

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

HOBART CONFERENCE 1995

BEGINNING PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHING

Don Williams

University of Western Sydney Macarthur

ABSTRACT

As an extension of previous studies of beginning teachers who have graduated from the University of Western Sydney Macarthur in recent years, the present study sought to obtain deeper insights into the experiences of beginning teachers in 1995. To date, fifteen out of an anticipated twenty have participated in the study. Graduates of the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) program in 1994, who had obtained work, were invited to complete the Starting Teaching Questionnaire which had been administered to cohorts of graduates in previous years. They were also visited in schools where they were interviewed and observed as they taught. The researchers participated in classroom activities and invited the teachers to point out things about beginning teaching that became obvious during these activities. In this paper data from the interviews and participant-observations were combined to describe the experience of beginning teaching. While all beginning teachers shared common views about issues that kept them busy and made the first year of teaching demanding, there were marked differences between those who had full-time positions with their own classes and those who were doing casual supply teaching.

INTRODUCTION

For several years annual graduation ceremonies in April at the University of Western Sydney Macarthur have afforded opportunity to survey primary beginning teachers about their success in obtaining work and their experiences as beginning teachers. Each April, recent graduates had been teaching or had been in the market for teaching positions for approximately two and a half months. With the advent of an accelerated program in which primary students could complete a three year course in two and a half calendar years by using summer schools, some students entered the workforce mid-year and attended a September graduation ceremony. One cohort of these students was surveyed in September 1994, approximately three months after entering the market for teaching positions. A Starting Teaching Questionnaire was used in all the surveys. It was constructed by drawing on key issues in the

literature on beginning teachers but it also incorporated factors which had particular significance in South West Sydney.

The results of the surveys of recent graduates have been reported elsewhere (Williams, 1994). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of beginning teachers, there was a need to go beyond the data obtained on the Starting Teaching Questionnaire by using a different approach. An internal research grant was obtained from the University of Western Sydney Macarthur to follow up approximately twenty recent primary graduates in schools. This paper is a work in progress report based on fifteen beginning teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The study commenced in February 1995 with the appointment of a research assistant. She was a member of the cohort of primary teacher education graduates who completed their course at the end of 1994 and would be the focus of the study. The appointment of a beginning teacher as a research assistant in a study of beginning teachers had worked well in a study of Improvements to Induction Programs for Beginning Teachers through the Use of Teacher Competencies which was undertaken for the Department of Employment, Education and Training (Williams, Perry, and Dobson, 1995).

Letters of introduction were written to participating graduates and to the Principals of the schools in which they were teaching to explain the research project. Beginning teachers were visited in their schools where they were interviewed and observed as they taught. The researchers, either together or separately, participated in classroom activities and invited the teachers to point out things about beginning teaching that became obvious during these activities. In some schools, Principals were also interviewed.

Data came from a variety of sources and techniques. In ethnographic terms, both the emic and etic approaches were used. However, particular stress was placed on the information obtained during discussions with the beginning teachers who were invited to comment on what they perceived as significant in their experiences. Their concepts and modes of expression were used in the recording of data. Towards the end of the time spent with the beginning teachers some structure was introduced to obtain their responses to a few specific questions.

The method used to analyse and synthesise data was not unlike the one used in the NUD.IST program.

FINDINGS

Beginning Teacher

As the study is about beginning teachers, it is important to establish who a beginning teacher was in 1995 in NSW public schools. Some beginning teachers were those who had recently completed an initial course of teacher education and were fortunate to be targeted for full-time tenurable positions. Others were effectively working full-time on block periods as casual teachers. Others were casual or supply teachers who picked up work where they could on a day to day or week to week basis. The employment situation was far more difficult than it had been a few years ago, but graduates were nevertheless doing reasonably well in gaining forms of employment.

Many beginning teachers had developed skills in seeking and obtaining employment. Getting known and respected was important. One graduate, who had obtained a full-time targeted position, had to lobby hard to get a school in her region.

A few of the targeted graduates experienced some animosity from teachers and their peers because they were seen to have gained a privilege. This was particularly poignant for a graduate who felt she had only an average academic record at university and yet had impressed the selection committee sufficiently to obtain a position. As a consequence, several of her peers had severed social relationships. The graduate felt that the targeted system was unfair, even though she had gained a position under the scheme. One of the Principals proffered the comment that he could not detect a difference in

performance between those he had employed as targeted graduates and those who were not targeted.

Graduation

One of the surprising findings in the study was the significance that many beginning teachers placed on the university graduation ceremony. It was a peak experience that served to validate their status as teachers. Students finishing the course at the end of a calendar year had to wait till April the next year to graduate. Even though the university had provided the Department of School Education with evidence that they had completed the course and were therefore eligible to begin teaching, the ceremony had special significance. I felt like a real teacher after the ceremony.

According to a couple of beginning teachers, graduation ceremonies should be held at the end of the year in which the course is completed.

The Department and Its Schools

The changes that new governments have made to education in NSW have had

an impact on student teachers and beginning teachers. They have produced a degree of stress. The changes made me feel insecure about my prospects of eventually finding full-time employment. Curriculum change has been particularly significant. It makes me feel as though I'm out of date even though I've just come out of university.

Schools differ. Some are modern and well equipped, others are poor and uninviting places. Beginning teachers are aware that they are unevenly distributed in schools across NSW. Greater Western Sydney is still a region where the majority of beginning teachers find work.

One of the beginning teachers had been fortunate to obtain a position at a coastal school in northern NSW. She described it as a middle class school where parents expect high academic and sporting standards.

Another beginning teacher had been appointed to a very stable school in a desirable area of Sydney. Three of the teachers on the staff had attended the school as pupils many years ago. Another beginning teacher was in a school in western Sydney that earned her four points per year towards transfer. It had a few beginning teachers and several other teachers who were relatively inexperienced. Quite often it experiences difficulty in obtaining a casual teacher to fill in when a teacher is away. At the school it is not uncommon for children from a class without a teacher to be distributed through other classes. In another school in western Sydney, a beginning teacher pointed to the high mobility of the children. In the school children who were absent seemed to have no difficulty obtaining notes from their parents explaining why they had been absent. The school was in a large housing commission area where children tend to come and go as they visit relatives. The teacher cited the case of one child who had been in three schools in six weeks. Domestic violence in the home is often a problem.

Getting to know a school in which you are placed as a beginning teacher is a major task.

The relative wealth of a school can have an impact on beginning teachers. A few of the beginning teachers pointed out that they had to spend a considerable amount of their own money to acquire sufficient resources for classroom activities. There were strict limitations on photocopying, and this was a problem that was difficult to overcome.

Getting Started as a Teacher

Every beginning teacher had much to say about the first few weeks of teaching. Terms such as daunting, overwhelming, scary, a bombardment, and difficult were used by different informants. One person was keen to point out that block practice teaching during the year as a student teacher is different from what a beginning teacher experiences at the start of a school year. Another felt it was a matter of sink or swim.

A new school, a new class, disruptions, and the like were demanding enough, but there was also anxiety about doing the right thing. It was scary in case I did the wrong thing. Daily lesson planning and the need to hand in a program by week three were demanding.

Stress levels were high at the start of the school year because beginning teachers were generally conscientious, enthusiastic and hard working. They put in long hours from Monday to Friday and often spent a great deal of the weekend working. Although the pressure eased off after the first five weeks or so, beginning teachers were extremely busy people during their first year of teaching.

While all beginning teachers carried an enormous workload, those with family responsibilities had almost insuperable workloads. I'm at school from about 8.00am to 5.00pm. When I get home I have my own children to organise. On most nights I'm up till 10.30pm or 11.00pm on school work.. I also have to work on weekends. It's just like being at university with assignments due.

University Study

Participants in the study had graduated with a three-year Bachelor of Teaching. A couple of them, who spoke about the pressure of continuing university study, had committed themselves to go straight on to obtain a four-year Bachelor of Education. One had a HECS scholarship from the Department and felt it was too precious to sacrifice. The other teacher had maintained a private tutoring commitment that she had as an undergraduate student in order to bring in extra money.

Teachers graduating from a university course face a dilemma if they have not been assured of a full-time teaching position. Should they enrol in their fourth-year Bachelor of Education immediately in case they only get casual work? If they do this and make a major commitment to university study, what should they do if they are offered full-time work part way through the university semester?

Casual Teaching

The special needs of casual teachers were highlighted in the study. Because ever so many teachers nowadays start as casual teachers, their plight needs to be recognised by employing authorities. I hate day to day casual teaching. Every child tries you out. You need to see that what you're doing makes a difference in the lives of the children you're teaching. This can't be done on a casual basis. There is a high level of insecurity and this causes stress. Schools have different expectations of casual teachers and hence it is difficult to be sure that what they are doing is right or acceptable. There might be a Casual Teachers' Handbook, but the casual teachers have little time to read it. In a school, specific matters can be important. For example, there might be a rule that a child cannot go to the toilet

alone.

Classroom management can be difficult for a casual teacher who has to step into a class that is used to the way the permanent teacher

organises things. At times the children feel that the presence of a casual teacher is an invitation to muck up and give the teacher hell. Often the children feel that the work given to them during their teacher's absence is not real work. When describing casual teaching as unsatisfying, one beginning teacher pointed out that she was a trained teacher and not simply a babysitter, but teachers parents and children tended to regard her as the latter. She went on to point out that casual teaching was different from practice teaching when she was a student. The way it is perceived is different.

A casual teacher tends to get a lot of extra duties such as playground duty. This happens even if the teacher whom the person is replacing is not scheduled for playground duty. As far as instructional planning is concerned, casual teaching might entail less work but it is also less satisfying.

Employment conditions for casual teachers reinforce the fact that they are casuals. They have to fill in the blue form and take it to the Department of School Education office in order to get paid. There is no payment for school holidays, even though this might be taken into account when pay levels are set. Casual teachers have to wait for a couple of weeks after school holidays before they receive any pay. One beginning teacher claimed that there were no professional development or inservice sessions available to her as a casual. Furthermore, she did not have a supervisor or mentor.

Supervisors and Mentors

Beginning teachers with full-time work had supervisors, but there was uncertainty about whether they had official mentors. Most saw the supervisor as having mentoring responsibilities while a few regarded other friendly and helpful teachers as mentors.

Generally speaking, supervisors were busy people who had good intentions but who found it difficult to provide a great deal of help to beginning teachers. Supervisors did very little if any observation of teaching. A couple of beginning teachers had their supervisors changed during the year and this was inconvenient. In one extreme case, a beginning teacher had four different supervisors in the space of six months due to staff changes within the school.

Induction

Formal induction programs for beginning teachers were few and far

between. In one region of the State, which traditionally has almost no beginning teachers, the Department put on a one-day induction program for fifteen in 1995. A teacher from a school in this region said that she was the first beginning teacher that her Principal had met in years. It is significant to note that few of the beginning teachers in the study referred to the concept of "induction" but instead spoke about support and the part other teachers played.

Other Teachers

Getting to know the staff in a school, even for those beginning teachers who had permanent positions, was not an easy task. To start with, in a large school there are many teachers and interaction patterns are limited. If you are flat out in your classroom and have extra duties such as playground duty, you have limited time to meet others. Some of the older staff had formed their own social and professional groups. One beginning teacher found it easier to relate to the part-time staff who came into her class for special programs.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of getting to know people, staff were generally friendly and helpful. Beginning teachers tended to get to know the other teachers in their section of the school, such as infants, and found one or two most helpful.

A beginning teacher who obtained a position in the school in which he had undertaken practice teaching had an advantage in that he knew the school routine and many of the staff. By way of contrast, a teacher who came into a school half way through the year found things difficult because routines and interaction patterns were already well established. Casual teachers were those who experienced the greatest difficulty given the transitory nature of their work.

Programming and Planning

Coming to grips with the key learning areas in the curriculum was daunting. Schools differed in their approaches and emphases. The major task that had to be completed within a matter of weeks was the program which also had to be approved. How to do justice within the program to all the key learning areas was a major problem in an over-crowded curriculum.

Daily timetabling and instructional planning were also very demanding. Library can take a whole afternoon. After sport the children are not in a mood for academic activities. How long should different lessons be? Composite classes present other demands. How do you ensure that children are working at appropriate levels and are being extended? If you happen to be working as a relief teacher, it is difficult to fit into other people's routines and programs.

Only one of the beginning teachers chose to talk directly about subject-matter knowledge and the need for her knowledge base to improve. By way of illustration, she wanted to gain a better understanding of decomposition in mathematics. She felt that the university course could concentrate more on giving students a deeper knowledge of subject-matter in the key learning areas. Another beginning teacher did make oblique reference to the need for a greater understanding of subject-matter.

Classroom Management

Classroom management was a topic addressed by all beginning teachers. One person felt it was much easier than she had expected it to be, but most were keen to talk about problems and strategies. In one classroom, children had traditionally settled disputes with the fist and this took quite a time to change. In a couple of other classrooms the beginning teachers had to work on group dynamics because certain children had to be separated to stop fights. In one case, children could not be seated together because of a conflict between their families. Beginning teachers were conscious of their use of rewards and punishments in the process of management. The ethos and general management of a school had a bearing on discipline and classroom management.

Classroom Appearance

While in classrooms the principal researcher observed the general appearance of the rooms as learning environments. They varied considerably. One classroom, for example, was old, musty and in need of repair. Resources were limited in this classroom, but the teacher had tried to make the most of a difficult situation. By way of contrast, another classroom had a multitude of learning resources

including separate play and painting rooms, toys, computers and books. It was bright and colourful, with ample space to display children's work. It would appear that beginning teachers who have their own classes on a full-time basis are conscious of the need to establish attractive and rich learning environments in their classrooms, but are limited by the resources available in the school and by their capacity to spend their own money. In some cases, perhaps a greater effort by beginning teachers could have been made to improve classroom appearance.

Individual Teaching Styles

While there was not a great deal of discussion about teaching styles, it was obvious that beginning teachers were reflecting on their practice. Issues such as the amount of group versus individual work were of concern. One teacher found that she had to revise a lot

because children forgot so easily.

By taking a personal interest in children, one teacher found that she had gained a great deal of personal and confidential information about children and their families. She had to learn to be discrete in what she listened to and what she did with the information.

Another teacher of young children faced a problem that arose from her love for the children she taught. Some of them come up and want to give her a cuddle, especially when they need comforting. She said that she gives them a cuddle, but is conscious that she is not supposed to touch children for fear of sexual allegations.

Casual teachers found it more difficult to gain fulfilment as teachers.

One teacher pointed out that she has thirty new names to learn every so often, and that it is hard to teach effectively without a detailed knowledge of the children.

Routine Administration

Matters that could be classified as routine school administration were mentioned frequently by beginning teachers. Setting up the roll and marking it had to be done correctly. Collecting money from students is not as simple as it looks. Money for sport has to go up to the office by a certain time. Money for photos is handled differently. Teachers are always sending messages and classes are constantly being disrupted.

There is a great deal of paper work that comes to teachers via the staff pigeonholes.

Playground duty was mentioned as a demanding chore. Some teachers had three or four periods of duty per week and as a result had little time to have a break and relax.

When one beginning teacher was asked to take the main school assembly for the first time, she found it a great strain. She was acutely conscious that she would be on display to the whole school, teachers and students.

Parents

Contact with the parents of the children varied greatly. Overall, they were mostly supportive. On the first occasion that one young teacher met parents, some of them made comments about how young she was and asked how long she had been teaching. She felt uncomfortable. Some of the parents were wary of her because of her inexperience.

In several schools parents were quite active. They helped in the

classroom and also in the tuck shop. In one middle class school they were supportive but also very demanding in terms of academic and other outcomes. By way of contrast, in a school in a region that found it difficult to attract teachers, parental involvement often was related to grievances over non-academic issues such as fairness, sport and excursions. They could be direct and blunt in their dealings with classroom teachers, or go above them to lodge complaints.

Biggest Joy associated with Teaching

Towards the end of interview sessions, beginning teachers were asked to indicate what their biggest joy had been. Responses invariably focused on children: a lesson had gone well and children had learnt something, the children had responded, the children had made progress, the children had displayed new attitudes, the children had responded positively and so on. Kids were at the centre of satisfaction.

Biggest Frustration associated with Teaching

When asked about the biggest frustration in their work, beginning teachers still focused to a large extent on children, but there were also several other concerns. There was frustration when children were not responding and learning. Difficult disruptive children were also frustrating. One teacher felt that boys demand more attention than girls. Being unable to do justice to the needs of children with learning disabilities and to those who are from a non-English speaking background concerned some teachers.

A few other reasons for frustration were proffered and these included being unable to establish effective relationships with staff, not having a secure job, and being unable to get all the work done.

Message to the Faculty of Education

At the conclusion of the interviews respondents were asked what would be the most important message(s) that they would like to convey to the staff in the Faculty of Education who were responsible for their preservice course. There was a fairly positive response to the course, but two teachers who had spent most of their time doing casual teaching suggested that intakes into the course should be cut because there were not enough full time jobs.

A few people wanted more emphasis on the English component of the course. How to teach children to read and write was mentioned. The third year of the course, containing the large integrated studies subject and the in-school semester, was felt to be the best year. More attention could have been devoted to some of the little things, such as how to set up and mark a roll.

CONCLUSION

The emphasis in this paper has been on the experiences of a number of beginning teachers at a time when relatively few were gaining targeted full-time positions immediately after graduating. The majority were nevertheless gaining work of some kind as teachers. Those who had been unsuccessful in obtaining work were not included in the study. One of the major findings of the study has been to show the difficulties faced by the casual teachers who teach a number of classes for varying lengths of time. Their experiences are not very fulfilling and should be of concern to those responsible for the employment of teachers and

the development of the teaching profession.

REFERENCES:

Williams, D. (1994) Starting Teaching. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Australian Teacher Education Association.

Williams, D., Perry, B., and Dobson, K. (1995) Improvements to Induction Programs for Beginning Teachers Through the Use of Teacher Competencies. (Research report to the Department of Employment, Education and Training) Sydney: Faculty of Education, University of Western Sydney Macarthur.

BEGINNING PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHING

INTRODUCTION

METHODOLOGY

FINDINGS

1. Beginning Teachers

2. Graduation

3. The Department and Its Schools

4. Getting Started as a Teacher

5.University Study

6.Casual Teaching

7.Supervisors and Mentors

8.Induction

9.Other Teachers

10.Programming and Planning

11.Classroom Management

12.Classroom Appearance

13.Individual Teaching Styles

14.Routine Administration

15.Parents

16.Biggest Joy

17.Biggest Frustration

18.Message to the Faculty of Education

CONCLUSION

C:\AARE95.doc