Life as a beginning male teacher in Queensland: Who are they and what are they doing?

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Abstract
During 2005 a mentor program was run as a pilot strategy to link male pre-service teachers with experienced male primary teachers in the Rockhampton and Mackay school districts. As part of the on-going project investigating the usefulness of a male mentoring program, an online survey was sent out to beginning male teachers in Queensland. Findings indicated that many of the male teachers felt unprepared for the realities of the school workplace with the social and emotional aspects of teaching, issues of work intensification, paperwork and administration as areas of common concern. Three main areas that beginning male teachers would like to see covered more fully in pre-service training included more practicum exposure, more behaviour management skills and pedagogy. In this paper we report on the results in relation to what these teachers would like to see in pre-service training for male teachers and implication for programs such as ours. We conclude by suggesting that further research investigating the BLM internship would beneficial to assess the effectiveness of support for the beginning male teacher and retention of quality male teachers.

Introduction
Over past years there has been much discussion concerning recruitment and retention of male teachers (Carter & Francis, 2000; de Vries, 2004; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Manuel, 2003; Martinez, 2004). In Queensland recruitment concerns resulted in the development of the male teacher strategy in 2002. This recruitment strategy was also premised on two broader but significant aspects. The first aspect concerned the need to offer children diverse learning experiences and the second aspect was the commitment to create an inclusive work environment (Education Queensland, 2002). More recently however the high turnover of teachers, both male and female, have concerned educational bureaucracies along with the looming possibility of a number of Baby Boomer teachers retiring from the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, & Elliot, 2004, June; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Matters, Pitman, & Gray, 1997; McCollow, 2001).
Within this context we were interested in exploring the first year experience of beginning male teachers (BMST) in order to tailor some supportive networks for the male Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) students enrolled on a pre-service teacher education degree at Central Queensland University (CQU). While there has been a steady number of males doing the degree not all of the males graduate as teachers. We have a good percentage of mature age male students who are changing careers and some students who require extra support with the practical aspect of the course. We note here that we consider generational shift among teachers and among students will be a significant issue warranting further investigation but that this paper only covers this area superficially.

In this paper we present findings from an online survey that had been sent to beginning male teachers across Queensland. These teachers were employed in the Catholic education sector and the State education sector. The survey was sent to emails addresses that had been sought from individual school administration. We do not claim to have covered all beginning male teachers due to limitations of securing email addresses. The survey was sent to 431 potential respondents after contacting over 900 schools across Queensland. The on-line survey covered three main dimensions. The first dimension concerned establishing just who are the beginning male teachers working in Queensland. The second dimension sought to inquire as to what had attracted these males to teaching and the third dimension dealt with support, both available and desired by this group. These findings are then discussed in the context of the research literature and implications for our own training program.

Launching the survey
An on-line survey questionnaire was launched in September 2005 and closed in October 2005. This survey was sent to email addresses of beginning male teachers provided by schools in the Catholic education sector and Education Queensland sector.

Table 1: Summary of survey selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools contacted</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools responded</td>
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<td>319</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of male teachers employed in schools contacted</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of beginning male teachers in schools contacted</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of addresses sent survey</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of survey responses</td>
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<td>Number of visits only</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The survey instrument
There were 31 questions divided into three main sections. The first section dealt with demographic data seeking general information about the school location, size, staffing and length of time the teacher had been working there. The second section had questions related to what had attracted the respondent to do teaching as a career, where they had learnt about teaching and why they had decided to do teaching. The third and final part of the survey dealt with their personal experience of being a beginning teacher and what kinds of things that they would like to see in place to support other beginning male teachers. The questions were based on the issues raised within the research literature and also from the experienced male primary teacher who had attended our mentor training workshops held in Mackay and Rockhampton.

Results and discussion: So just who are our beginning male teachers in Queensland?
Respondents to the survey were located in metropolitan, regional and rural areas as indicated by postcodes from as wide as Brisbane, Longreach, Mareeba and Hughenden. It is necessary to note that our respondents were those teachers currently employed on either a fixed term contract or in permanent positions within the state and Catholic sectors. Those teachers employed casually or on supply were not included as they would not have had an email address assigned by the school.

Working conditions
Sixty six percent of the respondents work in schools with more than 300 students. These respondents work with a number of other teachers ranging from just 4 to 125 with 95 per cent of the respondents working with other male teachers in their school. The number of other male teachers ranged from 1 to 80, indicating that most of these beginning male teachers had at least one other male colleague while other respondents had a large group of male colleagues. The respondents were roughly equally split among State primary and secondary school and Catholic primary and secondary schools indicating a good mix of respondents across level and sector. The other kinds of schools indicated were special schools and P – 12 schools. Most respondents (84%) had been full time students prior to their current teaching contract indicating that they had recently finished their studies. This also indicates that most respondents had taken time out from full time work to complete their university degree.

Attraction to teaching
When asked what had attracted these respondents to teaching, three main themes emerged: firstly, over 70 percent indicated that they had wanted to “make a difference with kids” with a desire to influence the next generation. Over half of the respondents (55%) surveyed indicated that the perception of job security was a strong attraction. The third theme related to a work/life balance (including school holidays and hours). Some saw teaching as being a positive career pathway (48%), while others considered teaching as a family occupation or had wanted to be professionally challenged.

Many of the respondents (34%) knew about teaching from family members with the other source of information being a teacher. Some respondents had learnt about teaching while
studying at university. These teachers may well have completed a graduate diploma after completing their degree or may have changed courses. This has implications for recruitment where a major source of potential teachers could lie within the university.

Family and teachers were the main sources of information about teaching as a career. We would argue many males coming from families where parents or close relatives are teachers are highly likely to have a different perception of the job. Subsequently negative images or stereotypes generated by community discourses are disregarded because their reference point of ‘what is a good teacher” is a member of their own family. This is an area that requires further research.

Reasons for choosing teaching coincided with what attracted these respondents to teaching with again three main themes emerging: lifestyle, “helping kids” and job security/career prospects. The lifestyle factor is about a work / life balance. This indicates two distinct groups of males entering teaching – the traditional school leaver who may come form a family where there is an existing teacher and someone who is changing careers. The survey data indicates this age group to be in late 20s to early 40s. Seventy seven percent of the respondents were born between 1961 and 1981 and therefore aged between 24 and 44.

**Life as a beginning male teacher**

Most of the respondents (67%) felt that their first six months of working as a teacher had not been easy for them. This is the time when support could be most beneficial to the beginning teachers as they go from being students in the idealised world of university to the reality of a workplace. Manuel (2003) suggests that there is no difference seen between beginning or experienced teachers among parents, school systems and the general public. Therefore the beginning teacher is expected to perform at a similar level to the experienced teacher.

Even though 68 percent of the respondents had a mentor assigned at the start of their employment, it may not have made their transition any easier or smoother. This points to the importance of who these mentors are. The literature suggests that not all teachers will automatically become a ‘good’ mentor as this mentoring role requires both training and support. Most of the teachers were involved with team planning but this question did not discuss whether this was a good or bad experience for the teachers. Most schools appear to endorse a team approach. This team approach however may have multiple definitions.

Over half of respondents (55%) were asked to do extra sports activities after school. There can be two ways of looking at this practice; one, it is a way of becoming socialised within the school and learning about school activities and two: represents a stereotype or school expectation that male teachers do the coaching. Others may see this as part of the job and volunteer rather than being asked. Some male teachers may find this a welcome change to being indoors and may enjoy sport as their own leisure activity.

The majority of respondents (73%) indicated that their school had or has an induction program in place for beginning teachers implying a non-standardised approach among
schools. The resources seen as necessary for the beginning teachers were access to a mentor, access to materials and having support and leadership shown in the workplace. Having supportive colleagues was the common support mechanism available to 78 percent of the respondents, followed by a helpful Principal and ongoing mentorship.

This indicates that most teachers look out for other teachers. This is also a strategy for developing good working relationships and fostering interpersonal skills. This strategy indicates the presence of an informal community of practice or ‘informal learning in action’. Building and supporting this kind of practice that is already in use offers a potential professional development focus among peers with the opportunity for professional conversations to be facilitated by a HOD or Principal within the workplace (Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004; Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal, 2004; Moir & Gless, 2001; Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 2003).

**What can be done for those joining the profession?**

When asked what would have made their first six months in the job easier, many of the teachers suggested a lighter teaching load where there could be some breathing space for planning and settling in. They said that better preparation for the actual realities around the first week would have been helpful along with knowing the practicalities of doing the job.

This indicates that some structural change is required and desired; perhaps the first year could be re-designed with provisional registration under supervision with a trained teacher mentor where the teacher mentor and the beginning teacher have a 75% teaching load and 25% planning with mentor. Another option would be to do work shadowing / double classroom or to cover ‘supply contracts’ for the first year – same school or same district. This would give the beginning teacher a range of contexts however this would need to be carefully planned and coordinated with a teacher mentor so the beginning teacher does not end up with the ‘worst class’ in the school.

Most remarked that it was things outside of pedagogy and teaching, such as dealing with the social and personal issues of students/workplace that cause much angst. In other words if teaching was just about teaching then most could find their niche without too much effort, but dealing with people management is the major concern for many BMTs as they negotiate this new territory called the school workplace. At the time of ‘pre-service training’ this ‘personal’ side may not be seen as relevant because it is not about practical classroom teaching. This suggests that perhaps a professional development workshop would be more appropriate at about 6-12 months post-graduation. It’s about deciding what is relevant in a pre-service course and what could be a follow up (Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). This could be linked to the structural change suggested in the first year (see earlier comments).

Most respondents indicated more ‘prac’ or more practical stuff; some wanted more interpersonal skill training and some listed specific programs but we sense this was about the actual application of these programs eg, New Basics, Productive Pedagogies. While
some of the respondents may have graduated from CQU since the introduction of the BLM, it is also highly likely that most of the respondents experienced a more traditional BEd program. The significant and important differences between the two programs are the increased emphasis placed on practicum exposure and developing pedagogy. For further discussion see the 2005 ACER report (Ingvarson, Beavis, Danielson, Ellis, & Elliot, 2005).

When asked to reflect on what they would have liked to have known before starting with teaching most of the respondents’ comments related to realities and expectations of other teachers, schools, Departments and relationship development, again things outside of pedagogy and classroom teaching. Issues that could possibly impact on employment as a teacher focused around four main categories: perceptions of inexperience, litigation, community expectations and finally workplace culture.

When asked “what do you see as important in supporting male teachers to remain in teaching?” by far the most common response was more male teachers. The respondents indicated that beginning male teachers wanted to see more male colleagues – it is about males seeing other male teachers and this would help to say that doing teaching is okay for males; it breaks down the image of teaching as women’s work and values contributions from males. Pay could help to do this. The pay – after a 4-year degree there is an expectation of payment equated with this rather than equated with hours/conditions of work. Students have a HECS bill but hours are less that other jobs, but there are extras that are unpaid – accommodation etc. For some people the current starting salary after doing a four-year tertiary course is far below that of someone who has completed a trade and doesn’t have a HECs debt. Another key issue was breaking down male stereotypes in the workplace not just in the community.

Conclusion
The online survey discussed in this paper was distributed to 431 beginning male teachers of which 95 respondents completed the survey. The respondents were located across Queensland covering both regional and metropolitan schools. Three main areas were covered in the survey; firstly general demographic data was collected. Secondly the respondents were asked what had attracted them to teaching and thirdly, they were asked about their experiences as beginning male teachers. The respondents indicated that a lighter teaching load and access to mentors could have made their initial appointment a little easier. They wanted to see more practical experience and interpersonal skills training during their undergraduate program. Most of them had supportive colleagues that they could call on during their initial appointment as well as a helpful principal. Among the most common dislikes associated with teaching were the pay, politics, work intensification, parental expectations and negative images of male teachers circulating in the community.

The male teachers surveyed wanted to see more male teachers in the profession and added that this would help in retaining other male teachers in the profession. Seeing more males working in the classroom would assist in breaking down stereotypes and the myth that teaching is women’s work and babysitting. It would reinforce that there are
appropriate male role models for children and that there are men who enjoy working with children. The major attractions to teaching for these respondents were being able to make a difference in children’s lives, see children progress and to be able to positively influence the coming generations of children. Further research investigating current transition pathways from university to the school based workplace, such as the Bachelor of Learning Management internship would be beneficial to determine how effective this particular program supports the beginning male teacher to establish and develop a teacher identity and how this encourages retention of quality male teachers.

References


