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LEARNING TO TEACH: NARRATIVES FROM EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The transition from preservice teacher education to practice in the workplace brings about a shift in role orientation and an epistemological move from knowing about teaching through formal study to knowing how to teach by confronting the daily challenges of the school and classroom (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Becoming a teacher therefore requires not only the development of a professional identity but the construction of professional knowledge and practice. Studies examining the professional growth of beginning teachers during their initial teacher education course and the early days of teaching have recognised the uniqueness of each graduate, however, some common themes have emerged. This paper details a study that tracked a sample group of 16 early career teachers through their first year of teaching. The teachers were encouraged to write about their experiences in journals and were interviewed in an attempt to provide a clearer understanding of how early career teachers achieve control of their own teaching and professional growth. This paper will make use of qualitative data to discuss their experiences and professional growth with the view to informing and strengthening early career teacher support.

BACKGROUND

It has long been accepted that the quality of education not only depends on the content of systems, school programs and infrastructure provided to support them but equally important is the quality of the teaching which occurs in the classrooms (Rowe & Rowe, 2002). For early career teachers the expectations of both colleagues and parents to deliver this quality teaching are enormous as they grapple with the daily requirements of programming, catering for a range of student needs, assessment and reporting and the area of managing students and classrooms (Veenman, 1984; Khamis, 2000).

The initial year of teaching is an important phase in any teacher's professional growth regardless of their teacher education preparation and is recognised as having long term implications for teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction and career length (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Khamis, 2000; Loughran, Brown & Doecke, 2001). Gold (1996) states that, "Few experiences in life have such a tremendous impact on the personal and professional life of a teacher as does the first year of teaching" (p.548). As early career teachers make this transition into schools they encounter many new challenges, responsibilities and must find a professional place within the school culture (Herbert & Worthy, 2001). These experiences derive from a complex interaction of personal and situational factors which help early career teachers to form a professional identity and construct professional practice with the capacity for continued further growth (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Over the years the learning-to-teach literature has seen many attempts to analyse the process of beginning to teach with several researchers basing their views on stage theory (Fuller, 1969; Katz, 1977; Ryan, 1986; Berliner, 1988; Goddard & Foster, 2001). Fuller's (1969) approach was based on a developmental model of teacher concerns beginning with new teachers experiencing survival concerns for 'self' then moving onto 'task' concerns focusing on management, and finally as they gain experience and confidence it is argued they focus on 'impact' concerns with the emphasis moving to their students. Katz (1977) developed descriptors for four stages she identified as,

survival, consolidation, renewal and maturity. She recognised that time spent in each phase will vary considerably between individual early career teachers from days to months and many teachers may never reach the latter stages. Berliner (1988) proposed a model of teacher development based on cognitive studies of expertise with five stages beginning with the 'novice' stage followed by the 'advanced beginner' stage where early career teachers develop strategic knowledge and they begin to use their experiences and understanding of context to guide behaviour. The third stage is 'competent' where a teacher is able to make conscious choices based on knowledge gained from many experiences before moving onto the fourth 'proficient' stage where intuition and know-how guide actions in the classroom. The final 'expert' stage of teaching is where a teacher has automated routines to handle planning, instruction and management. More recently Goddard and Foster (2001) identified six conceptual states experienced by early career teachers these being, "Archetypal; approaching the gates; gloss wears off; disillusionment; blaming and alternate routes across the Rubicon" (p.352). All of these researchers acknowledge the many variations to their stage models and note that early career teachers cannot be presumed to be a completely homogeneous group and therefore generalisations are made with caution.

Some of the common influences which are identified and confirmed in these earlier frameworks outlining professional growth of teachers are the importance of prior knowledge and beliefs, the crucial role of the image of self as a teacher and the major impact of context (Kagan, 1992). Most early career teachers bring to and carry through their preservice teacher education programs, personal beliefs about classrooms, teaching and how it felt to be a student (Lortie, 1975). This knowledge and these beliefs are sometimes unchanged even after years spent in preservice programs where course content is often not seen to be connected to preservice teachers' experiences in the classroom (Kagan, 1992; Knowles, 1994).

Early career teachers commonly display an unrealistic level of optimism and confidence in their ability to teach on entry to teaching (Pajares, 1992). This optimism and confidence is often challenged in the first few years of teaching, and many new recruits choose an early career exit, citing failure to receive adequate mentoring and supervision, behaviour management, excessive responsibilities and failure to recognise and reward professional growth in the early years of their careers as common concerns faced by beginning teachers (Gitomer, 1999; Lohr, 1999; Ramsey, 2000). Research has shown that those who remain and are supported are more likely to use their experience and acquired knowledge to begin to reconstruct their images of self as a teacher (Ginns, Heirdsfield, Atweh & Watters, 2001)

The school and classroom contexts in which early career teachers find themselves teaching have been shown to have a major impact on their professional growth (Kagan, 1992). Research has shown that in Australia many new teachers are commonly placed in hard to staff or remote areas which might mean they often have inadequate knowledge of the students' backgrounds, socio-cultural factors and expectations of parents and the community in which they find themselves teaching (Khamis, 2000; McCormack & Thomas, 2003). This can affect and challenge prior knowledge and beliefs and the early career teacher's image of self as a teacher as they adapt and develop within the constraints of their new workplace. These situations have reportedly led to a loss of confidence by new teachers in the "abilities they thought they had and themselves as individuals" (Khamis, 2000, p.5).

Many challenges facing early career teachers were recognised and researched by Feiman-Nemser (2001) who states "new teachers have two jobs – they have to teach and they have to learn to teach" (p.1026). She explains that no matter how comprehensive a preservice program may be it only lays the foundation and it is when an early career teacher enters their own classroom that they really begin to learn about the complexity of being a teacher, with the first years being an "intense and formative time in learning to teach" (p.1026). This is supported by Loughran et al., (2001) who comment "preservice programs cannot fully create or sustain an environment that genuinely equates with the reality of full-time teaching" (p.7). Manuel (2003) explains the unique position a beginning teacher finds themselves in by stating:

"The teaching profession is unique in its treatment of its new members in that, from day one on the job, the beginning teacher must assume all

the roles and responsibilities of the experienced practitioner with no material or other allowances made for their newness” (p.145)

Feiman-Nemser (2001) recognised the need for a continuum of serious and sustained professional learning opportunities for early career teachers. She developed a framework of teacher learning based on a set of Central Tasks of Learning to Teach (CTLT) in the form of a continuum which ranges from preservice through induction to continuing professional development of teachers (see Table 1). The central tasks are built on what teachers need to know, care about, and be able to do in order to promote substantial learning for all students. They acknowledge past approaches to learning to teach and the importance of the experiences, images and beliefs brought to preservice programs which influence what early career teachers are able to learn and how they will learn. The CTLT for beginning teachers during the Induction Stage considered by this framework include the gaining of local knowledge of students, curriculum and school context; designing responsive instructional programs; enacting a beginning repertoire; creating a classroom learning community and the development of a professional identity. The Induction Stage is generally that confronting teachers during their first three years of teaching, however, Feiman-Nemser (2001) acknowledges that “learning continues for thoughtful teachers as long as they remain in teaching” (p.1039).

Table 1 – Central Tasks of Learning to Teach

Preservice	Induction	Continuing Professional Development
1. examine beliefs critically in relation to vision of good teaching	1. Learn the context- students, curriculum, school community	1. Extend & deepen subject matter knowledge for teaching
2. Develop subject matter knowledge for teaching	2. Design responsive instructional program	2. Extend & refine repertoire in curriculum, instruction & assessment
3. Develop an understanding of learners, learning, & issues of diversity	3. Create a classroom learning community	3. Strengthen skills & dispositions to study & improve teaching
4. Develop a beginning repertoire	4. Enact a beginning repertoire	4. Expand responsibilities and develop leadership skills
5. Develop the tools & dispositions to study teaching	5. Develop a professional identity	

The notion of ongoing and life-long professional learning and growth for teachers has been supported by many researchers (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Schon, 1983, 1987; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). It has been accepted by these researchers that if professional growth is to occur teachers need to have sustained and substantive learning opportunities involving serious ongoing discussions with critical colleagues such as mentors and continued reflection on all aspects of their practices and beliefs to enhance their knowledge of teaching. Schon (1987) emphasised the importance of ongoing, critical reflection in teaching, in his notion of teachers as “reflective practitioners”. More recently Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002) emphasised the need to provide opportunities for support of teacher professional growth in realistic contexts with the view of “teachers as learners” within schools as “learning communities” (p.949). One way early career teachers can undertake professional growth using reflection is through narrative, either written or verbal, which allows them to voice their most pressing issues or concerns, examine prior knowledge in the light of new understandings and construct new knowledge through the processes of reflection, dialogue and inquiry (Beattie, 2000; Doecke, Brown & Loughran, 2000).

The use of narrative and a holistic orientation to learning to teach is grounded in Dewey’s philosophy that we learn through experience and reflection (1966). It is based on the education and development of the whole person who is becoming a teacher and allows, through an exchange of stories and conversations, the analysis, ongoing support and continuous feedback for individuals as they grapple with the complexities of becoming members of the teaching profession (Beattie, 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996). Researchers have strongly argued the value of narrative in educational research, especially the research by teachers into their own practice and in the case of this study, into their development as new members of the teaching profession (Beattie, 2000; Carter, 1993; Clandinin, 1992).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to identify and monitor early career teachers' experiences, reflections, support and professional growth during the first year of their induction into teaching. The specific aims of the study were to:

- A. review and monitor the areas of professional growth experienced by early career teachers
- B. identify the factors which supported or hindered the professional growth of early career teachers
- C. provide suggestions to improve the support of professional growth of early career teachers

METHOD

The participants in this study were graduates from a large regional university in NSW who had undertaken either a four-year Education Double Degree program in primary, secondary or early childhood teaching or a two year Bachelor of Education program offered as a retraining program for students with recognised prior learning qualifications. A random sample of male and female 2002 graduates from a mix of these programs who gained permanent employment in 2003 in NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) schools in both country and city locations and in early childhood, primary and secondary settings were approached and asked to participate in the study. Twenty graduates were selected with a final group of 16 participating in the study.

The participants were asked to identify a mentor or supervisor and to complete a journal documenting the first two terms of their induction into teaching. These journals were prepared in a semi-structured format by the researchers and required the participants to reflect on: the context of their school and setting; their initial teaching experiences; the type of support received; and their professional growth at the end of Term 1, Term 2, and early Term 4, 2003. The journals were collected at the end of Term 1 and Term 2 2003, photocopied and returned to the individual participants. Early in Term 4 2003 all of the participants and their mentors/supervisors undertook an individual 40-60 minute interview with a researcher in their school setting. These interviews sought to build upon the journal responses and provide a set of richer narratives concerning their experiences and professional learning in learning to teach.

The interviews used standardised semi-structured open-ended questions allowing the researchers to collect evidence regarding the main issues that are of key relevance to the focus of the study. Both the early career teachers and the mentors/supervisors were given a brief overview of the questions which would guide the interview in advance to ensure that the interviews focused on research areas and to encourage extended thought about the designated discussion issues. The interviews were tape-recorded to enable the researchers to concentrate on the on-going interview and enhance the conversational nature of the interview and to allow sensitive issues to be discussed when appropriate. All interviews were transcribed to allow for close analysis.

The data from the interview transcripts and the journals were collated, analysed and compared for major themes in terms of the study research aims. The theoretical framework of Feiman-Nemser's (2001) CTLT for the Induction Stage, was used as a framework to analyse and discuss aspects of professional growth identified by the participants. Common factors that supported or hindered growth were identified and recommendations are made to assist early career teachers' professional growth. When presenting the data the participants' narratives, either verbal or written, were identified by referring to their setting and location as follows: S, Co representing an early career teacher in a secondary school in a country location or P, Ci representing an early career teacher in a primary school in a city location. All participants were numbered 1 to 16 to identify individuals and enable developments in responses made on the three data gathering occasions to be reported, for example 8, S, Co, T2 represents the participant number 8 who was a secondary teacher in a country location and the response was made at the end of Term 2.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The key concept that underpins this study is that professional growth is a form of learning and should be an inevitable and continuous process for all teachers not only early career teachers. Understanding the process by which teachers grow professionally and the conditions that support

and promote that growth is complex. Traditionally teacher change has been linked to formal, planned inservice activities which use a deficit model of teacher learning (Guskey, 1986) assuming outside “experts” should train or supply teachers with knowledge or resource ideas they lack. However, in more recent times there has been a shift from the training approach to teachers participating “as active learners shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in both programs and practice” (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p.984). Professional growth using this latter approach means “transformations in teachers’ knowledge, understandings, skills, and commitments, in what they know, and what they are able to do in their individual practice as well as their shared responsibilities” within a school (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.1038).

A. Areas of professional growth –

When early career teachers face their new school and classrooms for the first time knowing that they are truly responsible for all that occurs and they may not have a supervisor, peer or colleague there to assess, support or guide them through all parts of their teaching, the realities they encounter help form part of their induction to teaching. Using Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) CTLT as a framework it is clear that familiarity with the local teaching environment becomes an important area of knowledge for early career teachers.

1. Learn the context - students, curriculum, and school community - In this study all participants acknowledged the immediate importance of gaining local knowledge and becoming familiar with the students, curriculum, administrative policies and procedures, professional expectations and the larger school community. Research has reported that three important determinants of growth and success for beginning teachers are the nature of the school and students, the colleagues and their willingness to support and assist and parent/community relationships (Kagan, 1992). Concurring with this view is work undertaken by Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kaufmann & Liu (2001) who found that a school culture that will provide formal and informal information about how to teach and how to be successful in the culture and context of the particular school and community is important for the ongoing success of any early career teacher. The participants in this study wrote extensively in their journals about the context of their schools and most found themselves in schools considered ‘harder to staff’ in either geographically isolated rural settings or city areas with lower socio-economic status and many social problems. One story from a primary teacher explained her school context at the beginning of Term 1:

My school has been restructured and has funding from many sources and has a high turnover of staff with all executive staff leaving last year and only the principal permanently replaced. The school has a high proportion of beginning teachers..... it is hard to get any casual staff which means when teachers are absent their classes are often split between teachers who are present..... The student population is 98% aboriginal from 4 distinct different community groups with a number of large families within these groups, however, there is at times conflict within and between both groups and families. Although the principal is Aboriginal the community are not readily accepting of her so far and her attempts to get to know them. The community has major social problems of unemployment, poverty, gambling, drug abuse, depression together with inadequate housing..... The students I teach have poor attendance records, very low literacy levels, poor attention spans, few social skills resulting in unacceptable violent behaviour such as swearing, throwing tables, chairs, rocks, and regularly leave class without permission..... Today a student held a pair of scissors at another student’s throat and last week another teacher was punched in the stomach which highlights the challenges I face and the extreme nature of ‘normal behaviour’ in this school (3, P, Co, T1).

Another secondary teacher explains her school and its context in her Term 1 journal:

XXX high school is in a south west NSW country town which has an economy based on agriculture and a school enrolment of 250 students with 4 beginning teachers appointed to the school this year..... I have

been linked to an official mentor who was born in this town and she has given me plenty of insight into the culture of the community. I teach classes from years 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 with the senior class proving very difficult. Their behaviour was a real shock as they are unmotivated and do not want to be at school but unemployment is high and there is no TAFE for these students to attend..... I would like to have a much better understanding of the mechanics of how the school runs and correct procedures so I have taken on tasks some beginning teachers would not consider such as Girls Welfare Adviser and am on the Literacy/Numeracy Committee, Discipline Committee and Gifted and Talented Committee (16, S, Co, T1).

The participant's Term 2 journal saw her continuing to struggle with a senior class with issues of assessment, behaviour and cheating taking up her time but she was receiving positive feedback from both parents and principal on her efforts to interest and motivate them. This teacher's role in school activities and the wider school community continued to build and helped build her confidence and understanding of the contextual factors specific to her school and students as she explained:

I was asked to take on the role of Year 7 Advisor next year and have spent time doing some thinking and work on this about how to involve the feeder primary school in the area..... I have had support in the form of assessment, practical ideas and different topics to use for example one on sheep farming from colleagues I met at an inservice run by the local Maths Teachers Association which have helped me and given me more confidence..... I have joined the local Rotary Club and taken on the role of youth director and we have started organising some events that I hope will interest, in particular, the senior students I teach as they are very bored and overlooked in this small country community (16, S, Co, T2).

The majority of participants in this study found themselves in contexts very different from their own school experiences or previous professional field experiences undertaken as part of their teacher education program with one new teacher stating early in her Term 1 journal " nothing I did at uni prepared me for this!" (2, P, Co, T1). This state of 'shock, disbelief, feeling daunted or overwhelmed' as reported by these teachers is common with early career teachers and has been well researched and documented in past studies as 'reality shock" (Veenman, 1984). As the year progressed most of the participants in this study seemed to move past this initial stage where aspects of their individual schools which initially seemed extremely problematic were addressed or understood with increased knowledge and experience. For some participants this was the result of structured sessions designed to assist them. One teacher explained his support:

All of the new teachers from my school met with the Pacific Islander community liaison officer and a community elder to gain some knowledge of the culture and provide us with opportunities to ask questions and gave us a point of reference in the future if problems arose. It certainly helped me to understand the type of family structures and customs these students have (15, S, Ci, T1).

As the knowledge of their students, colleagues and communities grew these teachers started to reconstruct their beliefs and conceptions of teaching and began to redevelop or amend these as detailed in area 5 below. Once this started to occur their level of understanding and acceptance increased and most started to focus on other areas of professional growth.

2. Design responsive instructional programs – The participants in this study were conscious of their need to bring their knowledge of content and syllabus requirements together with their newfound understanding of the students to make decisions about what and how to provide quality learning experiences. In Term 1 many grappled with management problems, setting up routines, catering for all levels of ability and setting realistic expectations based on their developing

knowledge of the students. One primary teacher wrote how things were towards the end of Term 1:

Some children in my class are now settling and beginning to do work well. I am beginning to formulate individual Maths programs because the ability levels are so diverse. If children can't do worksheets they would often just rip them up! I am worried about the coming of the Basic Skills Test and the class will not perform well – will this be a reflection of my teaching? I hope not! (2, P, Co, T1).

Some participants noted their increased sense of ease with planning lessons and programs to meet both the needs and interests of the students. A secondary teacher reflected in his journal:

I have become very comfortable with being able to structure lessons for the duration of the seventy minutes of class time which is a very workable length of time to teach. I have to use a range of strategies to keep the students focused and I have also been experimenting with different ways to settle the class before beginning lessons (10, S, Ci, T1).

As this teacher had been appointed as a permanent teacher in a mobile position in a large city secondary school it meant he could be transferred at any time and found he was required to teach outside his area of specialisation to make up his weekly teaching load. He reflected on the challenges this caused him in developing his programs and lessons in his journal by writing:

I have been allocated a small Year 7 IO class (moderate intellectual disability) for mathematics which is not my specialisation and I have had to really do some research on the content and best approach with these students. I am really enjoying the class as the students, although they have learning difficulties, are cooperative and willing to try. This class can be hard work as their range of abilities is vast and I need to employ one to one teaching most of the time (10, S, Ci, T1).

Another teacher reflected on his dilemma when given an all male English class on arrival at the school, he wrote:

I have an all boys Year 9 English class and this is quite challenging for a new teacher and as it is a major initiative for Boys Education this year by the school I feel there is some pressure on me to succeed with it. After seeking advice and suggestions from the head teacher I decided to select something of interest to them for our first topic. I chose the study of a novel which was 'Tomorrow when the War Began' by John Marsden and used an audio recording as well as discussion to enable the boys to move through the text with some fluency..... They seemed to be responding well to the subject matter and are motivated and working well..... This experience showed me the possibilities created by using multiple teaching strategies (13, S, Co, T1).

Towards the end of his Term 2 journal this teacher displayed increased confidence in his ability and the development of a broader view of teaching beyond his immediate daily lessons when he wrote;

After speaking with the head teacher, I have begun to think about the school drama programs, as this is my major area of expertise and interest.... I plan to update these in the July holidays as I will have taught them all by then and can determine what works and what does not. Doing this myself will give me a sense of ownership which I believe is important for my development (13, S, Co, T1).

3. Create a classroom learning community – From their previous practicums and internship the early career teachers in this study were conscious of the need to create a classroom learning community that is safe, respectful and productive. Early in Term 1 many of the secondary participants wrote about their difficulties in learning the students' names and personal details and not having a colleague there to assist them with this often left them feeling 'vulnerable' and 'overwhelmed'. One primary teacher explained how a difficult student undermined her confidence and classroom learning when she wrote:

Having this poorly behaved, violent student in my classroom is having a significant impact on my interaction with the remainder of the class..... Children in the room who need my assistance cannot get it as I need to concentrate on this one child and I am feeling stressed by it and the class is not working well. I know this child has a very poor home life and needs a lot of support in many ways..... I believe as a first year teacher I don't have the professional skills to deal with this extreme behaviour and situation as well as the other 29 students in my class (4, P, Ci, T1).

The student was moved into the class of the Deputy Principal and later in Term 1 the teacher wrote:

I feel unusual about not having the student in my class group now that it has happened, I guess I feel a sense of failure but I can also see it as a great opportunity to really work with the remainder of my class. I guess this experience has taught me that there isn't always one solution and that no matter what you believe there is only so much I can do at this stage (4, P., Ci, T1).

At the end of Term 2 this same early career teacher reflected;

As I look back over the year I know I was in survival mode in Term 1 and I now feel I am more in control of myself and noticing my teaching strategies are working well and the students seem more relaxed and happy to work together. I think having those early challenges made me realise that you need to work hard to be a good teacher and it does not happen overnight or four years of uni! (4, P, Ci, T1).

4. Enact a beginning repertoire – As a result of their teacher education program and early teaching experiences most participants in this study had a vision of good teaching and a beginning set of knowledge in classroom management, lesson planning and programming, teaching and assessment strategies. A major role of induction into teaching is to assist early career teachers to enact and broaden their repertoire by not abandoning these completely for safer, less complex activities or actions but to develop and extend these skills with an understanding of their new work environment and context (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). One secondary teacher wrote in her Term 2 journal how the reality of the classroom had helped develop her management repertoire:

Management has been a big issue for me particularly in Term 1..... You might have the most fantastic lesson planned that on a normal day would enthuse the students, yet they will come to your room in a ratty mood depending on a number of factors so then what? Through trial and error I have come up with my own strategies but I realise every situation is different..... I now know it is important to try to make my class calm and quietly prepared before entering my classroom and to have a set procedure to begin the lesson..... I now see that ultimately fairness is what students want and a chance to be treated like people (12, S, Co, T2)

Another teacher spoke of his realisation of the need to develop a repertoire over time and how this may challenge some prior beliefs when he wrote:

Assessment is something I have been trying to do consistently all year, however, being new there are times I feel I need to go along with what the other teachers have decided rather than trying or suggesting my own methods..... I suppose I am accepting that all the ideals and beliefs that I have developed over the past 4 years at uni cannot be implemented on day one. They are long term goals that need to be introduced slowly (11, S, Co, T2).

5. Develop a professional identity – Early career teachers need to consolidate a professional identity as they move from student, to preservice teacher to early career teacher. Identity formation, or how an early career teacher perceives themselves as a teacher, is an ongoing process that involves interpretation and self-evaluation (Cooper & Olson, 1996). Beginning teachers often struggle with these images of self which they can find contradictory such as being a skilled classroom manager but desiring to be seen as friendly and well liked. They also will have a self image of the kind of teacher they want to be and the classroom they want to have which will be based on their own biography such as background and personal life experiences, the teaching context and school culture and past teaching experiences (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000).

One teacher in this study had concerns about his identity due to the nature of his appointment as a permanent teacher in a mobile position, he explained this by writing:

I found that the expectation I could be moved to another school at any time has meant I have not committed to becoming fully involved in the school or learning about all of the students in my classes. I have adopted this position with the view to conserving my energy for when I was appointed to a settled permanent appointment (10, S, Ci, T1).

As the year progressed and he remained at the school he realised that this approach had led to continued ongoing identity problems when at the end of term he stated:

In a sense I feel like I have just completed another internship as there has been a lack of ownership with the school on my part with the main feeling that I am a visitor not a permanent part of the school (10, S, Ci, T2).

From analysis of the narratives in both the journals and interviews, it became evident to us that the participants in the study had difficulty in achieving a solid professional identity in the first three terms of their induction year. Although they referred to their increasing confidence in the classroom their reflections demonstrated their conflicting and unclear perceptions of their identity as a teacher. One teacher wrote:

..... I believed that I could walk into the school and do everything I believed was important about teaching and learning. This idea was quickly squashed and it has only been in the last few weeks of this term that I have truly accepted that this cannot always happen. I feel it is going to take me a long time to be a good teacher in the classroom and be accepted as part of this school and community (4, P, Ci, T2).

B. Factors which support or hinder professional growth -

The second phase of this study was a series of interviews with the participants in early Term 4 providing an excellent opportunity to expand upon their journal responses and to investigate the influences on their professional growth. Some of the common influences that supported or were felt to hinder professional growth are explained below.

Firstly, unlike many early career teachers all the participants in this study had the opportunity to attend formal induction sessions using Department of Education Beginning Teacher Induction materials. Past studies in Australia have found that fewer than half of early career teachers have participated in formal induction programs (Dinham, 1992; McCormack & Thomas, 2003). The type of program provided to this group was diverse in format from being shown a folder of resources to access as the need arose; to a two day district conference; a weekend district induction course; fortnightly district meetings with groups of beginning teachers and a weekly meeting with the school deputy principal or mentor/supervisor.

All of the participants welcomed these induction sessions and reported that a wide range of issues was addressed including departmental requirements and procedures for leave; Teaching Certificate information; child protection; technology; requirements such as excursions as well as classroom management ideas, strategies and support. Most participants felt the useful outcomes of these sessions were the awareness of support personnel such as consultants, district office staff and local professional association groups together with the opportunity to informally network with other early career teachers in the same district. This was particularly appreciated by the new teachers in the more remote country areas. One teacher explained that although the content was familiar to that taught at university, the induction material had a new relevance to him:

I don't know whether it was the way it was presented at uni or the fact that we did not have the experience to be able to translate the theory into practice..... We would sit around and talk about theories of learning and behaviour management programs whereas now we can discuss real examples of what might have happened an hour ago (15, S, Ci, T4).

Another primary teacher explained her experience of a district induction session:

We discussed everything to do with the DET such as the pay structure, leave entitlements, staff welfare, child protection and legal issues. The second part of the sessions involved a consultant from each subject eg. maths offering resources and advice which was helpful. The fact that I was talking to other first year out teachers and you suddenly realise I'm not the only one, there's someone else out there feeling the same way and having the same problems helps you keep going on (6, P, Ci, T4).

In addition to the DET Beginning Teacher Induction Program most participants received some form of induction to their school setting mostly in the form of an administrative orientation by a member of the school executive. This typically included a tour of the school and introductions to colleagues and support staff. A school survival kit containing staff lists, bell times, school maps, discipline policies, student welfare information, general assessment procedures and a calendar of important school events was given to a small number of participants and was seen as invaluable support for the early days of teaching.

Many of the participants were linked to mentors or supervisors as a form of both support and monitoring. The level of support and perceived value received by the early career teachers varied within the group and between primary and secondary teachers. The mentor model relies on the notion of an experienced teacher who possesses professional and personal qualities including the ability to communicate information, ideas, assistance and support and adopt a stance as a co-worker (Ginns et al., 2001). The primary participants reported stronger relationships with their mentors due to most being linked with someone teaching the same grade, as one mature age male teacher relates:

She has been absolutely wonderful from Day 1 we've hit it off and not only professionally, we have become friends..... She also teaches Year 3 and we have planned and programmed together bouncing ideas off each other which has been helpful in the areas I have not been as strong in. She has an amazing bank of knowledge and resources to draw on and is willing to share these and provide many suggestions. On the other hand I have been able to offer ideas back and she has appreciated it so that has given me a lift (5, P, Ci, T4).

The secondary teachers placed less value on the assistance of formal mentors who were often school executive and from another specialisation. Instead they saw their role more as a supervisor assessing their suitability for awarding the Teachers' Certificate. The secondary teachers found valuable support came from their colleagues in the same faculty and other schools. One teacher explained that this support can be of an informal manner:

You get a lot of staffroom chatter and comments where you talk about different things such as syllabus topics, assessment ideas, ways to deal with classroom management issues and background info on certain kids..... Most teachers are quick to give their opinion.... I listen to most pieces of advice and then I say is it suitable for me and the way I want to operate and I try not to get clouded by their approach and be open to all ideas (10, S, Ci, T4).

Another source of support identified by the participants were their former peers or other early career teachers in their school or district. One such comment was:

I actually think one of the best support networks is staying in touch with other new teachers because you are on the same level, talk the same language and have the same situations happening in your schools. It helps to share your ideas and experiences (9, S, Co, T4).

Finally, an important area of support mentioned frequently by these early career teachers was the importance of their colleagues in providing social support both in the school and in the local community. In the school setting information relating to resources, school contacts, traditions, power bases and social groups were seen as useful and welcomed by the participants, while assistance with housing, local culture, sporting groups and organised social events helped these new teachers become part of the community. This was particularly important for the teachers in remote country settings who were often living away from home and in unfamiliar circumstances and cultures for the first time. One teacher explained;

Most of the other teachers have been very supportive and my social life is quite busy in this small country town. Every Thursday we have a thing called Tie Thursday, hence the tie I am wearing, we all go out for dinner. Most play sport during the week at night like yoga, tennis, golf and there is usually a party on Saturday night. A lot of people depend on each other just because you don't really know anyone else and most of the teachers are young and everyone gets along. It's great and certainly makes the job more enjoyable (14, S, Co, T4).

As the interviews progressed the participants also identified some common factors which hindered or constrained their professional growth. One of the factors consistently mentioned was the practice of allocating beginning teachers to difficult classes or classes that others did not want to teach or assigning them to teach subjects for which they have little or no background. These situations were not only common in this study but are a theme constantly found in research into beginning to teach and ignore the fact that early career teachers are novices (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This situation not only sets the teacher up for failure and difficulties but disadvantages the students who need the most assistance. One teacher explained his feelings about this situation after three terms in the school:

I feel as new teachers I've been given a slightly more difficult load as I was told that last in teachers get the bottom of the bucket in regards to students... I've got a couple of classes that have got really big issues I think it would be good to give the beginning teachers not the worst of the worst in their first year out, let them build their classroom management and confidence with content while they are trying to get used to a new job and school ...yeah it can be very stressful (7, S, Co, T4).

Khamis (2000) states that newcomers to any profession are initially confused and are often unsure of their role and full responsibilities, however, in this study many of the participants were required to undertake or volunteered for additional activities which often led to them feeling overwhelmed. Lacking the confidence to decline and wanting to be accepted into the school community, and possessing an unrealistic level of optimism and confidence as identified by Pajares (1992), may account for these teachers undertaking positions for which they had little or no experience and resulted in valuable time being taken away from their classrooms and teaching. Teaching senior classes and undertaking positions such as year adviser, community representatives, school sport organiser, school musical or drama producer were often given to early career teachers before they had met their classes and established themselves in the school community. Reasons of 'youth, energy and plenty of time', 'proving themselves' or 'breaking them into the reality of teaching' which are often given are not sound educationally and can help to develop disenchantment for many new teachers. Many beginning teachers are reluctant to reveal problems or ask for help, believing that capable teachers work things out and cope (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). One teacher in this study explained his responsibilities:

I can't believe how busy things are in schools. I find it hard to get time to deal with all the things I need to..... Teaching is just not standing in front of the class or getting information across, there's so many things that impinge on and are part of teaching..... Being the only male member of the English staff and with a major in drama I have been teaching Year 11 and Year 12 HSC Drama which isn't something that I expected a beginning teacher would do. I am also Year 10 adviser and coach of the school rugby union and soccer teams (13, S, Co, T4).

Although most participants in this study had a mentor or supervisor to assist them, many felt unsupported by this person or were provided with relatively little positive reinforcement. The mentors sometimes were unclear about their roles and many of the participants wanted constructive feedback on their progress and felt uncertain when this did not occur. This was often as a result of the mentor being from another specialisation or not understanding many of the quality teaching and student centred approaches the participants had learnt in their teacher education program and were keen to implement. This resulted in many of the early career teachers feeling constrained and therefore caused conflict and tension. One teacher explained this:

I feel I am not growing as much as I could as a teacher.... I've got ideas I want to run with and I want to make maths a more exciting subject for my classes, whereas everybody else seems to be on the slow train and when I suggest or try things they say "well that's great, but here we always do it like this...." (7, S, Co, T4).

A number of participants expressed their disappointment at the lack of positive feedback, recognition or praise extended to them for their efforts by students, colleagues or parents. Instead many early career teachers often found themselves in what Khamis (2000) describes as "the anguish of compromise" where their ideas, actions or teaching may conflict with the prevailing professional climate of the school and can leave early career teachers with "feelings of self doubt, insecurity and professional isolation" (p.8). This feeling of uncertainty and confusion is supported by research undertaken by Zeichner & Gore (1990) who found that policies, traditions, power and personalities work to construct a school culture that challenges beginning teachers as they attempt to socialise into schools and their communities. One primary teacher reflected:

If we could do without the politics in the school it would be a wonderful place. No matter how I try and take the initiative to try something I always get some snide comments like when I introduced an intensive reading program for my class and the response from a school executive member was "I don't know, these young graduates, they just think they will be a principal next!" and I think I am doing this for the school and my class, it can be very disheartening! (6, P, Ci, T4).

C. Suggestions to improve the support of professional growth –

The preceding data all point to the idea that learning to teach takes time and needs to be supported in many collaborative ways to ensure ongoing professional growth by early career teachers. The following recommendations are made to assist in the facilitation of this professional growth:

1. **Induction programs** – Teacher induction in the form of school orientation to learn about the school, roles and responsibilities, expectations and support available is needed early in Term 1, however, a broader more ‘sustained and systematic approach’ to professional development is crucial for early career teachers. Programs need to be planned to support not overload teachers and should be aimed at ongoing developmentally appropriate support, which for many teachers may go past their first year, and deal with issues such as programming, pedagogy, assessment and parent-teacher contact to foster their ongoing professional growth. Feiman-Nemser (2001) explains:

Unless we take new teachers seriously as learners and frame induction around a vision of good teaching and compelling standards for student learning, we will end up with induction programs which will reduce stress and address immediate problems without promoting teacher development and improving the quality of teaching and learning (p.1031).

All early career teachers, permanent, mobile and casuals, should be provided with relief to attend such induction programs.

2. **Collegial networks** – The importance of the support of colleagues is widely recognised both in this study and others. Collegial networks may be formal such as a district early career teacher group that meets each fortnight, or subject specialisation workshops, conferences or regular meetings where teachers are encouraged to take part in professional discourse about subject knowledge, teaching practice, alternatives and ideas. This strongly supports the Dewey (1966) philosophy of learning to teach through experience and reflection. For the early career teachers in this study exchanging stories and conversations, continuous feedback from peers and colleagues was very valuable assistance in not only their survival as an early career teacher but their ongoing professional growth. In the early months and first years of teaching the type of advice, praise and emotional support provided informally by peers can assist in the development of a teacher identity and give new teachers greater confidence in their classrooms and schools.
3. **Mentors and supervisors** - Mentors and supervisors can play a key role in the successful induction, growth and therefore retention of early career teachers (Weiss, 1999). The results of this study support the need to clearly differentiate between the role of mentor for professional growth and the role of supervisor for the purpose of evaluating teaching to meet predetermined standards (Khamis, 2000). Mentors should be sensitive to the early career teachers’ development providing support, guidance and facilitating reflection on their practice through collaboration and collegiality. Both mentors and supervisors need to be carefully selected and provided with training and support and compensated by either salary or time allowed for recognition of the effort involved and the importance of their role. We recommend that the supervisor be selected by the school and undertake the early orientation and ongoing accreditation of the early career teacher. The early career teacher may be better placed, once oriented into the school, to have input into the selection of their own mentor.
4. **Mentoring for pedagogy** – It has been previously stated that there needs to be recognition that professional growth occurs over time and a singular program or session is not adequate in assisting early career teachers who come to teaching with

different skills, backgrounds and approaches to teaching. These teachers need time to get to know the school and context in which they are going to teach. Ideally this might require early career teachers to visit the school before taking up an appointment or requiring all teachers to begin school a week before students begin to allow time for planning, discussion and development of a support network particularly for the early days and weeks. Reduced face to face teaching during the first year of teaching could also assist these teachers, Manuel (2003) suggested an 80% teaching load in the first year would allow early career teachers valuable time to plan, reflect and seek assistance.

5. **Teaching allocations** – Evidence from this study and others reports the ongoing practice of allocating early career teachers to known difficult classes or teaching outside their area of qualification and specialisation. At a time when these teachers need to have their confidence boosted and feel they are supported, practices such as these work against them, leading instead to feelings of isolation, desperation and frustration, further limiting their opportunities for professional growth. Student numbers and staffing formulas act as constraining factors on school organisation, however, responsible leadership and commonsense should make principals aware that these situations do not lead to sound personal or educational outcomes.
6. **Collaborative school culture** – Finally, for schools to function effectively a partnership needs to be developed between students, teachers and the community with common goals of developing a collaborative culture of support and ongoing teacher learning. This culture should include the opportunities for beginning teachers to talk and have ongoing discussions with critical colleagues such as mentors on all aspects of their practices and beliefs to enhance their knowledge of teaching. This teacher talk should not only focus on their concerns and needs but provide a forum for professional discourse which encourages the group sharing of teaching ideas, strategies, resources and approaches. Working together to improve the teaching and learning culture of the school can do a lot towards reducing low morale, early career exit, preventing high teacher turnover and promoting professional growth.

CONCLUSION

This study was premised on the belief that becoming a teacher requires not only the development of a professional identity but the construction of professional knowledge and practice through relationships. Professional growth among early career teachers is both behavioural and conceptual and although each early career teacher is unique there are common influences which can support or hinder this growth (Kagan, 1992). The nature of this study required these early career teachers to reflect both in written and oral narrative on their experiences, knowledge and practices as they developed in their first year of permanent employment. We found the participants were keen to participate in this professional discourse, however, the early demands of learning-to-teach meant the oral narratives later in the year provided richer insights into these early career teacher's reflections and growth. Through these shared narratives the participants furthered their knowledge of themselves and others they were interacting with.

Analysis of their professional growth using Feiman-Nemser's (2001) continuum of teacher learning identified the overall importance of context on these teachers. Although they were teaching in diverse settings and locations, each presenting different challenges, most embarked on teaching with the same aims, philosophies and intent – basically to provide quality teaching and learning for their students. The other important finding of this study was the continuing struggle these early career teachers had to develop a professional identity. Many came to the end of their first year of teaching questioning their position in the school and their success as a teacher, still needing and wanting some form of feedback and confirmation as to their value within the school.

The results of this study indicated that the participants shared many common constraints and demands, however, all were able to acknowledge the value of participation in professional discourse in the form of the narratives with the researchers. These narratives allowed the participants to scrutinise their individual practice, some in more detail and more analytically than

others, however, each actively engaged in constructing personalised versions of their experiences as early career teachers. It is hoped that these teachers continue to engage in both informal and formal conversations to enable confidence building across the multiple dimensions of classrooms, schools and communities. It is through these opportunities that teachers will become active learners shaping their own development thereby strengthening their knowledge and experiences to create classrooms and schools where quality teaching and learning occurs and their professional growth is fostered and ongoing.

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