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CONCEPTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL  
INTERACTIONS DURING THEIR INDUCTION YEAR

by

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports one component of a study that investigated beginning teachers' conceptions of teaching during their induction year. The study was motivated by a finding of the Queensland Board of Teacher Education (1981 a, 1981 b) namely, that many of the concerns of beginning teachers are not being met during their first year of teaching. A team of lecturers from the Carseldine Campus of Brisbane College of Advanced Education (now Queensland University of Technology) conducted the study which was funded by the Board of Teacher Education, Queensland (Lennon et. al., 1988).

Eleven categories of induction experience for beginning teachers were identified. Those that involved beginning teachers in interpersonal interactions are the focus of this paper, namely:

- contacts with administrators;
- contacts with teachers and colleagues;
- interactions with pupils; and
- contacts with parents.

## BEGINNING TEACHERS AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Beginning teachers must immediately assume full responsibility for their interpersonal interactions. Augins (1979) stated that they are subject to a number of stressful situations which are added to by the 'reality shock' experienced when the supportive environment of their teacher education institution is supplanted by a 'sink or swim' philosophy in the school. Not only must beginning teachers establish rapport with a large range of people, but they must do as much work as experienced staff members and perhaps hear older colleagues ridiculing many of the theories they learned in their teacher education courses. Hogben (1979) noted that changes in role and status are suddenly quite dramatic when beginning teachers move from University to their first school.

The beginning teachers' first interpersonal interactions will be with school administrators. In his study of 38 beginning teachers in 23 schools, Battersby (1984 a and b) reported that interactions between the novice teachers and their principals were generally positive and there was no indication that beginners were made to feel aware of their position in a

hierarchical order as has been suggested by Hanson and Herrington (1976).

Augins (1979) warned that it was not sufficient that school administrators have good intentions regarding their policies towards beginning teachers. They must have written policies that outline the procedures that will support their intentions. Tisher (1979) observed that many of the induction programs that did exist tended to focus on administrative matters and orientation to the school.

Reed (1986) reported that beginning teachers rated communicating with principals and deputy principals as one of the five tasks they saw themselves performing better than other responsibilities. Besides interacting effectively with administrators, novice teachers must also interact effectively with the other group of professionals in schools, fellow staff teachers.

Battersby (1984 a and b) studied the association of beginning teachers with colleagues and found that some felt isolated from fellow staff members. Some were disillusioned by staff conflict which either involved them personally or which they observed among others. The data suggested that many beginning teachers were significantly influenced by a particular colleague, though some were dissatisfied with the general level of professionalism that they encountered. Staff contact in non-school settings such as staff social functions and outings was found to be significant.

Telfer (1982), in his study of graduates from the University of Newcastle, found that problems changed with different cohorts. However a survey conducted by him in 1979 revealed that the most significant problem reported was teacher-teacher conflict with beginning teachers finding difficulty adjusting to the expectations of others. McArthur (1981), who conducted a longitudinal investigation of Victorian secondary teachers, suggested that, when first faced with the 'reality shock' of full-time teaching, beginning teachers comply and identify with their more experienced colleagues and, over time, internalise opinions and values of their more experienced colleagues. Reed (1986) reported beginning teachers rated communicating with colleagues as another of the five tasks they saw themselves performing better than others. Though interactions with colleagues are important, in the minds of beginning teachers, these contacts do not assume the same magnitude as interactions with pupils.

Battersby (1984 a) noted that beginning teachers might have some realistic expectations about pupils from details gained about them before the commencement of the school year. Battersby also noted that, as beginners, they realised they could encounter problems of control. Telfer (1982) reported a survey conducted with beginning secondary school teachers who had graduated from the University of Newcastle. The subjects saw one of their greatest problems as creating interest in the topic they taught. Reed (1986) stated that beginning teachers were confident when interacting with children.

As beginning teachers leave their pre-service programs and enter their schools, many bring with them high ideals and enthusiasm for contributing to the growth of children. Lorte (1975) undertook a survey which showed that two of the factors that attracted young people to the work of teaching were enjoyment in working with young people and helping students to achieve. A follow-up study by Sykes (1983) revised Lorte's findings and showed changes in beginning teachers' attitudes, for example a decreased enjoyment of working with less responsive students. Fuller and Bown (1975) found that, in the pre-teaching phase, student teachers tend to identify with pupils and can be quite critical of classroom teachers. However, as beginning teachers experience teaching, their idealised concerns for pupils are replaced by intense concern with their own survival as teachers.

Interactions with pupils, in turn, lead to interactions with their parents. Such interactions may be positive or negative. Battersy (1984 a and b) found that, in general, beginning teachers viewed parents as supportive and established quite comfortable interpersonal relationships with them. On the other hand, Otto, Gasson and Jordan (1979) surveyed beginning teachers and found that conflicts with parents were seen as a significant problem.

The preceding paragraphs are in keeping with the observations of writers such as Sykes (1983) and Lorte (1975) namely, that there have been conflicting analyses of the factors influencing the development of young teachers. A need for a long-term, indepth study of how the professional teacher develops is apparent. Moreover, such research must take account of the idiosyncratic nature of professional development arising from the personal interpretations that young teachers place on their working environment.

#### METHODOLOGY

The study monitored the changing conceptions of teaching of 12 beginning teachers during their induction year. All had graduated with the Diploma of Teaching (Primary) from the Carseldine Campus of Brisbane College of Advanced Education.

Four tape-recorded interviews with each subject were spaced throughout the year to gather data on beginning teachers':

- (a) successes and difficulties;
- (b) needs and aspirations;
- (c) actual experiences on appointment and placement within their schools;
- (d) opinions of the adequacy of their pre-service teacher education program;

- (e) impressions of the induction process; and
- (f) suggestions for further professional development opportunities.

Additional data were obtained through a written questionnaire, administered between the first and second interview, and discussion of a set of photographs, taken by subjects between the second and third interview. The purpose of the photographs was to depict "My World at School".

A case study methodology (MacDonald and Walker, 1975, Adelman et al., 1976) was employed to portray the real world of the 12 beginning teachers in their induction year. The research team did not commence the study with a given set of questions requiring answers. Instead the team adopted a somewhat open-ended approach and tried to identify the concerns of beginning teachers as they emerged from the data collected. The researchers avoided the imposition of pre-formulated criteria that might not have been the real concerns of the subjects.

From the concerns identified, there emerged a definition of the process of being a beginning teacher as it applied to the 12 subjects. The study had the potential for 12 vastly different case studies. However, the research team was able to develop common lines of inquiry from the identification of consistent research concerns that emerged as the study progressed.

Data from the interviews, the questionnaire and the discussion of photographs were analysed utilizing a Constant Comparative Method (Glasser and Strauss, 1967) to compare the experiences of beginning teachers with a view to:

- (a) identifying propositions that could be made about this group of beginning teachers;
- (b) gauging the level of support for each of these propositions as evidenced in the data collected: and
- (c) portraying the changing levels of professional development in terms of a professional development model.

#### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

All subjects had been appointed to schools in the Brisbane North Education Region and this involved a variety of teaching contexts ranging from inner city to suburban to country schools. The appointments also differed along dimensions such as size of school, type of classroom, age of children, interaction with colleagues, interaction with the administration and parental involvement.

Glasser and Strauss (1967) advocated a model for deriving propositions and theories from data. This model, the Constant Comparative Method, was

employed to generate and develop categories, properties and hypotheses rather than test them. They argued that this approach required the saturation of data rather than the consideration of all data.

Over 70 propositions about the induction experiences of the subjects were generated by the research team. The level of support for each of the propositions was classified as low, medium or high and then the list of propositions was collapsed to 11 categories of induction experience four of which related to interpersonal interactions with administrators, teachers and colleagues, pupils and parents.

In describing, analysing and interpreting the experiences of each of the subjects the research team was able to present a set of findings and recommendations for each of these four categories of induction experience.

## FINDINGS

### Contacts with Administrators

- (a) Support of administrators was vital to the growth and development of beginning teachers.
- (b) Beginning teachers readily asked for advice from administrators on matters pertaining to them.
- (c) Interactions between beginning teachers and school principals were generally positive and the former were not made to feel that they are of lower status.
- (d) More information about beginning teachers' expectations of school principals, the types of relationships that develop and the nature of conflicts that arise on a day-to-day basis was needed.

### Contacts with Colleagues

- (a) Beginning teachers saw value in professional interactions with colleagues, especially those teaching at the same year level.
- (b) Some beginning teachers found:
  - (i) they had to initiate interactions with colleagues early in the year when they needed it most; and
  - (ii) that help from colleagues was mostly forthcoming later in the year when it was needed least.
- (c) Social activities were frequently mentioned by beginning teachers as a means by which professional interaction with colleagues was established.

- (d) Professional interaction with colleagues occurred in a variety of school settings, for example pupil-free days, year-level meetings, curriculum committees, and staff meetings.
- (e) Beginning teachers found opportunities to interact with other first and second year teachers particularly valuable.
- (f) Most beginning teachers found cooperative teaching both enjoyable and profitable.
- (g) Beginning teachers sometimes felt isolated from their colleagues.
- (h) Beginning teachers sometime felt disillusioned by staff conflict which either involved them personally or which they observed among others.
- (i) Beginning teachers were often influenced by a particular colleague or group of colleagues.
- (j) Beginning teachers were sometimes dissatisfied with the level of professionalism among colleagues. At other times, they experienced a high degree of satisfaction with professional colleagues.
- (k) Staff contact between beginning teachers and others could be quite significant in non-school settings, such as at staff social outings.

#### Contacts with Pupils

- (a) Pupils had a significant interactive effect in the shaping of beginning teachers' values, including their attitudes to class control.
- (b) Beginning teachers found a source of satisfaction in their interrelationships with pupils and pupil acknowledgement of their efforts.
- (c) Beginning teachers expressed an increasing degree of confidence in interacting with children as the year progressed.

#### Contacts with Parents

- (a) Many schools recognised the 'potential value' of parental assistance in the school program and/or specific classroom activities.
- (b) Despite encouragement, the efforts to involve parents gained less than anticipated returns and were complicated by the fact that both teachers and parents remained unsure of how the assistance could best be managed.
- (c)- Parents were generally viewed as supportive by beginning teachers who established quite comfortable interpersonal relationships with them.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED INTERPERSONAL CONTACTS

The findings of the four components of the study focused on in this paper suggest that interpersonal interactions of beginning teachers could be improved through:

- (a) the individualisation of induction programs to cater for the fact that there are important differences among beginning teachers and among schools;
- (b) the establishment of a mentor system whereby a more experienced colleague, who genuinely wishes to perform such duties, takes responsibility for each beginning teacher's school induction and further professional development.
- (c) making time available to beginning teachers so that they may interact with colleagues and visit their classrooms;
- (d) a staffing provision for schools with beginning teachers to release them from classes so that they may engage in induction activities focussed on their further professional development;
- (e) establishing peer coaching, mutual-aid networks that involve beginning teachers, second year teachers and experienced teacher tutors to offer support structures for beginning teachers;
- (f) a commitment by beginning teachers to the child as the central focus of the classroom and to valuing the status of the child despite ongoing physical and intellectual demands and frustrations;
- (g) the valuing as important by beginning teachers of:
  - (i) children interacting among themselves and with their teachers;
  - (ii) children enjoying school;
  - (iii) children finding learning interesting;
  - (iv) children and teachers respecting each other; and
  - (v) children as individuals who require differing modes of learning;
- (h) university preparation for teacher education students on how to utilize parental help constructively and continuing in-school support and workshops;
- (i) schools maintaining ongoing programs to inform and involve parents in ways that they can be of practical value in the school and classroom settings.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

It is interesting to note that contacts with teachers and colleagues was the category that generated the greatest number of findings. Beginning teachers appeared comfortable with their contacts with administrators, pupils and the parents of pupils. Although, in general, beginning teachers were comfortable with their contacts with teachers and colleagues, there were some areas of concern. It is suggested then that interpersonal interactions between beginning teachers and colleagues is an area that warrants further investigation and also careful attention when administrators formulate induction plans.

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