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Beginning teacher comments about pre-service education and their suggestions for future pre-service training programs.

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Abstract

This paper reports at 9 months on the results of a 2-year longitudinal study into beginning teacher's perceptions of their work and well-being. Data was collected from the graduates of three Queensland universities on two occasions during their first year of teaching. On the basis of their early career perspective, beginning teachers were asked to comment on the adequacy of their pre-service training and were encouraged to make suggestions about how they thought their overall training program may be improved. The longitudinal dimension of this study provides an added perspective often ignored in other contemporary investigations of perceptions of pre-service training for teachers. While both qualitative and quantitative analyses of beginning teacher perceptions are presented, the emphasis has been placed upon the qualitative analyses of beginning teacher responses, with quantitative data being reported to provide an overall context for the qualitative responses over the respondents' first 9 months employment. It is expected that results will be useful to those planning teacher preparation courses in the future. Suggestions are made for improving future teacher preparation programs, and comparisons are made to similar investigations that have been conducted in the past.

Beginning teacher comments about pre-service education and their suggestions for future pre-service training programs.

The beginning teacher's entry into the workforce can resemble a "baptism by fire". Indeed, concern about beginning teachers' transition from pre-service education into the profession continues to be a major issue for all stakeholders involved with the education sector. This initial period in the teaching career, unquestionably, influences one's abilities and expertise as a professional practitioner. The conditions of teaching experienced in the beginning, substantially influence the level of effectiveness, which that teacher is able to achieve and maintain, throughout the teaching career, and indeed, also influence the decision of whether or not to continue in the teaching profession. It is therefore imperative that the experiences of beginning teachers are overwhelmingly positive.

Within the literature describing the experiences of beginning teachers (Berliner, 1988; Fuller, 1969; Ryan, 1986; Williams, 1995) themes of initial overwhelm and subsequent progression towards competence and proficiency as a teacher are common. In fact, research (eg NSW DSE, 1992) undertaken with beginning teachers has consistently reinforced the need for on-going professional support, quite apart from supervision, for constructive reflection and on-going learning about the teaching and socialisation processes that the beginning teacher is required to master upon entry to the profession. Although the initial preparation and induction of beginning teachers is a well-researched area, there is a frustration evident due to a lack of constructive and comprehensive change. As has been previously stated, it is these beginning years that lay the foundation for the rest of their careers as educators. Although these beginning practitioners have undertaken

substantial study, usually in the form of a four-year undergraduate degree program, resoundingly, the literature states that they are ill prepared for their chosen career as a teacher (Commonwealth Government, 2003, Queensland Government, 2003). From this perspective, graduation from a substantial program of pre-service teacher training needs to be viewed as merely the first stage in a multi-staged transition from teaching student to competent teacher. In this light, pre-service training programs and their agents are merely the first, and potentially the most important, support structure that a prospective teacher needs to encounter in their journey to competence. From this point of view, pre-service training could realistically be considered as a comprehensive program of pre-service induction. If university preparation was to be viewed not separate from, but as the initial step in a staged induction program, research into beginning teacher perceptions of their pre-service training would be more integrated with research on beginning teacher experiences at the workplace.

Perhaps because of the important influence that pre-service training (induction) can have on the professional growth and development that a graduate experiences once they have commenced their career, the views of beginning teachers about their pre-service education are quite important for universities to consider when they review how they go about providing their students with this initial orientation and preparation for life within a teaching profession. There is considerable evidence in the literature that the beginning teacher perspective has been thoroughly investigated for the initial year of teaching and as a result various programs of graded support and transition programs have been suggested and described in the literature (list reffs here inc Khamis). There is, however, a corresponding lack of evidence in the literature, that these programs have been implemented and systematically evaluated. The reality for a first year teacher in Queensland appears more

likely to involve the abrupt cessation of university support and little or no systematic support for the transition to a teaching career by the graduates first employer (Odell & Ferraro, 1992; Lawson, 1992). Indeed the induction experience of beginning teachers is still described in the literature with descriptors such as confusing, stressful, exhausting and disheartening, and Ryan's (1986) warning about a 'curve of disenchantment', a curve which reaches its low point in the teachers first year of service, appears to have been largely ignored by university preparation programs, employers and researchers alike.

Although there is an awareness of the plight of struggling beginning teachers, at national and state/territories levels across Australia, evidence suggests that, to date, any attempts to redress the current "state of play" have been less than effective. Historically, the teaching profession is notorious for having high attrition rates (Brock & Grady, 1996). The status quo remains the same at the present. In order that this situation is redressed, a better understanding of why beginning teachers find it difficult to transition into their increasingly complex and demanding profession is timely.

Method

Procedure

In January 2003, a sample of more than 600 Queensland teachers was contacted via mail to secure written consent to participate in a longitudinal study into beginning teacher perceptions of their work and well-being during their first two years of professional employment. Survey booklets were then forwarded directly to 180 individuals who had agreed to participate in the study and who satisfied the criterion that they had already secured employment as a teacher. Reply paid envelopes were included with the survey so that completed forms could be returned directly to the researchers.

When first surveyed (T1; March-April 2002), 142 teachers responded to the survey. The same teachers were surveyed again 6 months later (T2). Nineteen of the respondents who completed the survey at T1 and who either failed to return the second survey or were not able to be contacted at T2 were discarded from this first year analysis. Therefore the attrition rate was 13.4%, however a series of *t*-tests and chi-square analyses applied to the demographic and well-being measures collected at T1 indicated that no attrition bias was apparent for those nineteen respondents who dropped out between the initial and subsequent surveys.

Beginning Teacher Participants

Participants were teachers provisionally registered in the Australian state of Queensland and working as teachers in the year following their graduation

from university. The sample was drawn from contact details held by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration. At T1, the average age was 26.25 years ($SD = 7.21$), and average duration of employment as teachers was only 7.37 weeks ($SD = 4.46$). At T2 respondents had been employed for an average of 8.34 months ($SD = 1.16$) and reported working an average of 45 hours ($SD = 11.30$) each week. One hundred and two (83%) respondents were female compared to National and Queensland estimates of female teacher frequencies of 65% and 59% respectively (Dempster, Sim, Beere & Logan, 2000). Respondents were teaching at one of the three levels of education in the following proportions: (%) of responses were from primary teachers, (%), were secondary teachers (%) and (%) were early childhood teachers. Thirty four percent (34%) of respondents were married. Respondents reported graduating from one of three Queensland universities and having completed their pre-service teacher training in 2001.

Survey Questions

At both T1 and T2, beginning teacher respondents were asked to complete survey booklets containing standard psychometric measures investigating burnout, work climate, and coping strategies for dealing with stressful situations. The results of these investigations have been reported elsewhere (Goddard & O'Brien, 2003).

In addition to the standard survey measures, survey booklets administered at both T1 and T2 included a number of open questions that encouraged respondents to write about the perception of their pre-service training in light of their teaching experience at the time they were surveyed. For example at

T1, respondents were asked *“What particular subjects or other educational experiences undertaken at university have you found helpful in undertaking any of your current duties”*, and at T2 respondents were asked *“What feedback would you hope that this survey will be able to give to the following: The Education Faculty that provided your teacher training”*. The qualitative data resulting from these types of questions was analyzed using a combination of QSR NUD*IST (Non-numeric Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-building, Richards & Richards, 1994) and a concept map using Inspiration Pro (ref ??).

In addition to the series of open-ended questions described above, each respondent was asked to rate their perception of the effectiveness of their recent teacher-training program to prepare for a teaching career. Respondents were asked to make this rating at both T1 and T2 with respect to (i) *“work you are currently undertaking”* and then in respect of (ii) *“ a teaching career in general”*.

Results

Summary Data

Forty three percent (43%) of respondents had a second degree (i.e. in addition to their Bachelor of Education degree). Forty percent (40%) moved (changed residences) to take up employment. Twenty two percent (22%) were working in a rural location. At T2, forty six percent (46%) of respondents reported that they had experienced regular contact with a more experienced

teacher who had acted as a mentor (either formally or informally) sometime during the year, however only twenty three percent (23%) of respondents indicated that their mentoring experience was initiated by their employer (i.e. half the respondents who considered they had a mentor considered that they participated in an informal mentoring arrangement). Eighty six percent (86%) of respondents held permanent teaching positions. Eighty one percent (81%) of respondents worked in the public school system (i.e. Education Queensland). Ninety six percent (96%) described their teaching position as a “full-time” position. At T2, eleven respondents (9%) had changed schools since the first survey

Ratings of teacher training effectiveness

Respondents were asked at both T1 and T2 to rate how effective they considered their teacher training was in preparing them for (i) a teaching career in general, and (ii) for the work they were actually undertaking when surveyed. Ratings were made on a 4-point likert scale that forced respondents to choose between two levels of effectiveness (effective & very effective) and two levels of ineffectiveness (ineffective and very ineffective). The neutral rating was replaced with a “don’t know” option. Frequency tables describing percentage of respondents nominating each category of perceived effectiveness of recently completed formal teacher training at both T1 and T2 are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below. Inspection of these tables indicates that at both T1 and T2 more than two thirds of respondents believed that their teacher training process was effective in relation to teaching in general,

however they were more evenly divided over the question of the effectiveness of the training for current duties.

Table 1

Perceived Effectiveness of Teacher Training for Teaching in General

	<i>V. Effective</i>	<i>Effective</i>	<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>V. Ineffective</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
<i>% at T1</i>	5	64	24	6	1
<i>% at T2</i>	6	61	29	3	1

Table 2

Perceived Effectiveness of Teacher Training for current work

	<i>V effective</i>	<i>Effective</i>	<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>V. ineffective</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
<i>% at T1</i>	5	44	41	9	1
<i>% at T2</i>	5	40	43	9	3

Qualitative Analysis of Open Questions

A number of open questions sought to tease out the issues of concern to beginning teachers and to assist in the interpretation of what beginning teachers perceive as their current work.

The open questions are listed below:

- T1. What is the most important learning experience that has occurred for you since you commenced work as a teacher?
- T1. What particular subjects or other educational experiences undertaken at university have you found helpful in undertaking your current duties?
- T1. What other questions would you like to see in the survey?
- T2. What are your suggestions for helping graduates make a low stress transition into teaching?
- T2. What other questions would you like to see in a survey which is seeking to identify what can be done to help new graduates make effective and low stress transitions into professional teaching careers?
- T2. What feedback would you hope that this survey will be able to give to the following: your current employer, the education faculty that provided your teacher training?

For purposes of this paper, comments by beginning teachers at T1 and T2 were combined and then separated into positive comments about their pre-services education course and suggestions for future courses. As shown in Table 3, 604 of the 1,705 text units collected for the Well-Being survey were separated from the rest of the data and used in this paper.

Table 3

Text Unit Usage.

Intervention	Positive Comments	Suggestions	Total text units
T 1 & T2	277	327	1705

Positive Comments

The positive comments related to the respondents perceptions about their pre-services training. The data was then processed using grounded theory, a combination of QSR NUD*IST (Richards & Richards, 1994) and a concept map drawing using Inspiration Pro. This process allowed the categories to emerge as the data was sorted. The data seemed to group into 7 areas as follows; Practical aspects of the course, Practicum or Field Experiences, Key Learning Areas (KLA's) / Curriculum, Behaviour Management, Pedagogy, Internship and Other.

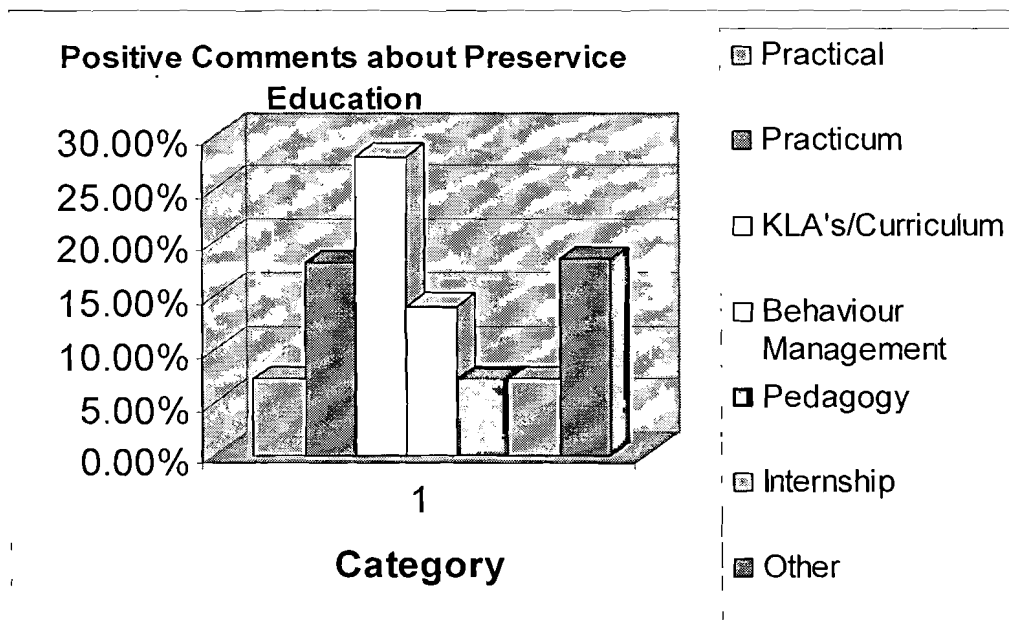


Figure 1: Positive Comments about Pre-service Education

Twenty eight percent of the positive comments related to the KLA's and Curriculum. Most of the comments around the KLA's and Curriculum indicate that students feel that they had been adequately prepared for this facet of

teaching. Many of the comments listed the subjects that were found helpful in teacher preparation, for example;

++ Text units 10-10:	
Curriculum subjects,	10
++ Text units 24-24:	
Literacy and Numeracy subjects	24

Other comments went further

++ Text units 16-17:	
Diagnosis and remediation in mathematics-rmassive help in	16
classroom teaching of maths.	17

and

++ Text units 38-40:	
The curriculum subjects- eg history, geography subjects	38
where actual teachers came to uni and taught us how to	39
be history and geography teachers.	

Eighteen percent (18%) of comments related to Practicum. Teasing out the difference between practical aspects of the course and practicum was at times a difficult exercise however this division followed the following definitions; Practicum was defined as relating to practical experiences, field experience and actual classroom experiences. Practical was taken as relating to aspects of the university course that related directly to classroom and school experiences.

Generally the data relating to Practicum related to the value of the experience and its high relationship with practical learning experiences. Some students simply wrote the word as in:

++ Text units 4-4:

Practicums

Others expanded

++ Text units 1-2:

Pracs were fantastic- the hands on experience was better 1
than the four years at uni.

++ Text units 77-77:

Learning in the field- excellent. 77

++ Text units 196-201:

Lots of practicum's, contact with people who are 196

currently in the classroom. 197

My practicums were the most crucial and helpful 198

educational experiences during my four years. Especially 199

the resources I collected and hands on learning and 200

doing.

++ Text units 208-209:

My practicum experience has really been the only helpful 208

experience. 209

Seventeen percent (17%) of comments relate to the category Other.

Comments in this field generally relate to the foundation studies at the various universities.

++ Text units 84-84:

Psychology, learning theories. 84

++ Text units 168-168:

Education in context (social ed subjects), 168

And specific electives not related to KLA's and Curriculum

++ Text units 49-49:

Special education, 49

++ Text units 58-59:

Education counselling has helped with dealing with 58

students and parents in awkward situations. 59

Seven percent (7.2%) of positive comments related to the practical aspects of both pedagogic and foundation studies. Some courses are seen as very theoretical and others seen as very practical.

++ Text units 152-154:

Involvement of practical subjects to the level of 152

coaching sport teams, making use of library, becoming 153

familiar with technology and its use in class. 154

++ Text units 180-181:

The practical subjects were the most helpful and relevant 180

parts of the course.

Fourteen percent (14%) of comments related to Behaviour Management. For example when the beginning teacher respondents were asked:

“What particular subjects or other educational experiences undertaken at university have you found helpful in undertaking your current duties?”

Most respondents simply wrote

++ Text units 15-15:

Behaviour management. 15

Others elaborated

++ Text units 62-63:

Classroom and behaviour management 62

Behaviour management extremely practical and useful. 63

++ Text units 148-149:

Behaviour management- with out it no learning is achieved 148

despite excellent training in teaching strategies. 149

++ Text units 252-252:

Behaviour management- this should be compulsive (sic). 252

(Perhaps meaning 'compulsory'?)

Both Pedagogy and Internship attracted seven percent (7.2%) of the positive comments about teacher preparation programs. Pedagogy comments revolved around (i) the usefulness of courses that involved teaching strategies, for example;

++ Text units 155-155:

Lesson planning, Unit planning, developing work programs. 155

And (ii) specific skills such as the setting and marking of examinations, for example;

++ Text units 65-66:

Also assessment- I don't have any qualms about setting 65

exams.

and

++ Text units 239-239:

reflective teaching. 239

Suggestions for the future

Three hundred and twenty seven (327) text units were written with the intent of providing advice for the future direction of pre-service education.

Figure 2 shows that forty four percent (44%) of the text was devoted to making teacher preparation courses more practical. Many comments were phrased so as to indicate an undesirable balance between theory and practice.

++ Text units 7-8:

Change the course so it focuses more on the practical	7
aspects of teaching rather than being so theory based.	8

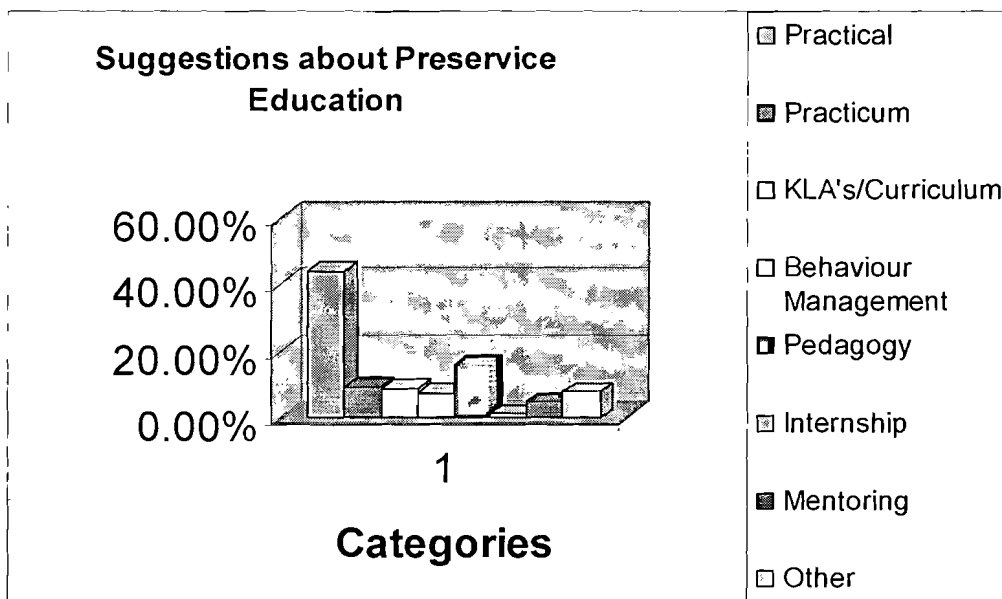


Figure 2: Suggestions about Pre-service Education

This theme of the usefulness of practical experiences and the lack of usefulness of theory was repeated many times, and seemingly to add emphasis, some of the comments were presented so as to strike personal notes. For example;

++ Text units 211-214:

Theory needs to be equally balanced with the practical.	211
And most importantly, that jaded and frustrated tertiary	212
educators do not provide an appropriate role model for	213
educators in training	

++ Text units 52-53:

Opportunities to observe good teachers and team-teach.	52
In my case, almost all theory went out the window!!!	

++ Text units 16-18:

More practical subjects at uni-planning, curriculum	16
studies etc who cares what the postmodern view of	17
education is?	

Other comments offered pragmatic suggestions about a need to address different outcome attributes. For example;

++ Text units 63-70:

The real life issues teachers need to deal with that are	63
not related to teaching, i.e. dealing with family issues,	64
family services, as well as assessment, teaching children	65
with learning difficulties and disabilities- things that	66
come hand in hand with teaching but what you're not	67
taught at uni.	

Many comments implied that specialization in certain grade areas would have been most helpful.

++ Text units 254-257:

A change to some of the courses may be worth doing, to	254
include subject which teach how to teach specific grades.	255
That the more practical experience we have the more	256
prepared we will be.	

Discussion

Ideas:

- Induction programs for beginning teachers need to be seen to begin at the commencement of their undergraduate preparation program and continue through until at least the end of their second year of experience as a classroom practitioner.
- Need for continuity, so that the transition from university to the classroom is seen to be seamless.
- The thoughts and perceptions of the participants in the study, and beginning teachers more generally need to be given serious consideration, if they are to feel truly supported.
- Rather than a top-down approach, a systemic approach which builds in the idea of tailoring the induction programme, throughout its entirety to suit the individual players.

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