

## PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROBLEMS OF BEGINNING TEACHERS

### INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, pressure has been mounting for teacher training institutions to improve the content and articulation of their courses in order to improve the quality of beginning teachers (Schools Council, 1989). A growing body of research suggests that not only must teacher educators address issues of course structure, content and articulation in improving teacher education, they must also take into consideration the beliefs, attitudes, expectations and perceptions that pre-service teachers bring to and develop during their training (Pajares, 1992). A number of educators have suggested that pre-service teachers' entry beliefs and perceptions strongly influence both the way they view the theoretical components of teacher training (Clark, 1988; Crow, 1987; Holt-Reynolds, 1992) and their teaching behaviours during field experience (Goodman, 1988). In light of the findings of studies such as these, it becomes important for teacher educators to understand the beliefs of pre-service teachers as an essential step in improving their professional preparation. This paper reports an investigation into the beliefs and expectations about teaching of pre-service teacher education students.

### PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

A large body of literature exists that provides teacher educators with insights into the role pre-service teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and preconceptions play in the acquisition of knowledge in teacher education. Firstly, pre-service teachers enter their training with well developed, highly entrenched ideas and attitudes about what constitutes good learning and teaching (Clark, 1988; Botempo and Digman, 1985). As early as 1975, Lortie argued without formal training (Book, Byers & Freeman, 1983; Crowe, 1987). In a study of the expectations that pre-service primary and secondary teachers had about their ability to teach (prior to any student teaching experience), Weinstein (1988) found that 81% of the primary subjects predicted that their future teaching performance would be 'above average' compared to that of their peers. For secondary pre-service teachers, their confidence in their ability to perform 'above average' compared to their peers was even greater, at 87%. This study also examined pre-service teachers' expectations about their performance on a number of teaching tasks. Weinstein found that both primary and secondary teacher trainees consistently underestimated the difficulty first year teachers would have with instructional, management and personal relation teaching tasks and consistently perceived themselves as having less difficulty than the 'Average First Year Teacher' on all tasks. Weinstein argued that this 'unrealistic optimism' (the belief that the problems others experience would not happen to them) may act as a filter in teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers who have

excessive confidence in their ability and who believe that teaching will be easy for them, may lack the motivation to take on board the information presented in their teacher education programs. Clearly, it is important for teacher educators to be aware of the beliefs and expectations that pre-service teachers hold so that the potential disadvantage of students' over-confidence or unrealistic expectations can be minimised.

### Study Questions

This study was a preliminary investigation to establish normative data on the perceptions that pre-service Bachelor of Education teachers at the University of Newcastle held about the difficulty of teaching problems faced by beginning teachers and about their expected

performance in the future as teachers. The questions this study sought to answer were:

How confident are pre-service teachers about their future ability to teach, both during practice teaching and in their first year of teaching?

What expectations do pre-service teachers have about the severity of problems facing beginning teachers, and about their ability to deal with these problems?

Are the confidence and expectations about teaching of pre-service teachers changed significantly by their teacher education program?

Are the confidence and expectations about teaching of male and female pre-service teachers significantly different?

Are the confidence and expectations about teaching of pre-service Primary and Secondary teachers significantly different?

Are the confidence and expectations of pre-service teachers in a postgraduate Diploma of Education significantly different from those of pre-service teachers in an undergraduate Bachelor of Education program?

### METHOD

#### Subjects

The subjects for this study were students from seven specialisations in the Bachelor of Education course and a sample of the students from the Postgraduate Diploma in Education course at the University of Newcastle. Of the 720 surveys distributed to students in seven courses and from all four year levels, 631 were returned, a response rate of 87%. The data were gathered during the first week of the academic year which meant that the first year B.Ed. students and the Dip.Ed. students had no teaching experience prior to participating in this research. Table 1 indicates the sample breakdown by specialisation, by year and by sex.

Table 1 : Distribution of students by year, specialisation and sex.

#### The Instrument

In order to establish normative data on pre-service teachers' expectations of teaching, a modified version of the Weinstein Teaching Expectations (WES) survey was used. The original WES had been used to gather data on the expectations of primary and secondary trainees at a university in the United States. Minor changes in wording were made to fit the Australian context, for example, getting students to work quietly during seat-work time was amended to read, getting students to work quietly at their desks.

The modified instrument, the Teaching Expectations Survey (TES) was divided into three sections (Appendix 1). Section A sought background information including age, year of the course, teaching specialisation and students' commitment to teaching. Section B addressed the issues of students' global expectations of their performance in practice teaching and their performance as first year teachers. In section C, students were asked to indicate how much of a problem they felt beginning teachers would have with a range of teaching responsibilities. Their responses are reported in this paper as the (Average First Year Teacher) responses.

They were then asked how much of a problem they thought they would have as teachers with the same duties. The responses to these items are referred to as the SELF responses. Each question had six possible responses which were: no problem, very small problem, small problem, moderate problem, serious problem and very serious problem. A factor analysis of the data from part C of the questionnaire confirmed that the items were grouped into four factors: instruction, organisation and management, administrative constraints, and interpersonal relations.

The reliabilities of these subscales, based on the four named factors (Cronbach's alpha) are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliabilities for the Average First Year Teacher and Self Subscales of the Teacher Expectations Survey

## RESULTS

### Student Confidence

The second part of the survey focused on students' confidence in their ability to deal with general aspects of teaching (instruction, organisation and management, administrative constraints and interpersonal relations). Students were asked to compare their expected performance with their peers in two instances: practice teaching and their first year teaching.

Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 report by year level, gender, and course pre-service teachers' expectations about their performance in practice teaching.

Table 3: Pre-service teachers expectations about their performance in practice teaching.

Question: Compared to other students in the same year of your teacher

education program, how well do you think you will do during your practice teaching?

The majority of students at all year levels and in all courses reported that they expected to perform better than their peers in their next practicum (70% of the males, 62% of the females, 55% of the first years, 69% of the second years, 76% of the third years, 68% of the fourth years, 72% of the primary students, 63% of the secondary students, and 52% of the Dip. Ed. students). Male students, first year students, and primary students were particularly confident they would perform in the slightly above average, above average, and much above average categories compared to their peers.

Question: Compared to other students in the same year of your teacher education program, how well do you think you will perform in each of these areas during your practice teaching?

Table 4: Anticipated Performance on Instructional Tasks During the Next Practicum

Except for the Diploma in Education students (46%), a majority of all groups indicated they would perform better than their peers on instructional tasks in their next practicum. Students in the third year (78%), fourth year (68.5%) and primary course (72%) were particularly confident about outperforming their peers on instructional tasks in their next practicum.

Table 5: Anticipated Performance on Organisational and Management Tasks during the next Practicum

The trend of responses from all groups continued when asked about their performance on organisational and management tasks. With the exception of the Diploma in Education students (46%), the majority of students in each group expected to outperform their peers. The most confident group of students were the fourth year students (70%).

Table 6: Anticipated Performance on Getting Along With Others During the Next Practicum

The most confident response from all groups appeared in the category of getting along with others. The majority of students responded that they would get along with others better than their peers during the

next practicum. Responses ranged from a low of 70% for Dip. Ed. students to a high of 90% of the third year students.

Table 7: Pre-service teachers expectations about their performance in their first year of teaching.

Question: Compared to other students in the same year of your teacher education program, how well do you think you will do during your first year as a teacher?

Tables 7, 8, 9 and 10 summarise student responses to questions relating to their anticipated performance as first year teachers. Again, there was a clear trend for all groups to rate their future performance as being better than the average first year teacher. Responses in the top three categories of the rating scale ranged from a total of 60% of females and first year students to 71% of third year and primary students.

Question: Compared to other students in the same year of your teacher education program, how well do you think you will do in each of these areas during your first year of teaching?

Table 8: Anticipated Performance on Instructional tasks during the first year of teaching

As first year teachers, a majority of students in all groups expected to outperform their peers on instructional tasks. The responses ranged from a low of 52% of the Dip.Ed students to a high of 68% of the fourth year and primary students.

Table 9: Anticipated Performance on Organisational and Management tasks during the first year of teaching

Seven of the nine groups display even more confidence in their ability to outperform their colleagues as first year teachers on organisational and management tasks. Only primary and fourth year students' responses declined by 4% on this question.

Table 10: Anticipated Performance in Getting Along With Others in the First Year of Teaching

It again is in the area of getting along with others that all groups of students feel the most confidence in performing better than their peers (Table 10). Responses in this area ranged from a low of 76% of Dip.Ed students in the top three categories, to a high of 83% of males

and fourth year students.

#### Table 11: Confidence to Begin Teaching Immediately

Question: Pretend that a Bachelor's degree or Dip. Ed. were not requirements to teach in the schools and that you were offered a

teaching position right now at the grade level of your choice. In general, how confident do you feel about your ability to begin teaching right now?

The final question in section B of the survey asked students to indicate how confident they felt to begin teaching immediately with no further teacher training. Keeping in mind that the survey was administered during the first week of the academic year, the data reveal some startling results (Table 11). A majority of all groups indicated that if teacher preparation were discontinued at that point, they would be able to do a fairly good or good job of teaching. Year one students (with one week of teacher training) had the lowest response rate, but still a majority (54%) felt they could do a good or fairly good job of teaching.

As would be expected, the confidence level of students increased as the number of years of training increased - 81 % of year two students, 90% of year three students and 94% of fourth year students were confident of doing a fairly good or good job of teaching with no further teacher training. Females were more conservative (72%) than their male counterparts (80%). Primary and secondary students were equally confident of their ability to begin teaching and do well (75%). The most surprising results were the Diploma in Education students. They had shown less confidence in being able to outperform their peers or the average first year teacher than the Bachelor of Education students.

However, 77% indicated that after one week of a one year end-on Diploma in Education they could do a good or fairly good job teaching.

#### Expectations about the Severity of Problems for the Average First Year Teacher

A set of 32 questions dealing with the problems beginning teachers face provided the main focus of the survey. Students were asked to indicate how much of a problem they felt each task would be for the average first year teacher and how much of a problem they felt each task would be for themselves as first year teachers. There were six possible responses for each task ranging from no problem to very serious problem. Table 12 summarises how serious these students perceive teaching problems to be for the average first year teacher (AFYT) and for themselves (SELF) as first year teachers.

The students responses suggested that the eight most serious problems

for the AFYT were getting disruptive students to cooperate, inadequate school equipment, insufficient materials and supplies, improving the academic performance of low achievers, maintaining classroom discipline, lack of supplementary supplies that enrich the curriculum, figuring out why pupils have difficulty with assignments and coping with the work load. These items approached the moderate problem category and were not seen as serious or very serious for average first year teachers.

Students responded that the eight most serious problems they anticipated for themselves were the same problems as they anticipated for the average first year teacher. Even though students saw these as problems, they rated the severity only at the small problem level for themselves.

Students were very optimistic when asked how much of a problem they thought the teaching tasks would present to them. None of the items were ranked as being very serious or serious. The only problem that approached the moderate category was getting disruptive

students to cooperate. The students ranked getting along with colleagues and coping with the work load to be the least serious problems for both the AFYT and themselves.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated a significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between the students' expectations of the difficulties they would experience as first year teachers and the difficulties that the average first year teacher would experience (Wilk's Lambda 0.405). A series of univariate ANOVAs indicated that the students' perceptions of the difficulties they would experience as first year teachers were all significantly different ( $p < .0001$ ) from their perceptions of the difficulties that the average first year teacher would experience (Table 12).

Table 12: Item means on the Instruction, Organisation and Management, Administrative Constraints, and Interpersonal Relations subscales of the Average First Year Teacher and the Self Scales.

Using an analysis of variance, the subscale means for each year level were compared to determine if the students' perceptions of the difficulty of teaching tasks change significantly as they gain more practical skills and knowledge through the teacher training course. The data indicate that no significant differences occur between Bachelor of

Education year levels for any of the AFYT subscales (Table 13). There was a significant difference in the way Diploma in Education students viewed the teaching tasks. They ranked the teaching problems as more difficult than all Bachelor of Education groups.

Significant differences in responses occurred in the Self organisational and management subscale between first and third year Bachelor of Education students and between second and fourth year Bachelor of Education students in the interpersonal relations subscales. First year students ranked organisational and management tasks as more of a problem for themselves than did the third year students. Fourth year students ranked interpersonal relations as being less of a problem than did the second year students. Diploma in education students ranked instructions, organisation and management, and administrative constraints as significantly more of a problem than did all of the Bachelor of Education groups.

The results of table seven raise several important questions for teacher educators. The first question is why do Bachelor of Education students' expectations remain so stable during the four years of teacher training? The means do not appear to change significantly for students between years, or even change from their induction, week one of their course, to the fourth year of the course. Is teacher training ineffective in changing student perceptions of the difficulty of teaching, or is teacher training effective in giving students skills and confidence which acts to maintain their initial confidence? These questions are worthy of further research.

#### Table 13: Comparison of Subscale Means By Year Level And Course Version

Single T-tests were used to determine if the perceptions of students from various groups were significantly different. In Table 14, the means of male/female and primary/secondary item responses for the average first year teacher version were compared.

#### Table 14: Comparison of Subgroup Means - Average First Year Teacher

Except for motivating students and relating to administrators which males saw as being more of a problem than females, there were no significant differences in the way these two groups responded to the items. Primary students indicated that teaching students from different cultures and backgrounds and planning lessons and units would be significantly more of a problem for the average first year teacher than did the secondary students. Secondary students saw

motivating students, maintaining classroom discipline and getting pupils to work quietly at their desks to be significantly more of a problem for the average first year teacher than did their primary counterparts.

In Table 15, the means of the male/female and primary/secondary item responses for themselves as first year teachers were compared. Males rated relating to administrators as being more of a problem than did females. Females rated responding effectively to student misbehaviour as more of a problem than did the males. All other responses by males and females to these items showed no significant difference.

Primary respondents reported that evaluating students' work, teaching students from different backgrounds, planning lessons and units, and adapting curricula and instruction for slow learners to be significantly more of an anticipated problem for themselves as first year teachers than did the secondary respondents. However, secondary respondents reported that motivating students would be significantly more of a problem for them as first year teachers than it would be for primary respondents.

Table 15: Comparison of Subgroup Means - Self as a First Year Teacher

## Discussion

This study set out to establish normative data on pre-service teachers' perceptions of the difficulty of teaching tasks and on pre-service teachers' confidence in dealing with those tasks. The results suggest that pre-service teachers at this institution do not perceive any of the 32 the listed tasks to be 'very serious', 'serious' or even 'moderate' problems for the average first year teacher. Of the eight tasks targeted as being the most difficult for the average first year teacher, only two deal with instruction which is the focus of this teacher education program. Of the remaining six tasks targeted as being difficult, three deal with organisation and management and three deal with inadequate equipment and supplies.

The literature on the perceived problems of beginning teachers was reviewed by Veenman (1984). He reported a number of perceived problems by both beginning teachers and principals of beginning teachers. Table 16 compares the eight most identified problems in the literature with the responses of the pre-service teachers in this study.

Table 16: Comparison of Problems Identified by Veenman and Pre-Service Teachers in this study.

Five of the problems identified in the literature by Veenman were also identified by the pre-service teachers in this study. The remaining three, 'motivating students', 'relationships with parents', and 'assessment of student work', were not seen by the pre-service teachers in this study as being among the eight most difficult problems that face the average first year teacher.

These same items were perceived by pre-service teachers as being the most difficult for themselves, but at a significantly lower level than the average first year teacher. Students clearly expect that the problems faced by the average first year teacher are not serious nor will they be as difficult for themselves as first year teachers.

Results of data analysis in this study support findings from other studies (Weinstein, 1988;

Book and Freeman, 1984) that suggest that students enter teacher training with a great deal of confidence in their ability and apparently a great deal of confidence in their ability to out perform their peers as teachers. The reasons for pre-service teachers' high level of confidence were not determined in this study. Weinstein (1988) suggests that the sources of expectations about teaching can be analysed from a perspective of 'unrealistic optimism' - the tendency to believe that the problems experienced by others won't happen to me' (p.33). In studies from the field of health psychology, unrealistic optimism is caused by egocentrism (believing the actions they have taken to prevent harm will always be successful, but failing to realise that others have also taken those actions unsuccessfully). It has also been suggested that unrealistic optimism occurs when people use their past experiences to predict their future vulnerability (ie., if they have not experienced a certain problem, they reason they will be unlikely to experience that problem in the future).

Further research by Book, Byers and Freeman (1983) supports the idea that previous experience in classrooms and with children may be a source of the unrealistic optimism displayed by pre-service teachers. They found that 80% of the pre-service teachers they surveyed had previous firsthand experience with children and 87% of that group expressed from moderate to high levels of competence in being able to teach immediately - even though they were enrolled in entry level education courses.

Lortie (1975) argues that pre-service teachers' preconceptions of teaching are developed from the thousands of hours spent observing teachers in classrooms and are firmly established by the time they enter teacher training. He further warns that the preconceptions students bring with them to teacher education are robust and show a remarkable resistance against traditional attempts to change them.

Conclusion

## References

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Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. Review of Education that the socialisation of pre-service teachers occurred through the internalisation of teaching models from the thousands of hours they had spent as pupils in classrooms. He suggested that formal pre-service training (pedagogy, methods, education) had less effect than the pretraining socialisation experiences. Others have suggested that the attitudes and beliefs formed about teaching from these experiences result in a kind of 'filter' through which students view theoretical content in teacher training (Crow, 1987; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). Crow (1987) labelled this filter a 'Teacher Role Identity' (TRI) and reported that pre-service teachers used the TRI to accept, assimilate or reject information presented in teacher training. Holt-Reynolds (1992) supported this view and went on to suggest that although pre-service teachers' personal theories of teaching could be helpful in assisting them to interpret information presented in their training, these personal theories can also function as misleading and unproductive frameworks for filtering out potentially useful information presented in teacher training.

It has been suggested that not only do personal theories and beliefs filter out information presented in teacher education, they may also be responsible for the high level of confidence pre-service teachers appear to bring to their teacher education. A number of studies have supported the finding that pre-service teachers enter teacher education with a great deal of confidence in their ability to teach students (other than the fourth year students) had more recently been students in schools and, therefore, might be more influenced by their recollection of those experiences; and thirdly, the Diploma in Education students might be feeling more anxious about their future careers as teachers, knowing that they had just 20 weeks of classes and 8 weeks of practice teaching to prepare them for whatever they would

face as first year teachers. It is this later possibility, and the generally view that the Diploma in Education is too short to be an adequate form of teacher preparation, that is most likely to explain the differences in the views expressed in this study.

Weinstein (1988, p.39) suggested that one way to reduce optimistic biases in teacher education students might be to require students to go through teacher education in a cohort. The present study suggests that this practice will not produce the effect that Weinstein predicted. All the students in the present study were members of cohorts of 15 to 75 students who had ample opportunity to compare their beliefs and abilities with their peers. For the second, third and fourth year students, these comparisons seem to have had little effect.

Overall, the study reported in this paper indicated that the students had quite unrealistic views of the complexity and difficulty of teaching, and quite inflated opinions of their own abilities to deal with these complexities. The source of these views, the effects they have on the students during and after their teacher education program, and the most appropriate response from teacher educators are all problematic. The most important questions for further research raised by this study are: Why are the pre-service teachers so confident? What effect does this confidence have on their acquisition of knowledge and skills during their teacher education program? What effects does this apparently misplaced confidence have on the performance of first year teachers? and What strategies can be introduced into the teacher education program to help the students gain a more realistic view of teaching? Without realistic views of teaching, students are unlikely to engage seriously in the pursuit of knowledge and skills that will equip them to deal with the problems that research has so frequently identified as confronting all beginning teachers.