Initiation and rites of passage:

Learning the school culture

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While most newly appointed teachers begin their teaching careers with excitement, they quickly discover that they must accommodate the distinctive school culture in which they find themselves. This paper considers various aspects of school culture as perceived and experienced by newly appointed teachers and suggests ways of enhancing their acculturation, understanding and experience.

The data for the paper arose from a larger study, partially in a consortium of four universities and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), and partially through further investigation by a team at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Two sources of data informed this paper: a questionnaire developed by the consortium and sent to each university's recent graduates, and subsequent focus group interviews conducted with respondents from UTS who had self-identified in the questionnaires.

This paper discusses one of the themes that arose from responses to the open-ended questions and focus groups: that of the impact of the school culture and climate on newly appointed teachers. Overall support from colleagues, principals, parents, staff and students was an important factor contributing to beginning teacher satisfaction in their new positions. Challenges in settling into new schools arose from a number of issues related to school culture, such as lack of acceptance by colleagues, school-based politics and teachers finding themselves in a school with low morale and few explicit school policies and procedures.

The paper concludes with recommendations for schools, systems and teacher education institutions that might support the transition into schools by newly appointed teachers.
INTRODUCTION

At the 2002 Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference, the UTS partner in the consortium investigating Teacher Preparation, Induction and Professional Development, presented a paper entitled ‘Bring Your Own Coffee Cup’. This expression captures one of the strong, often implicit aspects of school, or at least staffroom culture that Deal (1990, p132) characterises as ‘subtle, elusive, intangible’. Woe betide the new teacher or school visitor who unwittingly drinks from a personally owned coffee cup, or sits in a chair that is the traditional territory of a particular teacher.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996, p 37) define school culture as ‘the guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates particularly in reference to how people relate (or fail to relate) to each other. In simple terms, culture is the way we do things and relate to each other around here’. Within the school context, culture applies as much to aspects of professional policy and practice as it does to personal interactions and protocols, and extra-professional activities among staff. Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1991) attribute school culture to a great variety of factors including the mix of values, experiences, skills and aspirations represented in the school; special rituals and ceremonies; the unique history of achievements and traditions; the socio-economic and geographic location; the artistic skills of staff; and, the emphases of school subjects.

The organisational climate of schools is related to their culture but, arguably, has a more evaluative dimension. It refers to the perceived environmental quality of schools, and is typically located on a continuum of open to closed, which commonly equates with happy to not-so-happy. In an early study using the Organisational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ), Brady (1985) found that primary school organisational climate in NSW was explained by two ‘principal’ factors (principal supportiveness, and operations emphasis) and two ‘teacher’ factors (intimacy, and disaffiliation) that had remained constant over the previous decade. Professional and personal harmony are obviously major climate factors.

The UTS partner in the consortium focused on the impact of the school culture and climate on newly appointed teachers. The study described aspects of school culture that are conducive or inimical to inducting beginning teachers. It was also predicated on the belief that ‘the way we do things’ is very inclusive; it relates to virtually all areas of a school’s operation.

UTS has two main teacher education programs: a BEd (Primary) and a Grad. Dip. Ed (Secondary). Within the four year primary degree, it is possible to do primary only, special education, or honours (a different fourth year). At the time of the study it was also possible to do a degree in teacher librarianship. The Grad. Dip. Ed. offered specialisations in science, maths and PD/H/PE at the time of this study. Students from these programs comprised the sample.
LITERATURE

The work of this Consortium arose due to the worldwide concerns about retaining teachers and increasing their job satisfaction. These concerns arise out of an awareness of high drop-out rates of teachers in their first five years of teaching. School culture is an essential factor in helping or hindering beginning teachers in their efforts to become effective teachers, and to increase their job satisfaction (Woods & Weasmer 2004). Further, the literature suggests that job satisfaction is a predictor of teacher retention (Shann 1998).

The school culture can also increase or minimise the acculturation shock felt by so many beginning teachers on arrival in their first school. Sabar (2004) describes the adjustment process through the metaphor of migration. She suggests that the experiences of migrants have much in common with the processes of adapting to the school culture in which the beginning teachers find themselves. Issues of needing supporting social networks, experiencing feelings of marginality and coping with differences between expectation and reality are common to both groups. The school culture can address these issues or exacerbate them.

Woods and Weasmer (2004) consider various factors in the school culture that impact on job satisfaction. Amongst these, are the amount of autonomy teachers feel they have in the school, the amount of support available from executive staff, and the need to know that their contributions to the school culture are recognised and acknowledged. An important aspect of the school culture is the level of collegiality that exists. Woods and Weasmer suggest that when veteran teachers and beginning teachers share their ideas with each other, there are reciprocal benefits, which include a clearer understanding of the school culture by the newcomer, and a stronger sense of what is expected.

Halford (1998) considered the support offered to beginning teachers to be so inadequate when compared to other professions that education is provocatively noted as “the profession that eats its young” (p 33). Flores (2001) found, in her study of fourteen beginning teachers in six schools in Portugal, that most of the teachers did not find their working conditions supportive, and that those who did find the workplace supportive were more likely to seek and act upon advice, and to develop a more confident and positive attitude to teaching.

Another aspect of the school culture that has an impact on the job satisfaction of the beginning teacher is the (often) subtle pressure to conform. Teachers who wish to teach in different ways from those that are current in the school often run the risk of being seen as subversive and undermining the school culture. They will often face ostracism, or isolation from their colleagues (Boomer & Torr 1987). They can best avoid such treatment by conforming to the norm, which will lead, in many cases, to lack of job satisfaction and disappointment with themselves (Schuck & Segal 2002).

Patterson and Patterson (2004) also suggest that the school leaders play an important part in shaping and promoting a healthy school culture. The credibility and expertise of the school leaders (principals and other staff in executive positions), and the relationships created by them, will strongly influence the school culture.
Feiman-Nemser (2003) emphasises the importance of supporting and surrounding neophytes with a professional culture that will be beneficial to teacher learning. She suggests that there are many aspects of their new job that cannot be learnt before they arrive at the school, and one of these is learning to understand the school community and culture. She asks the following questions:

What implicit and explicit messages do new teachers receive about teaching in this school and district? How do interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and students strengthen or weaken new teachers' disposition toward students' learning and the new teachers' motivation to continue developing as teachers?

and concludes,

**Whether the early years of teaching are a time of constructive learning or a period of coping, adjustment, and survival depends largely on the working conditions and culture of teaching that new teachers encounter. (Feimann-Nemser, p.27)**

The above discussion presents a strong argument for investigating the school culture as its impact has been found to be considerable, both nationally and internationally. Concern about retaining newly appointed teachers in the profession must incorporate interest in developing school cultures that are supportive and welcoming and helpful in assisting beginning teachers to develop to their potential as professional and effective practitioners. This paper contributes to the growing evidence about the impact of school culture by describing the experiences of graduates of UTS teacher education programs.

**METHOD**

Data were collected from UTS teacher education graduates in 2001 using two means of data collection. The first was the survey 'Teacher Preparation, Induction and Professional Development Study', developed collaboratively by the consortium partners. The second was a set of focus group interviews with UTS respondents who had indicated willingness to be interviewed.

The 33 question survey comprised a mix of open and closed items in the areas of 'Participant information', 'Initial teacher education', 'Initial teacher experience' and 'Professional growth'. It was the latter two areas that yielded data relevant to school culture and climate.

Approximately 320 questionnaires were sent to 2000 and 2001 UTS graduates of the B.Ed. and the Grad. Dip Ed. Programs as described above. The seemingly modest 79 (24%) returned was comparable with the response rate for the other three consortium partners, and the low percentage return may be in part explained by the likelihood that many graduates were no longer living at the only address available to the university.

The majority of respondents were employed with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) (64%); while 16% were employed within the independent sector; 12% in Catholic systemic schools, and 9% with other employers. Over two-thirds of these
graduates had permanent (full time or part time) teaching status with the NSW DET, and the vast majority were teaching in the city or suburbs of Sydney. Table 1 displays numbers and percentages of UTS respondents employed specifically with DET.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialisation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% Working with DET</th>
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<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>62</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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Focus groups were conducted at the university in January and early February 2002 with graduates who had identified as being prepared to be interviewed. Four focus group discussions and one individual interview were held. Fourteen people participated altogether, five of them secondary, and the others were all B.Ed. graduates (either in primary education, special education or teacher librarians). One participant was an experienced primary school teacher who had participated in earlier work on mentoring with UTS but had upgraded her degree.

A number of different aspects of the graduates’ experiences as teachers were examined in the focus groups. Some of these related to school culture and climate. The following questions were used:

- What are the challenges facing beginning teachers, from your experiences?
- What critical incidents have you experienced, both positive and negative?
- What processes of mentoring and supervision have you experienced?
- What issues arise for teacher education at UTS?

Responses to the first two questions provided the most information on culture and climate although some data on this topic were obtained from responses to the third and fourth questions. Tapes were transcribed by a research assistant. Data from focus group discussions, interviews and surveys were examined to reveal issues related to school cultures experienced by the participants.

As the data relating to school culture and climate were qualitative, the procedure for analysis advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used whereby data are arranged in themes, reduced and displayed.

**FINDINGS**

Four broad themes relating to culture and climate are discernible in the data from the two areas of the survey relating to initial teacher experience and professional growth, and from the questions asked of the focus groups.
1. Relationships

Quality relationships are an almost universal determinant of both personal and professional satisfaction, so it was no surprise that affirming and satisfying relationships with principal, colleagues, peers, students and parents emerged as a decisive culture/climate factor:

I think so much depends on the people at the school – the parents, the children, the staff
– if they are great then you have a good experience.

The primary teacher librarians were the most satisfied group in this regard.

Dissatisfaction often arose from staff conflict and experiences with school-based politics. Arguably the most important relationships in a school are those with colleagues, and a large number of respondents revealed that they were experiencing difficulty ‘fitting in’ to the school. The problem of feeling a ‘second class’ citizen applied equally to the subsamples of respondents (‘still treated as a casual among peers’) and included a perception that established teachers do not want to move outside their comfort zones (‘trying to bring new ideas to the school and no-one wants to help or be part of it’; ‘problems with older members of staff believing that new practices are fads’).

Such feelings of not being accepted were exacerbated by issues related to fairness and staff morale (‘unfair treatment of some staff’; ‘staff morale is low...seems to be staff versus executive’). One teacher, acknowledging previous divisiveness among staff, was successfully proactive:

(I’ve) been helping unite staff – apparently quite ‘cliquey’ previously. I have initiated a birthday buddy system and continually plan staff outings, morning teas and so on.

Relationships with parents were also often problematic and a source of stress for numerous respondents (‘parents being demanding, rude, interrupting my class, gossiping’; ‘a troublesome parent who made complaints in the first month – unnecessary stress’; ‘parental problems, misunderstandings, interferences’). Some of the respondents indicated that their teacher education might be improved in this area (‘more ideas on how to conduct parent/teacher interviews’; ‘help write reports so it isn’t a shock’; ‘dealing with parents and community – being a young graduate – feel terrified of over-bearing and judgmental parents – do not know how to deal with different types of parents’). For one beginning teacher, being the youngest staff member was a problem as she looked too young: ‘With both parents and staff this was a problem’.

The most pervasive area of comment on relationships with students related to classroom management. While such an issue may be regarded simply as a teaching problem relating to inexperience in teaching, it may also be regarded in some instances as an expression of a school’s climate. Management was a major challenge for the secondary teachers. They explained their difficulties in terms of students’ attitudes to learning and school policies (‘students don’t care about learning. Most don’t want to learn’; ‘negative student attitudes, lack of respect, argumentative attitudes’). One
secondary teacher, addressing the question of challenges, and unequivocally revealing her state of mind, comments:

Mainly the classroom management – when students do not trust you or try to push you in your first two terms of teaching. It’s terrible.

Primary teachers also expressed difficulties with management, though the problem of general student attitude was not as heavily accentuated. ‘Attitude’ problems were regarded as specific, rather than general: ‘disruptive students, students who refuse to complete work’; ‘classroom management with tough students’; ‘dealing with violent, emotionally disturbed students’; and ‘disciplining repeat offenders’. Possibly the major challenge for beginning teachers was expressed in:

Behaviour problems – lessons are ruined/not as successful because of spending time managing behaviour.

Clearly, problems with the development of warm and trusting relationships with staff, parents and students was one of the major barriers experienced by newly appointed teachers.

2. Communication

Communication was a problem for beginning teachers because ‘the way we do things and relate to each other around here’ (Fullan and Hargreaves’ 1996 characterisation of culture) was not articulated for them. This message is typified by a primary teacher who claimed that ‘it has taken me about a year to work out exactly what people were expecting of me’. Teachers commented that a major challenge for them was to find out the written and unwritten rules (‘laws’). These were the ‘things you don’t or can’t learn at Uni’ for example, like ‘whose coffee cup you don’t use’.

The following teacher comment reveals the often silent, tacit, coffee cup ownership notions of an organisation’s culture:

I got yelled at by the principal because I’d culled a whole heap of books (which is in the library handbook) and hadn’t donated them to a mission supported by the school. I had no idea that that mission was what the school supported. I donated it to another mission. So just a lack of communication there, in terms of unwritten kind of rules and things that people just generally know.

The involvement of the NSW DET as a consortium partner was an expression of their more general concern about communicating the culture of the school to new appointees. More specifically, it was an expression of the need to implement quality induction programs in schools, particularly through nominating a supervisor and another person as mentor within the school for each beginning teacher. This program, conceived of as a way of retaining teachers who are disenchanted with teaching in their early years, was in
its incipient stages of development at the time of the study. Hence, the references by beginning teachers to the need for effective communication through quality induction:

As a temporary casual I wasn’t given a formal induction and therefore I didn’t know a lot of things about the school that I should have.

I find myself stumbling along and finding things out as I go along. I very much think that I needed some sort of induction.

It seems clear that the clarification of the many routines and protocols that more experienced teachers take for granted is needed.

3. Support v isolation

The location of the beginning teacher on this continuum was to some extent dependent on the quality of the appointed supervisor. At times, the supervisor’s assistance was limited for circumstantial reasons: ‘just that my supervisor could have helped me when I first arrived, however she was injured and in charge of new teachers’. Occasionally, the supervisor was not to the liking of the teacher: ‘[I needed] a different supervisor who is helpful and supportive, not demanding and intimidating…people who help before problems arise’. Whereas Brady and Schuck (2004), in their 2003/4 study of mentoring provision for beginning teachers, found that mentors, other than those formally nominated, were selected by the teachers, and that the need for a single source of wisdom was diminished in more collaborative school cultures, where help was shared, the same was not apparent in the reported study.

There were some interesting counter-reactions to the issue of providing support. While the need for such assistance was widely acknowledged to the extent that its absence was sometimes blamed for problems within the school, the occasional respondent believed that it was a challenge to professional autonomy: ‘(I) don’t need to be spoon-fed. I am a professional’.

There was a variety of personal and systemic factors influencing a teacher’s feelings of being supported or isolated. For instance, the notion of loneliness in a crowd was apparent, particularly when unrealistic work demands produced stress. One teacher extolled the support of the Catholic system, though it must be acknowledged that such a response may be as much an expression of satisfaction with an individual school as with a system:

The Catholic system is very supportive in providing release time and there is constant encouragement to attend in-service courses. Funding seems to be plentiful in these areas.

Another aspect of the support versus isolation issue involved the number of beginning teachers at the school. A number of beginning teachers commented on the support that other newcomers provided:
At my school there were three other staff members commencing at the start of the year. It was nice not to be the only new member and have others to relate to...

What made it good was two other beginning teachers starting at the same time so we helped each other as well.

4. Leadership

Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1991) make a clear link between the tangible characteristics of school culture and school leadership, by attributing culture, at least in part, to the underlying philosophy espoused by leaders and staff; the ways in which that philosophy is translated into practice; and the value sets of leaders. Leadership was frequently referred to by the beginning teachers, but more as an amorphous collective than a single person like the principal.

While there was some expressed dissatisfaction with perceived justice ostensibly meted out by school leaders ('some teachers get away with things that others get into trouble for'), there was a more general criticism of lack of global planning and consequent decisions made in an ad hoc manner. One respondent perceives a dissatisfaction endemic in the school culture itself:

Dissatisfaction comes from a school culture that is unable to stem high absenteeism and erratic discipline policy.

Concerns about classroom management were linked to leadership issues perceived as school-wide problems, ('lack of school policies for discipline, welfare and bullying'; 'lack of authority given to teachers to act on misbehaviour')

Acknowledgement of the beginning teacher's work by a member of the executive staff was noted to be very important in promoting job satisfaction. One participant discussed the support of the Deputy Principal at the school:

'Third week, first term last year, I was putting up the big board display in the office. She came up to me and said, "Do you want some help?" and I said "No, no,no".. you know she was in a suit (laughs) and she said "I just want to say that you have done everything you can these past few weeks, I think that you're fantastic.." de-de-de-de, you know. Just that positive reinforcement makes you want to be... you just learn. Anything they say.'

The above quotations highlight the need for the executive to be warm and supportive in their interactions with newly appointed staff.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the four themes of relationships, communication, support vs isolation and leadership, the findings in this NSW study reflect those of many previous investigations. The mix of current and new teachers' values, experiences, skills and aspirations (Beare, Caldwell & Millikin 1991), variations in social networks (Sabir 2004), and a supportive
executive (Woods & Weasner 2004), contribute to the success of beginning teachers in settling in to their new school environment. Through the voices of the beginning teachers in this study we can see a framework for scaffolding and supporting the successful induction of beginning teachers. Following, are recommendations, based on the findings of the study, for the system, school, and teacher education institutions. They are directed towards changing the culture of schools to enhance quality induction and improving their climate.

**System**

- Mandate appointment of separate supervisor and mentor for beginning teachers
- Provide training for mentors
- Establish an electronic mentoring network based both within a school district and beyond, providing beginning teachers with electronic access to both other beginning teachers, and experienced volunteer mentors. The work of Brady and Schuck (2004) is notable in trialling/pioneering such a network.
- Provide time release for beginning teachers to use electronic networks, but in particular to work on a regular basis with both supervisor and mentor.
- Develop and provide professional development on systems and strategies for staff supervision, focusing on the empowerment of beginning teachers.
- Institute a program of district-based regular meetings of beginning teachers to address issues specifically targeted by them.
- Allow opportunities through release time for beginning teachers to observe best practice in their schools and, where possible, to work as mentoring buddies with each other.

**SCHOOL**

- Provide professional development for all staff on mentoring and assisting new teachers
- Educate mentors and supervisors in the provision of appropriate support, and the most effective ways of communicating it.
- Recognise the work of mentors in workload allocations, specifically in time release.
- Build a sharing and collaborative culture whereby all teachers share both resources and ideas for planning, teaching and assessing.
- Implement a school-based induction program for beginning teachers, including familiarisation with available resources and their location, and the detailing of explicit expectations.
• Arrange regular meetings for beginning teachers, or if there is only one in the school, ascertain whether there are others in neighbouring schools with whom that teacher can interact.

TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

• Incorporate input from recent graduates (beginning teachers) in initial teacher education.

• Teach more towards the survival skills for beginning teachers, focusing on what to investigate on the first day and week, and what questions to ask.

• Review course content, considering the inclusion of more on interaction with principals, parents, supervisors and mentors.

CONCLUSION

A central message of the study is that initiation into teaching has its parallels with the initiation rites of some communities: it is often painful, and sometimes involves isolation from other community members. We contend however, that rites of passage for teachers need not be painful. If teacher educators provide the knowledge and skills necessary to operate effectively in the school community; if established school leadership and staff induct the beginning teacher into a collaborative school culture, the nature of which is clearly articulated; and, if the system provides the means by which broad-based mentoring support can operate, then rites of passage can not only be comfortable, but exhilarating.

REFERENCES