Some questions of recruitment and retention from Auckland's south west

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Abstract

The current problems we are facing in our state secondary schools of retention, quality and the availability of New Zealand trained secondary teachers, remain largely unsolved. Before any long term solutions are found, the right questions need to be asked.

This study follows the early teaching careers of three teachers, all from the same Graduate Diploma of Teaching (Secondary) programme. During the study, the three were all teaching together in a semi rural co-educational state secondary school.

The individual reflections of these teachers are explored, with a focus on their experiences and the challenges facing them as they work(ed) toward full registration. Sources of data include their personal reflections, lesson observations, evaluations and individual interviews with the teachers. These were analysed to ascertain their long term career goals.

The findings are presented as a series of questions which need to be addressed urgently if we are to learn what is required of a school and of our profession in its support and retention of beginning teachers. These questions may be crucial if we are to assuage the worsening secondary teacher shortage ahead of us.

Introduction

There is a serious problem of retention of beginning teachers in New Zealand
secondary schools at present (Evans, 2003). Additionally, concerns have been
expressed regarding the induction processes for these teachers within the secondary
system (Renwick, 2001). It appears that there is a need for an exploration of the
experiences of beginning teachers, the findings from which might help the profession
to address these retention concerns. It is also our belief that research of this nature is
critical if we are to find more effective ways of supporting the induction of new
teachers into our schools and our profession.

In this paper, we present the findings of a case study of the professional journeys of
three teachers over the period of a teaching year. At the time of the project, the three
teachers were in their first, second or third year teaching. All three were graduates of
the same secondary graduate diploma teacher education programme. They were
employed as full time teachers in a state co-educational semi-rural Auckland
secondary school. The three teachers varied in age and taught in different curriculum
areas. Two were female and one was male. One of the three teachers had just
successfully completed two years teaching and was a fully registered teacher. The
other two were still moving from provisional to full registration.

Other teachers in the school, who had an ongoing professional relationship with these
beginning teachers, also participated in the study. These teachers were responsible for
the appraisal of the beginning teachers; all were fully registered experienced
classroom teachers and heads of faculty. In addition, the first author had overall
responsibility for appraisal, new teacher induction and professional development
within the school. This same author had previously interacted professionally with all
three of the beginning teachers during their pre-service teacher education programme.
As a result of this long-term working relationship the case study of these three
teachers had the potential to be an authentic account of their experiences, both past
and present.

Background to Study

There had been relatively little research about the professional development of beginning teachers in either primary or secondary schools in New Zealand until the last two years (Education Review Office, 2002; Renwick, 2001). This is of concern because 38.4% of New Zealand teachers leave teaching in New Zealand within three years of joining the profession (Evans, 2003). Data from many western countries has suggested that New Zealand is not alone in this problem (Goddard & Foster, 2001; Patterson, Roehrig, & Luft, 2003).

Attrition of beginning teachers was a problem even in 1991 (Texley, 1996). Nowadays the problem is ever more urgent as increasing numbers of baby boomers retire and the number of secondary students rise (Eick, 2002; Renwick, 2001;). "With more and more teachers reaching retirement age, we shall have to make beginning teachers feel welcome" (Texley, p.26). We need to know more about the professional development of the beginning teacher. "While literature is helpful, reports of personal experiences are also informative and beneficial" (Luft, Roehrig, & Patterson, 2002, p. 222). This research project was undertaken in order to provide in-depth information about what is required of a school and the wider education system in support of beginning teachers.

Research Design

In this research project, the data were gathered, analysed and discussed with the participants within an interpretivist tradition (Neuman, 2000) that allowed the complexity of the beginning teachers' professional lives to be reflected in the findings (Sarantakos, 1998). A case study approach enabled an examination of the preferences, motivations and actions of the teachers (Yin, 1988). A close collaboration between the first author researcher and the teachers involved allowed the researcher and the teachers to reach agreement about the significance of the gathered data (Lin, 1996).

Sources of Data

Permission for formal access to the school and the teachers was gained from the principal of the school. The three beginning teachers were fully informed about their participation in the case study and all three gave written permission for their experiences to be analysed during the research project. The data were gathered through observation, interview and document analysis. Classroom observation took place during one year, as part of the school's regular appraisal programme. The first author interviewed each teacher twice. The second interview was video-taped. The interview questions were given to the teachers one week prior to the interviews, allowing them time to reflect on their responses. Tapes were transcribed and returned to the teachers for comment and validation. The teachers also participated in the development of their professional stories by writing a personal cameo. Documents collected for analysis included the beginning teachers' appraisal documentation and their applications for their teaching position. Comparative analysis of the beginning teachers' pre-service and in-service pedagogical philosophies was made using these documents. Data gathered were analysed and the emerging themes identified.

Findings

It became clear from the emerging themes identified by the researchers and participants that there were two significant aspects of life as a beginning teacher that concerned all three of these teachers. To use their language, these aspects can be summed up as "Survival" and "Kids' behaviour". Another emerging theme was the impact of the beginning teachers' core professional beliefs on the quality of their professional experiences. In addition, the beginning teachers talked about aspirations for their professional lives. We will discuss these emergent themes in more detail below.

The three teachers have been given the pseudonyms Jane, Nick and Pat; respectively in their first, second and third year of teaching during the study.

Survival

During their first year all three teachers were questioning the wisdom of their career choice. They were amazed at how challenging teaching had proved to be and that they had survived the often overwhelming experience:

> *JANE: Everyone tells me it is like this, surviving I mean, I am just tired all the time! I keep telling myself to keep it rolling along and just get through it. I feel if I stop, I just might not start again.*

> *NICK: I survived, my first year, I guess, I'm still here! I can honestly say parts of it are a bit of a blur really.*

> *PAT: "My god what have I done?" was what I thought for most of my first year. Honestly in my first year if anyone asked me if I enjoyed teaching, I could never say yes!*

The three teachers also realised after reflection that they had changed their unrealistic expectations and that this had helped them to survive, for example:

> *PAT: I am a realist now…. not dropping my standards - just analysing what I do and letting go of what I need to, to survive!*

Other members of the teaching staff appeared to validate this feeling of exhaustion and attempted to support the teachers by reassuring them that this was all very normal. They comforted these beginning teachers by recalling their own first year of teaching, with stories of classroom disaster and challenge, and assuring the beginning teachers that they would "get through it". Both Nick and Pat felt this acknowledgement of shared experience helped at times, showing them that they were not disastrous teachers, yet they also thought that stories of others' early teaching experiences did little to support their own ongoing individual and current challenges.

A strong influence on how well they survived was the professional relationships established by these beginning teachers. Jane's story illustrates this well. Whilst Jane had initially found that tales of disaster and challenge provided some solace and support, by term three she was actively seeking more than this. For Jane, professional relationships within her department were difficult. The leadership of Jane's curriculum department was not stable during the year and this instability left Jane feeling quite desperate about her own long-term survival. During the third term, Jane was proactive in gaining support from another source. She articulated her dilemma to a more experienced member of her department, who introduced her to a senior staff member who was from a different curriculum area but who had considerable institutional knowledge. This senior teacher then took an active role in supporting Jane, who believed that this teacher had helped her to survive - "this term at least!" Jane recognised the importance of strong and supportive professional relationships for all teachers:

> If I could change something it would be that someone came up to me and said here is your mentor for the year. I think even the most experienced teachers need someone to talk to even if they haven't got the best ideas…. sometimes it's just someone to listen to you.

With regard to Jane's survival, discussions with Jane's self-selected mentor later in Term Three warrant recording. The mentor felt that Jane had developed a well-tuned survival mechanism on her own, much better than those she herself recalled having developed in her own first year of teaching. To support this assertion she cited that Jane had begun to pace her weeks, her planning and commitments and that Jane was quite comfortable in taking a 'stress day' off school, when things were getting on top of her.

It is important to note that all three of these beginning teachers commented upon support from the senior management of the school. They perceived this to be weak which at times made them feel less supported and less secure in their roles. This was particularly the case for Pat who said that she got to desperation point before someone came to help and look at her classes.

Kids' behaviour

Another of the strong themes to emerge from the research was that of the struggles the three teachers faced with management of student behaviour and motivation of learners. They saw these to be fundamental to their feelings of success (or lack of) as a beginning classroom teacher. They were concerned about establishing classroom routines in the face of unexpectedly challenging misbehaviour, for example:

> *NICK: I did the classic start too soft … I would start tougher, I didn't expect the kids to be so destructive, and definitely I would have tighter classroom management.*

> *PAT: I got advice from teachers (about managing student behaviour) and started to become something I was not. [Looking back now] I would not try to be something I was not – I would be true to myself.*

The three teachers' struggles with classroom management also featured in their appraisal documentation. For example, Nick was recommended to "further develop discipline procedures and a harder approach". However, all felt that the school systems did little to support them with classroom management. Jane and Pat indicated that a lack of communication in the school added to their frustrations in the classroom, especially with regard to knowing how to use the school discipline structures.

All three beginning teachers were critical of their pre-service preparation for managing the learning in secondary classrooms. According to them, there should have more time spent on managing student behaviour during their pre-service education:

> *JANE: I know they say that dealing with kids' behaviour and things like that is on the job stuff, but it would have been good to talk about it.*

> *NICK: I don't think one year is enough for the training. It could easily be 18 months with more focus on behaviour management and more practicum.*

> *PAT: Less theory and more practical [in the area of managing students and their behaviour] would have been good*

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Significance and retention of core professional beliefs

As part of their pre-service teacher education all three beginning teachers had been required to articulate a personal philosophy of pedagogical practice and had been encouraged to include a summary statement of this in the curriculum vitae that they used when applying for positions. It was of interest to us to consider how this philosophy had been retained or changed during their initial years of teaching.

All three teachers had mentioned a passion for their subject in the philosophical statements and all three retained this passion after their early years of teaching. For example:

> *JANE: My experience [as a teacher's aide] led me to follow a passion for young people and so my decision to enter teaching. For me this decision allowed me to combine my two greatest passions, people and art. Most of the time I still believe that this was the right career path for me and I remain passionate about my students and art.*

Additionally, both Nick and Pat still felt strongly that mutual respect between teacher and learner was vital for learning, for example:

> *PAT: The idea of mutual respect ... if I respect them they will respect me. I don't think that's changed. … Honesty, respect and integrity are values I hold dear and try to live my life by.*

In her application-for-position documents, Jane had explained her philosophy through drawings and photographs of herself and groups of her disabled students; a textured intertwined image. She had emphasised her interest in the holistic development of students. That she had maintained this interest is indicated by a comment in her appraisal report:

> *You have a quiet, delightfully holistic way of teaching.*

Whilst these aspects of their personal pedagogical philosophy had remained intact, all three teachers indicated that some of their pedagogical principles had been challenged by the reality of the classroom. For Nick, the low level of motivation of his students challenged his notion of mutual respect almost daily. Pat, too, referred to the challenges she faced daily as she tried to infect her students with her passion and knowledge of her subject. For Pat, the actual level of achievement of her students – compared to her initial "idealist expectations" – had challenged her pedagogical beliefs. She had become more "realistic about what students were capable of" and had moved her expectation of student achievement "down a level". For Jane, the reality of the job had almost overwhelmed her. Her idealism was under constant attack and this had become the most soul-destroying aspect of her teaching.

Future career aspirations

Despite the challenges to their philosophies, all three beginning teachers planned to remain in teaching. However, even though they retained a passion for their subject, they remained reluctant to take on further responsibilities in their faculty or school. Nick had seen the workload carried by his Head of Faculty and could see no reason to aspire to such a role. Pat had no immediate desire for promotion but could see herself as "Head of Department within five years, perhaps". Jane was determined to remain at the school for another year until becoming fully registered and then to "teach in some capacity overseas".

In this section of the report we have discussed the four themes we have taken from the data. These were themes of survival, management of student behaviour, significance and retention of core professional beliefs and future career aspirations. Whilst it is not possible to generalize from the findings of a case study, these findings link with much of the literature regarding the experiences of beginning professionals.

Discussion

Many of the challenges facing these three beginning professionals are identified in the
literature. For these teachers, survival was their main anxiety and it is of concern that
other teachers in the school normalised this "simply surviving" experience when
talking with the beginning teachers. The greatest challenge to beginning teachers'
survival was their ability to manage student learning, including managing student
behaviour. One of the most pervading changes in education has been the paradigm
shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning (Lasley, 1998). However, this
style of learning can be problematic in that "where there are management problems,
quite a lot of interesting … work… goes out of the window" (Haggerty, 1997, p. 103).
Additionally, references to classroom management problems experienced by
beginning teachers are relatively common (Dowding, 1998; Haberman, 1991;
Haggerty, 1997; Renwick, 2001). The beginning teachers in this study were adamant
that they could have been better prepared for these aspects of teaching in their pre-
service education, both by addressing these more thoroughly through discussion at
college and by having longer periods of practice in schools.

The personal attributes of these beginning teachers were significant in ensuring their
survival. A strong belief system and a rich life experience contributed to their
resourcefulness and resilience as learners in the profession (Claxton, 2003).
Beginning teachers' beliefs have been characterized as pliable by Luft (2001) and
prone to being confronted and battered by Loughran and Doecke (2001). However,
these beginning teachers had held fast to the pedagogical principles that they had
articulated in their philosophical statements. Nevertheless, whilst not changing the
essence of these beliefs, to some extent they had changed their expectations linked to
these beliefs. In addition to holding fast to their pedagogical beliefs it was also clear
that the teachers in this case brought with them rich life experiences which sustained
them when faced with the demands of the classroom (Hargreaves, 1998).

These beginning teachers did not find that the school's systems for induction and
mentoring were particularly helpful. In this respect, their experience echoes that of
many beginning teachers in the secondary sector in New Zealand (Renwick, 2001).

These beginning teachers recognized the gaps in their induction programme and were searching for collegiality (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Lui, 2001). By Term Three of their first year, all three had exercised professional agency (Jary & Jary, 1991) by selecting a mentor for themselves as they had not found the formal mentoring system effective. These mentors were outside of the beginning teachers subject specialism but had been recognized as having strong institutional knowledge. One beginning teacher also sought an additional mentor who led a similar subject department at a different school.

This study has explored the factors that enable or hinder beginning teachers' professional development. The beginning professional brings personal attributes and attitudes to their first position, as a result of their life experiences, academic studies and pre-service education. He or she has a variety of very individualized experiences in their everyday classroom life that are mostly invisible to the other professionals around them; that is, the classroom becomes the "Black Box". The urgent need for education in New Zealand is for every beginning professional to emerge from the "Black Box" as a continuing professional – one who is an excellent teacher, positive about their profession, committed to their students and passionate about their subject [see Figure 1]. This study shows that there is a need for a well-developed system in schools, designed to support a beginning teacher's individual needs. When such a system is working effectively it will contribute to the emergence of a strong continuing professional.
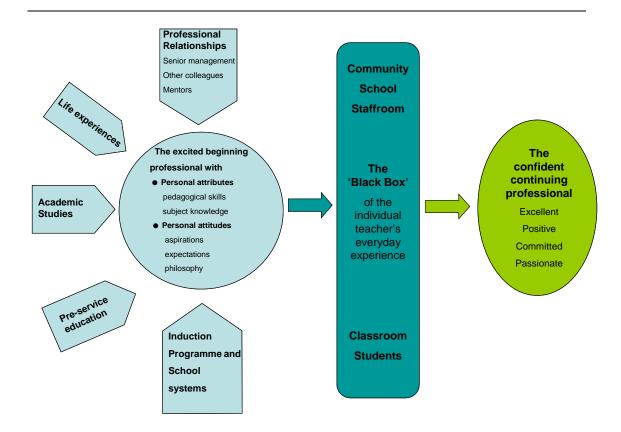
Fig 1: Model for Beginning Teacher Professional Development

Some questions arising from this study

The findings from this study, although specific to the study, raise questions for the profession to ponder. Such questions focus on recruitment and factors influencing retention. Some questions are:

- Two of the teachers believed that drawing on their life experience was key to their survival: should there be more focus on recruiting people with rich life experience into the profession?
- Is mere survival enough in the first year of teaching? Are we setting up our beginning teachers to believe that their first year should be just a matter of survival and that they are not 'normal' if they don't have this struggle for survival?
- By Term Three, all three beginning teachers in this study had sought out their own mentor: should a support person be selected by the school or by the beginning teacher?

- The mentors these teachers chose all had strong institutional knowledge rather than being from the same curriculum area. Should induction programmes focus more on the institutional knowledge needs of the beginning teacher?

- How can we better prepare beginning teachers to manage their classrooms? How can they be better helped to cope with classroom realities? How can pre-service education programmes better meet these needs?

- All three teachers held fast to aspects of their philosophy, yet it was a struggle to do so. For them all, challenges to their own passions about their subject and to their beliefs about why they wanted to become a teacher were the most soul-destroying aspects of their teaching. Is it important that the pedagogical philosophy developed during pre-service education is reflected upon during the first year of teaching? Is this one of the keys to retention in our profession?

As we search for the answers to these questions, we believe that we should listen carefully to the voices of the beginning teachers themselves as well as challenging the systems within which they construct their practice.

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