

SOME STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR COURSE OF PRIMARY TEACHER EDUCATION

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BACKGROUND

The main providers of courses of primary teacher education in New Zealand are five colleges of education and one school of education within a university. The colleges are autonomous institutions but all have close links with their local university. Students training to be primary teachers take one of three main routes:

*a three-year course leading to a diploma of teaching. Such students may enrol concurrently at the university.

*conjoint four-year bachelor of education degree course when students take courses at both the university and the college.

*a two-year post-graduate course for students who already have all or more than half of a university degree.

When the fieldwork for the study described in this paper began in 1988, most students were enrolled in the three-year diploma course. By the time the fieldwork was completed in 1992, major moves had been made towards making primary teaching a graduate profession. A B.Ed. programme has become the norm for primary teacher education. In future, those graduating with a three-year diploma will be the exception.

The Research Project

This paper is based on data collected through a longitudinal study of primary teacher education. It is based on the experiences of a cohort of students at the Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch Colleges of Education. The study began in 1988 at the point at which the students in the cohort were selected for training. The fieldwork was completed at the end of 1992 when a sample of students within the cohort who had been appointed to their first teaching positions were interviewed after about nine months in the classroom. The latest interviews have yet to be analysed.

Previous research studies in this country have for the most part

been retrospective studies of groups of students from the college where the investigation has taken place. Much the same, apparently, can be said of similar research studies in Australia. Tisher (1987) has commented on the lack of national and longitudinal studies. He emphasises the need for research that will 'study the process of teacher education as it unfolds over time for those involved in it'.

Two theoretical assumptions have underlined our research approach. The first is that the process of teacher education is embedded in more general issues of learning and teaching in schools, which in turn are affected by social forces outside the schools. Any study of teacher education must therefore be set in a framework which 'integrates the aspects of context, input, process and product.' See Report of the National Inquiry into Teacher Education (1980) Canberra, p. 215.

Secondly, we recognise that the experiences students bring to the college are key influences on their later development as students and teachers. Our starting point, therefore was the students at the point at which they were accepted for teacher training at the end of 1988. We were interested in their views of themselves at that time in relation to their future teaching role. We assumed that the meanings students gave to these role attributes constituted their sense of reality - of the way the world of the teacher ought to be. The research is a study in the professional socialisation of teacher trainees. We have tracked this process of interaction from selection to their initiation as classroom teachers. These interactions through time can be represented diagrammatically as in Figure I.

Data have been collected by means of a postal questionnaire to successful applicants to all courses of primary teacher education in the three colleges prior to the students entering the colleges (N = 549), and a second questionnaire at the end of the final year of training for those students doing a three-year course of primary teacher education (N = 289). The first survey was followed by more intensive investigation of a sample of the students through student interviews and college records of student performance during each year of their training (N = 107). Much of our interview data is qualitative but it is supported by more quantifiable data through the student questionnaires.

DO COURSES OF TRAINING MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

A key issue for colleges of education must be, do their courses of training

make a difference?

Compared with their views on entry to college, how confident are students at the end of the course about the skills they are going to be taking into the classroom?

There are two major components of a student's preparation to become a primary classroom teacher - their personal and their professional development, not that it is necessarily possible or desirable to draw a clear dividing line between the two. Many factors and experiences contribute towards these developments. Those we have identified are:

- *the student's personal biography: those qualities, abilities and skills students

bring with them to their course of training, and continue to develop;

- * the experience of the in-college part of their training;

- * the teaching experiences students have while they are at college;

- *courses of university study students have undertaken before or during their college course;

- *students' anticipation and actual experience of their first teaching position, particularly the school to which they are appointed and the age and composition of their first class.

These factors and experiences interlock and the significance of each varies from student to student. All contribute towards a student's ultimate contribution in the classroom.

We cannot, on the basis of our study, and we doubt if individual students could either, give

a weighting to the importance of any one factor. All play their part and all need to be

considered when commenting on the ways students progress towards becoming effective

beginning teachers.

On the basis of the data collected from students, we have developed a model intended

to summarise diagrammatically the experience of students and their preparation to be primary classroom teachers. (See Figure 2)

These issues cannot all be addressed in this paper. Examples of students' personal and professional development have been selected for comment.

Students' Personal Biography

When students started their courses of training most already believed they had the personal qualities and abilities necessary to be a good teacher. The possession of these skills was a major reason why they believed they had been selected in the first place. The students' cumulative past experience continued to influence their reaction to the course throughout their training. In the second year, for example, when we asked students what they thought have been the main influences on their teaching style most opted for associate teachers on teaching practice sections, but the next most important category for more than a third of the students was the influence of their own personality and background. Similarly, when we asked students at the end of their training in terms of becoming classroom teachers, what difference the course of training had made to them, a number again emphasised how important they considered the skills and abilities they brought with them to college.

*The importance of their teaching experience before coming to college, including knowledge of how children learn.

*Prior work experiences which had relevance for classroom teaching, for example, planning and management skills from previous occupations.

*Personal commitment to the idea of being a teacher, in some cases from an early age.

* A love of, and commitment to, children.

*Personality traits students believe are important for becoming successful teachers.

*The influence of family members, particularly mothers who are also classroom teachers. Students may still use them as a point of reference ahead of most college lecturers, although others acknowledge that family are also interested in new ideas.

*Knowledge of child development because of experience with their own children.

This is not to underestimate the considerable impact on students' professional development of the college programme, but students frequently linked the personal skills they believed they had on entering college with the development of professional skills during their training. An example would be one of the older students we interviewed who commented:

College focuses your awareness of various issues, like the need to cope with each individual child... I always had a respect for the idea that children should be treated as individuals, but respect isn't far enough. My ideals were right

but now I've got the equipment to deal with it as well. I've the knowledge to be able to handle the situation. So I think college has given me the tools, that's what it's done. ... On the emotional, moral side I haven't developed at all really. I've stayed the same. I went into teaching for a certain reason - it wasn't as if I came straight from school. But there's no way I had the

tools
before I came here.

The In-college Programme

The in-college experience of students largely revolves around a series of courses they take each year. Pre-service college courses are offered to trainees as a collection of units, some of which are compulsory while others are optional. There is a core of compulsory subjects which is the same across all colleges, but the number and range of courses varies across colleges, as does the terminology used to describe them. Each of the three colleges make a distinction between vocational or professional studies courses which have compulsory units and courses more geared towards students' personal development where there is a greater degree of choice, although the degree of choice varies considerably from year to year and from college to college. All colleges are also in the process of reorganising their courses so that the experience of students in one year is not necessarily that of students in subsequent years. Students tend to judge the college and their training to be teachers largely on the basis of personal contact with individual lecturers and their courses.

In each year of the study we have questioned students about their college courses and this material has been fed back to individual departments within the colleges. As one would expect there were differences of student opinion between colleges, and between courses within colleges, but there were also recurring themes within the student comments.

Students' Overall Comments About Courses

Much depends on the skills and personality of individual lecturers.

Students appreciate

lecturers who:

- *are enthusiastic about their subject
- *are well prepared
- *are good role models in their teaching methods
- *present their material in a lively manner
- *consult with students on the course outline and allow students some input and choice
- *are open to student comment and criticism
- *understand what is now happening in primary school classrooms
- *support students and increase their confidence both as individuals and as

future
classroom teachers

*are equally concerned with all students, not just those who are good at a subject.

The course content and the way courses are organized are important.

Students appreciate
courses which:

*have stated objectives and live up to them

*are well planned and co-ordinated - courses with planned progressions that
'hang
together'

*are stimulating, with challenging content that extends students and helps
them to 'kick

about the thought processes'

*provide time for discussion but do not use discussion as an excuse for not
being well
prepared

*are relevant to the classroom while also recognizing the importance of
students'

personal development. This is helped if lecturers:

-give concrete examples

-provide opportunities for students to develop resources

-assist students with lesson and unit plans

-provide opportunities for practical experience with children

-suggest ideas which can be tried out on teaching practice section

*focus on how children learn

*recognize students' previous experience and are at an appropriate level.

(Examples

were given by students who had taken Maori at university but had to cover
basic

Maori vocabulary at college; who had done 7th form mathematics but had to
cover

basic primary school numeracy skills; and who had a degree in music but had
to cover

basic notation.)

*are continuous from the previous year's courses but do not repeat work
already
covered

*provide a full workload of a high standard without 'busy work'

*cover relevant primary school curricula at all levels so that students are
prepared

equally well for all levels of the primary school. (There was a common
criticism of

students feeling more confident with junior and middle school than with
intermediate

level.)

*link curriculum content with how to teach it

*make the relationship to other curriculum areas clear. (Students in all colleges raised the question of the 'integrated curriculum'. The curriculum tends to be 'broken up' in the college. Who has the responsibility to put it together again?)
*demonstrate the relevance of educational theory to practical situations
*are the right length for the content. (There was a common feeling of 50-hour courses

being too rushed and, in some cases, of information overload.)
*increase student confidence.

In looking at the in-college programmes, a range of issues have emerged. These are not confined to the in-college programme but inevitably interact with, for example, students experience in schools.

Student Views On How Children Learn

Most students believe their views on how children learn have changed as a result of the course of training. Although there was variation in the comments made by students there was nevertheless a general change in their perception; they still see themselves in the role of teachers but they are focusing more on children as learners. In the words of two students:

I used to think children were a pot you poured knowledge into. But I've changed a lot. Children bring their own agendas into the classroom.

When I first started I didn't know how children learn. I just thought that the teacher came in and had it all together and the kids sat there and soaked it all up...

The ways students' views on how children learn have changed:

*A more child-centred approach; a greater awareness of children's individual differences and needs.

*Teachers need to find out what the children know and build on that.

* Not all children learn in the same way or in the same way all the time.

*The importance of home background, particularly differences in cultural experiences.

*A greater awareness of the need for children to become independent learners;
handing the responsibility for learning over to the children.

*Children learn best when they are actively engaged and the programme is practically based; the importance of active, hands-on, learn-by-doing discovery approaches.

*Children are more likely to learn if they enjoy what they are doing.

*The value of shared, co-operative learning; children learn from each other;
the influence of peers.

*Learning principles are the same for various ages - but children do learn different things at different stages; age appropriateness.

* The importance of positive reinforcement.

*The importance of the teacher's manner and methods, and the classroom environment.

* Children are capable of learning more than previously thought.

* Learning is a more complex and interesting process than at first thought.

* Learning about children's learning is a lifelong process.

The Primary School Curriculum

We have attempted to trace changes in students' views about various curriculum subjects during their course of training. When we surveyed our cohort of students before they began their courses of training and at the end of the course, we asked them:

* which three curriculum areas they were most looking forward to teaching;

* which three curriculum areas they were least looking forward to teaching.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the students' responses.

Table 1
Curriculum Areas Most Looked Forward To: ranked

On entry to college
% of students
(N=549)

At end of training
% of students
(N=289)

1. Physical education	46	Reading	54
2. Reading		39	Physical education
3. Social studies		35	Written language
4. Art	33	Art	48
		Education outside the classroom	42
5. Written language		29	Mathematics
6. Drama		27	Science
7. Maori culture/language		24	Social studies
8. Mathematics	24	Music	35
9. Music		24	Oral language
10. Oral language		21	Health
11. Science		20	Drama
12. Health		16	Maori
13. Computer studies	13	Computers in the classroom	19

Table 2

Curriculum Areas Least Looked Forward To: ranked

training	On entry to college		At end of	
	% of students (N=549)		% of students (N=289)	
1. Mathematics	35	Computers in the classroom	44	
2. Computer studies	35	Maori	42	
3. Science	27	Music	35	
4. Music	21	Drama	30	
5. Drama	19	Mathematics	27	
6. Maori culture /language	19	Science	20	
7. Art	16	Social studies	16	
8. Physical education	12	Health	14	
9. Health	10	Art	11	
10. Social studies	9	Physical education	8	
11. Written language	8	Reading	8	
		Education outside the classroom	7	
12. Oral language	6	Oral language	5	
13. Reading	4	Written language	4	

Some Comments Related to Tables 1 and 2

*On entry to college, and at the end of training, students ticked more curriculum areas as being areas they were most looking forward to compared with those they were least looking forward to.

*The differences in the students' responses between subjects were often not great.

*Reading and physical education were the two curriculum areas most frequently mentioned by students entering college as being those they were most looking forward to teaching. These remained the same.

*With the exception of Maori (where the difference is minimal), the percentage of students saying they are looking forward to teaching each of the particular curriculum areas listed is higher for all subjects than it had been at entry to college.

*The subjects which the highest proportion of students at the end of their training say they were now looking forward to teaching, compared with their views on entry to college, were: written language (an increase of 19% of students), science (17%), reading (15%), art (15%), mathematics (14%) and oral language (14%).

*In six curriculum areas, the percentage of students now saying they are least looking forward to teaching the subjects in the classroom is less than on entry to college although in most cases the differences are not great. These are mathematics, science, art, physical education, written and oral language. *For seven curriculum areas the percentage of students who say they are least looking forward to teaching a particular area has actually increased since entry to college. These are: Maori, music, drama, computers in the classroom, social studies, health and reading.

Students' Knowledge of the Content of Various Primary School Curriculum Areas

We also asked students how confident they were that they had an adequate knowledge of the content of various primary school curriculum areas. The student responses are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Students' Knowledge of Curriculum Content

Curriculum Areas	Percentage of students (N=249)					
	Very confident	Confident	Not at all	Very confident	Confident	Not at all
Language	49	49				
1Physical Education	49	47		5Mathematics	40	55
38 50 10Social Studies	30	57		12Science	29	57
26 63 11Music	21	48		30Maori	13	38
				48		
						6Art
						14Health

Note about Table 3.

When the two categories 'very confident' and 'confident' are combined
 -more than 90% of students overall say they are confident in language, mathematics and physical education;
 -between 80 and 90% are confident in health, art, science and social studies;
 -students are markedly less confident about music (69%) and Maori (51%).

Students' Experience of an Integrated Primary Programme

As well as looking at curriculum areas separately, we were interested to find out a little about students' experience of, and attitude towards, teaching an integrated curriculum or programme.

*About three-quarters of the students overall (70%) say they have had a chance to observe an integrated programme 'frequently' or 'regularly'.

*Just over two-thirds of the students (65%) say they have had a chance to teach such a programme 'regularly' or 'frequently'.

Students' Confidence to Teach an Integrated Programme

Regardless of their experience while at college, nearly all the students, 96%, say they are either 'very confident' (42%) or 'confident' (54%) about running an integrated curriculum programme in their own classroom. Students who added a comment tended to emphasise:

- * the importance attached to an integrated approach by lecturers;
- * students' own approval of the approach;
- * successful experiences they had had with associates using such an approach;
- * their own attempts to run integrated programmes while they were on section - usually successful and pleasurable;
- * the need for more practice in their own classroom to increase their confidence.

Student Views on Reasons Why Children Succeed or Fail at School

We asked students two questions on entry to college and at the end of their training, which are essentially two sides of the same coin:

I think children learn best when...

and

What do you think are the main reasons why some children do not succeed at school?

Comments About Student Responses

The role of the teacher

*The competence of the teacher is seen as the main factor contributing both to children's success at school and to their failure.

*It is the teacher's responsibility to use appropriate teaching methods in a classroom environment which is stimulating for children and supportive of their needs.

*The single most important contributor to school failure is teacher incompetence, either because of the use of inappropriate teaching methods, curriculum content which does not suit individual children, an unsupportive classroom environment, or inadequacies of teacher personality and poor teacher/pupil relationships.

*There appears to have been a shift in student opinion about the role of teachers. Competent teachers are still the main contributors to pupil success but students are more likely to regard lack of teacher competence as

contributing to school failure, than they did when they entered college.

The role of the pupil

*Students made very little reference to children's abilities, either mental, physical or social, as contributing to either their success or failure at school, but there appears to have been a slight shift since students began their course of training. On entry, a minority of students referred to pupils' lack of academic ability, the fact that, in the words of one student, 'some children are just thick', as being a contributing factor to school failure. The students made no such comments at the end of their course. Similarly, some students on entry to college explained school failure in terms of children's physical handicaps, for example, poor eyesight or hearing. There were fewer such references at the end of the course. The underlying assumption was that all children are capable of learning, and it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that this occurs.

*By comparison, how children feel about themselves, particularly their self-esteem, is an important factor in contributing to both school success and school failure. Children with low self-esteem are often poorly motivated to learn.

The role of the parents

*Students believe that the role of parents and the home is markedly less significant than either the school or the children themselves in contributing to

either school success or failure. Where parents do have an impact, it is more likely to contribute to failure than success. There does, however, appear to have been a movement in student opinion since they began their training. Although few students mentioned parents contributing to school success, they were less likely at the end of their training to believe that parents were responsible for children's failure at school.

Students in Schools

One of the most difficult issues for teacher educators is to marry the theory and practice of

education. The importance for students of the teaching practice section was emphasised over and over again during student interviews, in response to questions about for example:

- * students' increased motivation to teach;
- * the main influence on students' teaching style;
- * their changed views of how children learn;
- * most useful parts of training;
- * suggested changes to courses and training.

The perennial issue of the relationship between theory and practice in teacher education was apparent as soon as we started interviewing students in their first year. Most students we talked to had a strong commitment to train as teachers and wanted to get started straightaway. For many, early experiences in schools was the main way they saw themselves making a start in 'learning how to teach'. When they entered the college most did not have a coherent theory of teaching (some indeed were unaware that there was such a thing as pedagogical theory) to which they could link their teaching practice.

The relationship between the college course and experience in classrooms is obviously a crucial one, and problems in co-ordinating the two underline for students the gap between theory and practice, a problem of which they were constantly aware. Furthermore, there appears to be dissonance between the view of most staff and that of most students as to where the main focus of their training should lie. Figure 3 is an attempt to summarize this apparent tension.

Students regard the school as 'the real world' of teaching and are anxious to get out there. Both lecturers and students recognise the importance of both the lecture room and the classroom. But it may also be true to say that the college is central to the training experience for lecturers, whereas the school is the major focus for the students. Lecturers believe that their courses prepare students to teach. The ideas and methods advocated by lecturers are presented to the students in college and can then be practised by them in schools. The students, on the other hand, see the major focus of their training to be in the classroom and view the college as a place which should be helping them to cope more effectively in schools. As one student put it,

Teaching practice sections are not well co-ordinated with the college course. Lecturers tend to blame the teaching sections for getting in the way of their courses. They tend to say, "Well, we've only got six weeks to do this, so what we'll do is we'll give you this assignment to do on your section". Not, "You can use this section to test this." Sections are treated as a kind of 'tack-on' to the course, when they could be regarded as a very positive thing.'

When students in their final year were asked what was the most useful part of their training about three-quarters of them said the most useful part of their training was their teaching experience in classrooms. The main benefits of teaching practice are twofold. Students can put into practice ideas they have gained from college courses (theory into practice); and they can also gain further ideas from practising teachers. The weighting given to these two aspects varies from student to student. There are those who

think that 'Teaching experience is the most beneficial part of the course, where you learn the most thorough advice from the teacher and observation of the teacher'. There are others who value teaching practice but acknowledge that they would not have been able to achieve what they did in the classroom, '... without college courses, for example curriculum courses in reading and maths'. Other comments made by students included the importance of:

- * the experience gained of teaching children at all levels of the primary school;

- *having an opportunity to spend time in a range of schools, for example, inner city, multicultural, with children from a range of socio-economic backgrounds;

- * full control (but support available if needed);

- *experience in setting up classroom programmes and teaching particular subjects;

- *the opportunity to observe a range of teaching styles, including those students would not wish to emulate;

- * the opportunity to be immersed in a school environment.

Although it is difficult to quantify this qualitative data, many students were likely to refer to teaching experience as being the most significant way in which their training had helped them to become effective classroom teachers. It is also important to stress, however, that this aspect should not be considered in isolation from the in-college courses. Whether or not the students acknowledged when answering questions about teaching practice, there were other occasions when they considered teaching sections as the opportunity to put into practice ideas which had been presented and discussed in college. It is not surprising that, as students are preparing themselves to be classroom teachers, they regard practical experience as so important. Students rightly measure their progress towards becoming teachers by their increased competence on teaching practice sections. This does not mean that their classroom experience is the only valuable part of their training. That would be similar to suggesting that work in an operating theatre is the only valuable part of training to be a surgeon.

We were also interested in whether students thought they had had the chance to see in schools the kinds of teaching practices advocated in the college. When we raised these issues we had in mind the four- or six-week teaching experience blocks, but these are not the

only occasions when students are in schools. They may also visit classrooms for demonstration, or one-off lessons which they prepare themselves, linked to particular college courses. Students also referred to experiences they had had at normal schools attached to the college where demonstration lessons had been planned specifically to demonstrate teaching approaches being discussed in a college course:

When the college wants you to see a specific teaching technique they sometimes set up visits to model schools. In those cases because the teacher and the class has got a specific agenda you will see exactly what's been talked about.

Students may complain that these situations are rather artificial, but they are occasions when students see particular teaching methods demonstrated.

The situation with teaching practice sections, on the other hand, is more of a lottery - much depends on the associate and class students find themselves with. Some teachers are 'on the same track' as college lecturers but others do not teach in ways sympathetic to those advocated by the college. The reality of the classroom means that even up-to-date teachers find it difficult to perform well in all areas with all pupils all of the time. Over a period of three years, however, most students would have had the chance to see a range of teaching styles in practice. Even those they did not agree with helped them to formulate their own views on what was good practice.

The students were also asked if there had ever been occasions when they had seen practices in schools which they thought were in advance of those advocated at college. The majority, more than 80%, said 'No'. It is clear from students' comments that, on the whole, they regard the teaching methods advocated by the college to be up-to-date and in the

vanguard of teaching practices:

The college on the whole is in advance of the teachers. I think teachers should keep coming back and having refresher courses and keep up with what's happening. I've seen some pretty weird things happening in schools.

There were only isolated comments from students, about half a dozen from each college, which gave examples of practices they had seen in schools which they considered to be in advance of those advocated by the college. Usually, these were occasions when the student had had a 'brilliant' associate.

All colleges recognise the crucial importance of students' experience in schools and are working towards improving the quality of this experience. Approaches vary from college to college, but common to all are:

- *The appointment of a full-time liaison officer or manager who is responsible for all student placements in schools and also in maintaining close links with schools.

- *The preparation of courses which are more closely integrated with teaching practice.

- *Having school representatives on all advisory committees which plan courses.

- *Ensuring that tutors who visit students in schools are known to the students and have on-going contact with them.

- *Ensuring that associate teachers are more carefully selected than previously and are prepared more systematically for their responsibilities, both in terms of taking training courses and in the detailed guidance, written and face-to-face, from the college to carry out their responsibilities to students effectively.

University Courses

When we began our study the majority of students in Auckland and Wellington and one-third of those in Christchurch were not taking university courses. We asked those students who

were also attending university, if they thought the university courses they undertook would contribute to their effectiveness as primary school teachers. Students felt that almost all the courses they had taken would do so. Though we thought they would have, they gave no special emphasis to education courses. Students did comment on the knowledge of child development they had gained from university courses, in some cases more than through college courses. In addition students felt that their university courses contributed to their effectiveness as teachers by

- * giving the student confidence in their own academic abilities;
- * enabling the student to pick up organisational and research skills;
- * providing the student with greater self-motivation.

Generally, those taking degree courses found them more intellectually stimulating than the college courses, assessment was more rigorous, and assignments took longer to research and complete. At the same time most students found the university an impersonal, unfriendly place in contrast to the colleges, all of which were seen as friendly, warm, supportive environments.

This study needs to be seen in the context of transition from secondary to tertiary education. And, in the case of graduates, of transition from one tertiary institution to another. There appears to be an awkward join between students' earlier experience as senior secondary students and their first contact with a tertiary institution. All three colleges include

in their official aims a commitment to developing the intellect of students. However, six months into the course, many students found that it lacked intellectual challenge. Students taking university courses invariably found the college less intellectually stimulating and demanding (although there was usually plenty of 'busy work'). But they were not alone in this. Many school leavers also considered the courses at the college of education less intellectually demanding than those they had experienced at secondary

school.

There may be an inherent conflict in the fact that students expect to be intellectually challenged but also want courses that are practically based in terms of their future as classroom teachers of primary-aged children. Furthermore, limited intellectual challenge does not always mean students are dissatisfied. A number of those attending university as well as the college, commented on the fact that they enjoyed the balance between the two. They were enjoying the more practical nature of the college course and the fact that by and large it was more geared to their chosen vocation of teaching. They also enjoyed being part of a group of students all preparing for the same career.

First Teaching Position

Initially it may appear strange to consider the students' first teaching position as influencing their reaction to their course of training while still in college. The problem for those students who mentioned this issue is that they have trouble thinking in the abstract about how well prepared they are to teach a class when they do not know the level and age of the children or the school within which the class will be. There is only so much the college can do. Because neither the lecturers nor the students know the age group students will be teaching, courses are less specific than some students would like.

We will have more data on this topic when we analyse our interviews of first-year teachers. The material we have already collected through our interviews of those two-year, graduate trainees now in classrooms, shows that, not surprisingly, the class and school in which beginning teachers find themselves is a further important influence on their development as effective teachers.

Accreditation of Prior Learning

We referred earlier in this paper to the importance of personal biography in shaping students' views and their reaction to the course. If the colleges do recognise that the students have a 'history' which influences their experience of the course they do not always, in the view of students, act on it.

In interviewing students each year we were frequently impressed

with the commitment of the students and their desire to become competent teachers. The colleges acknowledge the need for students to recognise individual differences among pupils but we doubt if the

colleges are successful in planning programmes which recognise individual differences among students, including differences in what they bring with them to the college, and differences in the length of time it will take them to be ready for the classroom. We have formed the impression that for a proportion of students in our interview sample the course was probably too long. Colleges are considering other ways of packaging their course of teacher education. There certainly appears to be an argument for more flexibility with a 'step on, step off' arrangement to suit student needs, particularly if teacher education is seen as a part of lifelong learning, and for the pre-service component being supported by adequate teacher support and in-service training. College staff are sympathetic to the need to recognise students' prior learning experiences but also believe it is difficult to shorten courses in special cases for two main reasons:

- * courses are planned as an integrated whole, and
- * college courses and timetables are closely linked to university and school programmes and timetables.

Accreditation of prior learning raises a range of complex issues. Examples of these are:

- *It is sometimes difficult to assess what knowledge a student may have gained through a particular experience, for example, being a teacher aide in a school.

- *The value of prior learning is easier to assess in some areas than in others. For example, the skills brought by students fluent in the Maori language may be obvious; the recognition of previous teaching experience is difficult to assess.

- *In a college course, teaching experience is integrated with

learning theory so

that lecturers worry about taking in someone with teaching experience who believes that all s/he needs is a "top up" with theory.

*Students need to be able to demonstrate learning outcomes they claim to have achieved. Students with prior teaching experience may have had unsatisfactory teachers as role models. They may require more rather than less time to meet the college's required learning outcomes.

*Mature students often equate age and maturity with skills in teaching but this is not necessarily the case.

*Some students come into a college with valuable experiences, for example, management and organisational experience, but as the college is not teaching such a course, they cannot receive credit although their experience may prove

useful in the classroom.

*In respect of some understandings that are central to a course of teacher education, it is by no means unusual for students to realise that their previous knowledge was more limited and not as transferable as they had earlier thought. If they had not taken the relevant course they would not have been challenged to reconsider their assumptions.

*Students do not necessarily know what they need to know until they have had some experience of a particular course.

*If students take reduced courses they miss out on some of the richness of interaction that comes from a whole group working, discussing, and learning together. Mixed groups with school leavers and mature students have a chemistry of their own - both groups learn from each other. It is also an important principle for students to take into the classroom - that students learn from each other as well as the teacher.

All colleges can give examples of students who, when they have had the chance to have their case heard, have opted for sticking with the pre-planned course. The fact that a lecturer has taken the trouble to discuss the issue with a student is often a sufficient acknowledgement that the student's situation is recognised and can be a very positive

introduction to the college. When credits are allowed, it is more likely that a particular section of a course or optional papers are credited rather than a total programme shortened. Such a reduced course, even although it still takes the same length of time to complete, should allow students more choice and flexibility of the use of their time within the three-year programme.

Benefits and Hazards of This Longitudinal Study

We believe that the ultimate goal of the research project must be to improve the process of teacher education, first by describing the experience of students in training, and second by identifying areas where change should be considered. A longitudinal study provides rich qualitative data, enabling us to see the growth and development of student ideas as they respond to and reflect on new experiences, develop professional confidence and more realistic goals for their own practices as classroom teachers.

An important reason for opting for a longitudinal study was so that we could develop a working relationship with the principals and staffs of the three colleges we were working in. Our assumption was that, if our data provided information that could be useful to the colleges about student perceptions of their courses, we should find ways of discussing it with them. That was the basis on which the project was entered into, and during the last four

years we have fed back a great deal of information to the colleges, sent drafts of our annual reports to them for comment, and had follow-up meetings with staff during which the significance of our findings for them has been the point of discussion. This working relationship has also been important for us as researchers by giving us a greater depth of understanding of the colleges the students of our sample were experiencing.

Here, however, it is worth noting some unexpected features of the larger context of policy for teacher education to which the colleges have been responding during the life of the research project. One of the assumptions of longitudinal studies is that the basic policies in relation to which a particular study is being undertaken will be

sufficiently similar at its end so that any lessons can be applied. In that respect our research project has been a casualty of the unprecedented policy changes that have happened while it has been in progress.

Teacher education in New Zealand is going through a period of rapid change as colleges explore ways of producing better teachers and also adapt to changed Government requirements for the management of tertiary institutions and the delivery of tertiary education. Changes to the way that the central educational agencies are operating are also presenting new challenges to the colleges. The Ministry of Education is contracting out many responsibilities which the former Department of Education undertook through its own staff. All colleges are, for example, now playing important new roles in curriculum development, staff involvement in this area is having an important spin-off back to the colleges and students through the lecture programme.

We intended through this study to provide a national focus on issues to do with teacher education. Time and resources confined us to three institutions. Increased autonomy has meant that the colleges, which have never been replicas of each other, are developing even more marked individual characteristics than in the past - influenced by, for example, size, geographic locality, proximity to other institutions (particularly universities and polytechnics), as well as the collective and personal philosophies of staff.

A particular problem for this study is the variation in size between the three colleges in which we are working. Auckland, the largest college, has more than two-thirds of our total cohort so that when we look at issues across colleges our comments necessarily reflect more accurately the views of Auckland students. Auckland is also the college where the greatest changes have taken place during the time of our study as far as the relationship with the university is concerned. Students entering college the year after those in our cohort all enrolled for a conjoint B.Ed. degree. This was not a requirement for our students of some of whom later regarded themselves as a 'lost' generation.

An important issue is the movement within a cohort of students over

a three-year period. All the students who entered college when we began our study were training to be teachers, but the courses they took varied from two to four years. This fact increases the

difficulty of tracking the students' progress and making comparative comments about their experience. Added to this is the number of students who have withdrawn from college either permanently or temporarily. The net effect of these two factors means that although 549 students, completed our initial questionnaire our final questionnaire for third years was returned by only 289 students. In both cases, however, these figures represent a response rate of more than 80% of students who could have been expected to complete a questionnaire - a high percentage for a research study of this kind. (See also Figure 3)

Figure 3
Cohort of Students 1989-91

Students not available in 1991

Students who took
2 year shortened course
N = 89
Students who are taking
4 year B.Ed. course
N = 50
Students who have left
college or are on leave
N = 125

The present study is being conducted under contract to the Ministry of Education.

Staff may be concerned at the political uses which could be made of findings which focus largely on the perceptions of students. Students' perceptions of their courses of training is a legitimate focus for research but it cannot provide a complete or holistic account of teacher education. There are other wider contexts within which students' views need to be placed if some of the issues they raise are to be discussed realistically with college staff and management. Looked at now, from the vantage point of 1992, 1988 was not a good year to choose for a longitudinal study expected to have policy implications. Our cohort of students became, in fact, the last intake to embark under the conditions whose essential features had remained broadly comparable for 25 years or so.

In discussing our research design at the beginning of this paper we talked about the need to place any study of teacher education in the wider context of social and economic issues. This aspect has become particularly significant for students in our study, as so few classroom positions were available to them at the end of their training. The cohort of students studied during this project was the first to enter courses of primary training without being guaranteed a teaching job at the end of the course. It is difficult to establish precisely how many of these students were in classrooms at the time this report was written because once students have left the college, staff depend on students notifying the college when they are appointed to a school and there is no necessity for them to do so. We do know, however,

that many were without full-time teaching positions. Students were aware during their final year that job prospects were such that only a proportion of them would be appointed to positions in 1992. This disappointed and angered them and their frustration came through in response to a number of our questions, including their motivation to teach. From the students' point of views, this is a bitter and worrying outcome after three years of effort. For ourselves, it is disappointing to know that the final stage of our study will be undermined by the fact that we can follow only a few of our interview sample into the classroom. We modified our research design in the final phase to include students who were part of the cohort we surveyed on entry to college and at the end of their training, but not all of whom will have previously been interviewed. This will reduce the amount of longitudinal analysis we had hoped to undertake. As well as following up those students who are in the classroom in 1992, we hope to be able to track most of those who did not win teaching positions.

Changes to courses of teacher education have been a less serious hazard than it would have been if we had chosen to keep our data 'sealed' until after the research was completed and we wrote a final report. By feeding back information and reports on the project as it has unfolded we have been able to discuss with the college staff matters which they have then considered for each year of their courses. We know from our continuing discussion with the principals and lecturers that this information has become a useful input to discussions about

college policies on various aspects of the courses they are conducting.

Despite these comments we believe that the views students express raise questions of policy and organisation for which colleges of education must always be seeking effective answers. It is in the context of the process of ongoing evaluation that we believe findings from the study have a contribution to make. It also says much for the college and the students that, despite any criticisms students may have of their training, at the end of the course most students, 97%, describe themselves either "confident" or "very

confident" about
their skills as a future teacher.

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