You'll be OK!: Induction experiences and reflections of NSW beginning teachers in physical education

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The recent report of the NSW Ministerial Review of Teacher Education, Quality Matters (2000) highlighted the importance of supporting the induction of teachers into the workplace and the need for partnerships between initial teacher education programs and employers to ensure a smooth transition into the profession of teaching. The aim of this pilot study was to identify factors which cause concern, assist in retention of graduates or lead to separation of beginning teachers. A sample group of graduates from a double degree Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Health & Physical Education initial teacher education program completed a comprehensive questionnaire and participated in structured interviews to investigate their induction and professional growth during their first years of employment. The results indicated a failure by many school leaders to provide basic support in the form of formal induction. Lack of informative feedback from mentors or supervisors also caused concern and difficulty for these teachers in making the transition into schools. The study recommends the need for induction to recognise the importance of context and reduce the isolation experienced by beginning teachers in schools through developing district support networks. Appointing adequately trained mentors who go beyond formal assessment and supervision to provide critical collegial support could enhance professional growth and reduce attrition rates of beginning teachers.

Introduction

The first few years in a physical education beginning teacher's career can have a major impact on not only the quality of their teaching but their professional growth and future directions in teaching. The recent report of the NSW Ministerial Review of Teacher Education, Quality Matters identified teacher induction as "the critical link between preparation and practice as a professional" (Ramsey, 2000, p.205). Evidence in the Review highlighted the lack of defined responsibility for this process with little clarity as to the respective roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the induction and professional growth of teachers.

Induction has been defined as "a transitional period in teacher education, between pre-service preparation and continuing professional development, during which assistance and/or assessment may be provided" (Huling-Austin, Odell, Ishler, Kay & Edefelt, 1989, p.3). The implementation of probation programs in Canadian schools in 1969 was one of the earliest attempts to provide a form of induction and support for beginning teachers (Wright, 1997). Hall and Hord (1980, cited in Lawson, 1991) are credited with first introducing the term "induction" to describe the beginning years of teaching. Research on teacher induction has been closely aligned with that of teacher socialisation where researchers have learned that, as beginning teachers move from their teacher education programs to teachers in schools, they experience "reality shock" (Herbert & Worthy, 2001; Khamis, 2000; Lang, 1999; Veenman, 1984). This has been described as a "washout effect", where what they learn in their teacher education programs is progressively eroded by school practice (Zeichner & Tabachnik, 1981).

A study conducted in Queensland highlighted the role contextual factors play in the problems faced by beginning teachers (Martinez, 1994). This study found that it was common practice by school systems to appoint beginning teachers in settings which were inherently loaded with difficulties, such as coordinating extra curricula activities and teaching in more than one subject area. Zeichner and Gore (1990) also argued that policies, traditions, power and personalities work to construct a school culture that provides further challenges to beginning teachers as they learn to assimilate into these institutional constraints.

Common difficulties shared by first year teachers include classroom management, lack of control, frustration, isolation, a sense of being overwhelmed by the job and feeling unprepared (Solomon, Worthy & Carter, 1993). Beginning physical education teachers, as well as experiencing these difficulties, often face challenges...
specific to their specialisation. These have been identified as low status for their subject, physical isolation within the school setting, fewer colleagues for support and lack of appropriate resources or specialist teaching spaces. Other common concerns identified by beginning teachers are teaching outside their subject area, administration requirements and their expected social identity (Macdonald & Kirk, 1996; Schemp & Graber, 1992; Smyth, 1995; Wright, 1997).

For many beginning teachers, the reality of teaching has proven too demanding, and some chose an early career exit. Common reasons given for this exit include failure to receive adequate mentoring and supervision, classroom management problems, excessive responsibilities and failure to recognise and reward professional growth in the early years of their careers (Gitomer, 1999; Lohr, 1999; Ramsey, 2000; Wilkinson, 1997). Attrition rates among beginning teachers in Pacific Rim countries (including Australia) are often five times higher than those of more experienced teachers (Stephens & Moscowitz, 1997). Past NSW statistics indicated one in six teachers exited the profession in the first two years of employment (Martinez, 1994). The UK has seen high numbers of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years, citing inattention to specific support for newly qualified teachers as possible reasons (Williams & Prestage, 2000). According to DePaul (2000) 22% of teachers in the US leave the teaching profession within the first three years of entry. This type of data presents a challenge to teacher education institutions, systems and schools to examine some of the reasons for this discontent.

While there have been numerous graduate surveys, there have been relatively few attempts to evaluate induction support provided by systems and schools for beginning physical education teachers in Australia. A number of researchers have emphasised the value feedback from beginning teachers can provide for all parties as they seek to ensure that graduates move into the workforce adequately prepared and into an environment which will be supportive, productive, and professionally rewarding (Goodlad, 1994; NSW Department of School Education, 1992). This study aimed to gather feedback and interpret it in terms of assisting the induction and professional growth of secondary physical education teachers.

**Purpose of the study**

This project aimed to identify and monitor secondary physical education beginning teachers’ experiences, support, problems and reflections encountered during the first two years of their induction into teaching. The specific aims of the study were to:

1. identify induction programs undertaken by secondary physical education beginning teachers during their first year of teaching;
2. review the major concerns and problems encountered by secondary physical education beginning teachers during induction;
3. identify possible reasons for secondary physical education graduates early retention or separation from teaching as a career.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were the first graduates from a four-year double degree program composed of Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Health and Physical Education. The discipline subjects within the degree program consisted of four major strands, these being health, physical education studies, sports science and kinetics. The teaching component of the degree consisted of three major strands - general education, specialist teaching and learning in health and physical education and a professional experience strand undertaken in a variety of school settings. This professional experience extended over the four years of the program culminating in a ten-week internship in a secondary school during the final semester of study.

The sample group was completing the first two years of teaching following graduation at the end of 1999, and was aged between 22 and 28 years. From an initial group of 30 graduates, 12 completed a questionnaire and seven of these volunteered to undertake follow-up interviews. These graduates were teaching the NSW Yrs 7-12 Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHEP) syllabus in city and country NSW locations and in schools varying in size and ethnicity.

**Procedures**

A questionnaire was completed after three terms of teaching in 2000 and interviews were conducted in Term 2 of 2000 with the seven physical education teachers undertaking a one hour personal interview conducted by both researchers. The questionnaire sought information on the format and perceived value of their induction programs, as well as the mentoring and the professional support provided to the beginning teachers. The NSW DET Beginning Teacher Induction Kit and The Central Tasks of Learning to Teach continuum (Feiman-Nemser, 2000, p.65) were used to determine appropriate focus areas within the questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was used to determine the perceived value of the structured aspects of the induction process and the combined professional development sections of the questionnaire. Questions relating to professional problems/concerns, future aspirations and possible reasons for an early career exit were posed to enable some open-ended responses.

The semi-structured interview assisted to clarify areas relating to the teachers’ induction experiences identified in the questionnaires, gave them an opportunity to discuss sensitive issues or concerns, and allowed for comparative data across subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The questionnaire data was available at the interviews and often guided the interviewers questions when clarification or more detail was deemed important to the study.

**Analysis**

The questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and reviewed for thematic elements common across cases. The qualitative data presented in this paper will identify participants comments by reference to their sex and location with an example of F, Co representing female beginning teacher in a country school or M, Ct, male teacher in a city school.
Results

To identify and evaluate the induction programs undertaken by beginning teachers during their first year of teaching the questionnaire data were analysed (Table 1).

There was considerable variation both in the experiences undertaken by the physical education beginning teachers during their induction, as well as the perceived value of these experiences. Fifty eight percent of the beginning teachers undertook the formal Beginning Teacher Induction Program and rated this as valuable (mean=3.37). The responses and interview data indicated formal induction was more likely to occur if several new teachers were appointed to a school. When only one or two new teachers were appointed to a school the induction process was less structured and sporadic and 'often occurred too late'. All received an induction handbook, which, for some, was discussed in more detail at a meeting held by the district coordinator. For others, the handbook 'had to be taken home and read'. At times, however, some felt that alot of the material presented in the formal induction sessions had already been covered in their undergraduate program. This is not unexpected, as the Internship program and the professional preparation subject graduates completed in the final year of their course attempted to initiate the process of induction to help prepare the graduates' transition into the profession.

One form of induction which was undertaken by most of the physical education beginning teachers was that provided by the faculty head teachers with 90% of the beginning teachers experiencing this form of induction. This induction was perceived to be highly valuable to the new teacher (mean=4.18). Opportunities to meet district curriculum consultants were also mentioned as beneficial for one city beginning teacher.

The supervisory process occurred to varying degrees throughout the first year of teaching. The group generally expected more direct assistance and regular supervision. One beginning teacher in a small country school explains her supervision:

I would just take it (program, units, ideas) and say "is this OK"? to my supervisor, I would ask can I do this or that and he would say 'yes' or 'no' so alot of it was just reactive on his part rather than proactive... I thought there would be a lot more official observation, and I was expecting things to get worse at the end of the year thinking he is going to cram all these things in but he kept saying your doing OK. (F, Co)

Confusion existed in relation to the roles of the supervisor and the mentor. Forty two percent of the physical education beginning teachers indicated they had formal mentors appointed to assist their induction although the perceived value (mean=2.80) of these was seen as just below average. In some schools where the role of mentor and supervisor was seen as one, beginning teachers appeared to align themselves to an informal mentor, with 33% of beginning teachers establishing these links and reporting them as just over average in value (mean=3.28). Of interest is the high value the beginning teachers placed on the support from colleagues who were usually in the same faculty (mean=4.58). The importance of this support is explained by one beginning teacher in the following comment:

My official mentor was not in my faculty and located on the other side of the school, so if there was something I needed advice on I would ask the people in my staffroom. Basically they did a lot of the mentoring for me as they were there and it was easier to ask them. (F, Co)

The secondary physical education beginning teachers in this study offered many suggestions for improvement of the induction process. Most saw value in a structured program that needed to start on the first day of entry to the school or if possible as soon as the appointment was made before the school year begins. School as well as system documentation /programs were recommended. Regular meetings and the opportunity to take part in scheduled observations of other teachers and team teaching in the school, particularly during Term 1, were recommended, as was a reduced teaching load for the first term in the school for both mentor and beginning teacher. The teachers in this study expressed the need for information to go beyond that already provided, suggesting use of consultants who could develop specific programs to assist beginning teachers. Areas where assistance was required included advice on implementing strategies to deal with issues as students from non-English speaking backgrounds, bullying, violent behaviour in the classroom and playground, report writing, conducting parent interviews and team teaching. Another area of need expressed during the interviews related to helping in the establishment of social and professional networks with other nearby physical education beginning teachers to overcome the isolation experienced in the early period of transition into the workplace.

These beginning teachers deemed ongoing support in the form of regular feedback and encouragement important during the first year of teaching. They felt this should be provided initially by those responsible for the formal mentoring and/or supervisory roles, and secondly from colleagues who could offer immediate advice as situations arose. The following comment reiterated this need:

I think especially in the first and second year, teachers need a lot of encouragement in the teaching field. You don't get

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Induction</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Employer Beginning Teacher Induction Program</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Formal school induction by Principal, D.P. or L.T.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Faculty induction by Head Teacher</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Formal link to a mentor teacher in your school</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Informal link to a mentor teacher in your school</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Required attendance at professional development days</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Informal support of colleagues in your school</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Types of induction support received (%) and perceived.
Although professional boredom, possible reasons included "better" classes, teaching senior classes and different responsibilities within the school or district.

A major concern of employing agencies is the early exit from the profession. Fifty percent of questionnaire respondents indicated that they anticipated remaining in the teaching profession for at least 10 years and all saw themselves teaching for at least three years (Table 2).

'Satisfaction with their current teaching position' (mostly those in small country schools) and 'enjoyment from seeing their students achieve' were reasons given for staying in teaching. One interviewee had clearly set goals for himself during these early years stating:

I would like to become a head teacher fairly quickly, not wait 10 years, after five years I want to have that position. I would like to get into consultancy work eventually... advising staff on how to cope with difficult students (M, Co)

Most agreed that they needed to remain challenged throughout their career. Examples of how nature might occur included a change of schools, change of system or location, "better" classes, teaching senior classes and different responsibilities within the school or district.

A variety of reasons were given by the beginning teachers which may cause their early exit from the teaching profession. Lack of respect from students, coupled with their inappropriate behaviour and lack of parental support for teachers, were issues frequently discussed. One interviewee explained his frustration this way:

It is extremely stressful when students do not listen, have no respect and misbehave... I feel like a crabby old man already. I feel I have a wealth of knowledge to give to students but only 20% of my time is teaching and 80% of my time is management. I feel that my wealth of knowledge and skills could be appreciated, rewarded (financially and peace of mind) more greatly in some other field in the future. (M, Co)

When questioned further in this area most physical education teachers admitted that the percentage of students who caused them concern was small when compared to those who responded favourably to their teaching. Other possible reasons for an early exit from the teaching profession were boredom, travel, politics of schools and faculties, age ("not wanting to be an old out of touch PE teacher") and wanting to try other sports related jobs.

Discussion

Although the majority of beginning teachers in this study had undertaken some form of induction during their first year of teaching, the range and perceived value of these experiences varied. Despite the fact that all of the teachers in this study were teaching in schools which had access to the Employer Induction Program, only 58% had been given the opportunity to undertake this program. This indicates that some school leaders to provide basic support for beginning teachers. It also reinforces the important role the principal has in orchestrating beginning teachers' transition into schools.

This study highlighted the incompatibility of assistance and assessment being carried out by the same person (Huling-Austin, 1990). Most physical education beginning teachers in this study received very little informative feedback from their supervisor and rated the assistance from formal mentors of little value. Mentors need adequate training and compensation in the form of time to work with beginning teachers. Mentors need clearly defined roles that offer more than just emotional support and technical assistance. They should also guide the professional roles of the beginning teacher helping them to focus on student learning and to develop sound reasons for their actions. To assist in reducing the isolation between teachers in schools and districts, a climate of collaboration, in which networks among beginning teachers are built and ideas shared, needs to be encouraged and supported. The beginning teachers in this study indicated their interest in this type of induction support, particularly those in more isolated smaller country schools with fewer immediate physical education colleagues.

Feiman-Nemser (2000) suggests the curriculum in an induction program must take into account the different kinds of preparation new teachers bring and the realities of their teaching context, and must extend across a span of 2-3 years. A study that reviewed induction programs and issues in the United Kingdom noted that previous initiatives had achieved little success improving induction practice because of difficulties in providing guidance relevant to variable contexts (Williams & Prestage, 2000). This need for contextual knowledge highlights the importance of faculty induction and the informal support of colleagues, both of which were highly valued by the beginning teachers in this study. This kind of informal mentoring can work for those teachers fortunate enough to have a colleague interested in assisting them, however, it can also lead to the "reality shock" and the reinforcement of traditional norms and practices rather than promoting more powerful teaching (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993).

The beginning teachers interviewed in this study expressed initial increased teaching confidence and had permanent teaching positions, which could explain why they indicated a greater intention to remain within the teaching profession compared to international and previous NSW statistics (Cross, 1991 in Martine, 1994; Williams & Prestage, 2000). Teacher attrition is a problem influenced by both personal and institutional factors, however, there is evidence supporting the role of induction programs in reducing the rate of attrition for beginning teachers (Herbert & Worthy, 2001; Khamis, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Studies on beginning teacher attrition from the United States have identified the need for schools and employers to assist graduates to critically evaluate their teaching practices; recognise the impact of contextual
of education attitudes, skills and encourage Arts, A providing supported and genuinely rvorkplace. This study aimed to examine the experiences and reflections of a small group of beginning secondary physical education teachers as they undertook the process of induction into the workplace. These responses and suggestions illustrate the need for the transition into the workplace to be a connected process where pre-service educators not only lay a strong foundation in subject knowledge, pedagogical principles and skills, but also encourage and prepare teachers with flexible professional attitudes, skills and understandings.

This study highlighted the need for beginning teachers to access the formal induction and professional support offered in systems and schools. This, however, is not enough. Beginning teachers also need to assist themselves through self evaluation, peer review and seeking professional support from professional bodies and colleagues in neighbouring schools to ensure a smooth transition into teaching.

The results of this study also highlighted the need for initial teacher education programs to provide comprehensive professional preparation courses. These courses should aim to adequately prepare graduates to maximise their induction experiences and also provide an awareness of professional development opportunities and providers to assist their ongoing growth and development in the workplace.

Teacher induction programs and practices conducted by systems and schools need to recognise not only the importance of context and beginning teacher identity, but be prepared to go beyond formal supervision and assessment to encourage skills of inquiry through critical collegiality.

Teachers who undertake this role need to be trained, supported and genuinely capable and interested in assisting new teachers. The NSW Ministerial Review of Teacher Education: Quality Matters, supported this approach, advocating professional accreditation as well as reducing the initial workload of teachers in their first year of service (Ramsey, 2000, p.68).

As the induction process continues, there is a need to sustain professional learning opportunities by building them into the work of teaching. Providing access to a wide community of discourse and practice and relating to contextual questions and concerns will assist in providing effective support programs for the induction and professional growth of physical education beginning teachers in the 21st century.

Footnote
A copy of the questionnaire is available from Dr Ann McCormack, School of Education, faculty of Education & Arts, University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW 2306 or email - Ann.McCormack@newcastle.edu.au

References


Lawson, H. (1989). From rookie to veteran: workplace conditions in professional development opportunities and providers to assist their ongoing growth and development in the workplace.

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