent’ while 9.2% did not. When aspects of competence were explored further, the highest level expressed on a five-point scale, ranging from not competent to extremely competent, was in the areas of an ability to relate to students (mean 4.10); lesson planning (mean 3.82); and, being reflective of one’s own practice (3.82). Less confidence was expressed in areas such as student assessment (2.86); reporting on student outcomes (2.88) and programming (2.93).

Other areas such as lesson planning (3.82); ability to evaluate one’s own teaching (3.7); subject matter knowledge (3.42); implementing teaching and learning strategies (3.31); identifying individual differences (3.23); using appropriate information
technologies (3.23); and classroom management (3.8) were all areas where responses varied quite markedly from individual to individual.

The responses here pointed particularly to the fact that competence is individually defined and that, on entering employment, the needs of one new teacher will vary markedly from one to the other. Responses reinforce the need to develop individual learning plans reflecting standards-referenced frameworks for professional learning.

8. Perceived present level of competence

In all instances, new teachers felt they had grown professionally (using the five-point scale ranging from not competent to extremely competent). The comparison with the mean recorded from graduation is interesting.

- Lesson planning (Upon graduation 2.56; Present 3.99)
- Programming (2.76; 3.57)
- Subject matter knowledge (2.60; 3.77)
- Implementing teaching and learning strategies( 2.82; 3.64)
- Student assessment (2.76; 3.46)
- Using appropriate information technologies (2.52; 3.54)
- Reporting on student outcomes (2.70; 3.47)
- Identifying individual differences (2.60; 3.65)
- Ability to relate to students (2.82; 4.36)
- Classroom management (3.0; 3.72)
- Ability to evaluate one’s teaching (2.62; 3.88)
- Being reflective of one’s own practice (2.71; 3.95)

Further to this, the degree of satisfaction with the current teaching position was recorded as very high (22.9%); high (38.9%); moderate (27.0%); low (8.3%) and very low (2.9%). Clearly, those in the low and very low categories are at some risk.

At face-value level, the data discussed above appeared to suggest that the induction experience was ad-hoc; that the support provided was variable in its provision and variable in its perceived value. On the other hand, the data also recorded evidence of marked professional growth. Cutting across these observations were a range of variables and contextual factors. While these make precise judgements about the quality of induction sometimes difficult, they appear to suggest, nonetheless, that it is the individual needs of the new teacher and the capacity of mentors, supervisors and colleagues to respond to those needs, that make the most difference.
9. Mentors and supervisors

In response to the question ‘Do/did you have a supervisor’, 52.3% said yes; 2.6% said ‘yes, after my request’; and 45.1% ‘no, not yet’.

In response to the question ‘Do/did you have a mentor’, around 18.8% said ‘no, did not want one’; 40.3% said ‘no, but wanted one’; 15.8% said ‘yes, chosen by me’; and 25.2% said ‘yes, chosen by the school’.

In response to the question is/was your mentor also your supervisor, 35.6% of respondents said ‘yes’; 64.4% ‘no’.

The impression that is formed from the data is that the practice of formally allocating mentors and supervisors to new teachers varies markedly from school to school and that at times the role differentiation is blurred.

10. Commitment to the profession

Around 53.6% of respondents recorded that they expected to be a member of the profession for 10 years or more, and 14% for 7-10 years. Another 12.5% indicated they expected to teach for intermittent periods; 11.2% for 4-6 years and 8.8% for 0-3 years.

There are two issues here. The first relates to those new teachers who are at risk and who, given appropriate support, can be helped to get through a difficult period and go on to sustained teaching careers. The second relates to the lifestyle choices of young people today who, despite the offer of tenured employment, preferred teaching locations and the best of support structures still choose to opt out of teaching. Retention is not an issue when lifestyle choices are set. More opposite questions relate to the conditions that would prompt a return when the time is right and that would recognise relevant life experiences in contributing to career path progression in teaching. While emphasis is shifting from recruitment to retention (Ewing and Smith, 2002), at least to ensure that there is some balance between the two, emphasis also needs to be placed on the conditions of re-entry after a period of separation.

SUMMARY

At best this cross-sectoral study, given the limited response rate, could only serve as a stimulus for discussion, a guide for planning for induction programs in the universities and employing authorities, and to help pinpoint areas for profitable research.

There are two levels at play. The first is the broad policy domain that, across Australia in the various national and state education jurisdictions, is currently examining issues of accreditation of teacher education, and of graduate and entry-level professional standards. This work holds great promise if we accept the view that it is difficult to work together - new teacher, school, university and employing authority - if we are not agreed on the outcomes of professional growth we are trying to achieve for new teachers and on how we are going to do it. The study identified the need to define more clearly what is meant by ‘induction’ in this context.
The second level relates to the lived experience of the new teacher as he or she moves through the professional experience component of initial teacher education, induction and on to full-time employment. The study has suggested that further research might well be local. What kind of profile do we hold, for instance, on each new teacher in working with them? How do we track the lived experiences of new teachers? What kind of observations and judgements might be made in aggregating the profiling of new teachers in a way that contributes directly to planning for their support, growth and retention in local school contexts, both as individuals and as part of a collective?

How, and in what ways, might we reconcile the apparent need for structure in our approach to induction, with the immense range of variables that impinge on it, both in the makeup of the individual teacher, and in the culture and context of the school in which he or she is working?

END NOTE


At the time of writing, further alignment with a standards framework for teacher professional learning was taking place with the work of the newly-created NSW Institute of Teachers. (See http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/).

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