

## How Can Universities Support Beginning Teachers?

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*Many beginning teachers struggle in teaching, consequently, tertiary education has been criticised for not preparing preservice teachers well enough. This qualitative study uses interviews and questionnaires to investigate 10 first-year teachers' understandings of how universities can support them more effectively. The findings indicated that university preparation needed more literacy (particularly reading and spelling), numeracy, catering for lower socio-economic students, understanding behaviour differentiation, and communicating with parents. A two-prong approach may support beginning teachers: (1) timely induction and mentoring within school settings, and (2) research for advancing teacher education coursework to ensure currency of addressing beginning teachers' needs.*

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Attrition from the teaching profession is costing governments significantly. For instance, Howe (2006) writes of “exemplary teacher induction programs found in the US”, yet attrition rates continue to cost the US \$2.1 billion dollars per year (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Howe also states that overall induction programs “often fall way short of providing beginning teachers with the support they require” (p. 292), and in Australian, induction also falls short of ensuring adequate support in these early years of teaching (Hudson, Beutel, & Hudson, 2009). Despite review recommendations for assisting beginning teachers (e.g., House of Representatives Standing Committee on Educational and Vocational Training [HRSCEVT], 2007), there is an inference that education systems are failing to provide the support beginning teachers require to arrest attrition. There are state programs available in Australia, however, research (e.g., Keogh, Garvis, & Pendergast, 2010) shows that these programs may not be as successful as intended, particularly as they do not cover adequately some of the key components for ensuring beginning teachers remain in the profession (e.g., mentoring effective teaching, including behaviour management, assessment and so forth).

Studies (Goddard & Goddard, 2006; Hudson et al., 2009; O'Brien & Goddard, 2006) show that many beginning teachers struggle in their first few years of teaching and, according to Darling-Hammond (2010) and others, many leave the profession because of low salary, unsatisfying working conditions (particularly lower socio-economic schools), lack of professional support (e.g., mentoring and induction), and inadequate teacher preparation (including managing student behaviour). It appears that after four years of a teacher preparation program such as an undergraduate Bachelor of Education, there could be far more than 20% of beginning teachers in Australia unable to take their university learning and apply it to practice (e.g., see Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003). This presents multiple questions around university preparation for teaching, the partnership arrangements with schools,

graduate propensities and dispositions, and demands within 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools. This current study aims to investigate beginning teachers' perceptions of their tertiary preparation for their first year of teaching.

Beginning teachers report a significant disconnect between university coursework and the real world of teaching with a "perceived lack of relevance of some of the theoretical components of courses" (HRSCEVT, 2007, p. 8). As there are connections between university coursework and what beginning teachers perceive during their first year of teaching, it is crucial to examine their challenges and needs in their first year in order to backward map the effectiveness of university coursework. Indeed, there are similarities between studies in various countries around the world (e.g., Ireland: Abbott, Moran, & Clarke, 2009; Portugal: Flores & Ferreira, 2009; Singapore: Choy, Chong, Wong, & Wong, 2011) indicating a commonality of beginning teachers wanting further support once in teaching positions. Findings from an Italian study on beginning teachers (Bezzina, 2006) identified their challenges as "coping with mixed-ability groups, class discipline, curriculum implementation and physical exhaustion" (p. 426), which is not unlike findings elsewhere. Classroom management, including managing student behaviour, is identified as a distinct area of need for beginning teachers (e.g., Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007), and Bezzina's study showed that beginning teachers wanted more resources and the support from an experienced mentor, which also infers that university coursework needs to consider how preservice teachers learn about resources and mentors. Others studies have shown that predicting "burn out" for beginning teachers can be the lack of appreciation from staff, students and parents (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Marable and Raimondi (2007) highlight overwhelming responsibilities, management issues and dealing with parents as some of the key issues for beginning teachers grasp. As the inability to cope with stress is a reason for attrition (Rieg, Paquette, & Chen, 2007), some authors (e.g., Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010) suggest instilling resilient skills, while others (Barrera, Braley, & Slate, 2010) signal the need to improve working conditions and provide timely support within the school.

Connecting theory to practice is an ongoing concern of reviews and research. For example, an American study (Beck, Kosnik, & Rowsell, 2007) outlines 22 first-year beginning teachers' responses about their university preparation for which they highlighted "program planning, initial set-up, assessment and evaluation, effective group work" (p. 70) as key concerns. These researchers presented gaps in their findings where they expected evidence from the beginning teachers on "building class community, addressing equity issues, and exploring 'multiliteracies'", including guided reading (p. 71), as these were key aspects of their university coursework. Although internships and practicum create theory-practice connections (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008), researchers (Beck et al., 2007) advocate university coursework connects theory with practice (praxis, e.g., Freire, 1972), however, many teaching and learning approaches at universities appear to be "explained mainly in abstract terms" (Beck et al., p. 71). This seems to have translated into an education where coursework may not be perceived to relate directly to teaching, as identified in reviews, for instance the need to develop "the capacity of beginning teachers to deal adequately with classroom management issues, to perform assessment and reporting tasks and to communicate with parents" (HRSCEVT, 2007, p. 8). Although Sharplin, O'Neill, and Chapman (2011) have a pertinent catchcry of "intervention for retention" (p. 136) that focuses on timely mentoring and induction at points of crisis for beginning teachers, there is another prong for arresting the attrition rates that requires timely and ongoing research, namely, feeding the knowledge from beginning teachers' issues back into university coursework.

Research (see Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008) shows that university coursework can develop preservice teachers' skills to teaching in the first year, particularly with subject-specific pedagogy aligned with presiding state and national curriculum documents, however, research "is insufficient in determining what preservice preparation is useful for learning to teach in various induction contexts" (p. 147). Although there are calls for research on the school support provided to beginning teachers to "build, implement, and continue effective induction" (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007, p. 142), there is insufficient research on what beginning teachers need from their universities to ensure they have knowledge and skills for teaching to address their first-year of teaching issues. Hence the research question for this study was: How can universities support beginning teachers?

## METHODS

There were 26 final-year preservice teachers at this small university campus located in a lower socio-economic community from which 22 completed a demographic survey indicating: there were 23% final years with children of their own, 55% were the first in their family to attend university, 55% had part-time work to finance their studies (14% relied on family, 18% scholarship), and their main reasons for attending this campus included proximity to home (77%), small size (18%) and the university coursework (9%). Nineteen of the 26 were employed after graduating from this campus, and 10 beginning teachers out of the 19 were selected purposefully for proximity and availability, and were emailed information about the research inviting them to participate in the study. This qualitative study investigates how these 10 beginning teachers (2 males, 8 females) were supported in their schools within their first three months of teaching. Two participants (one of each gender) in the study were over 30 years of age while the others were between 20 and 29 years of age. Their classes varied with eight participants teaching single classes between Year 1-7 in the primary school, one teaching multiple grades in the lower primary (i.e., a Year 2/3 composite class) and Participant 10 was a language teacher to various classes in the upper primary. Six of these early-career teachers taught in schools located on the outskirts of the city and four taught in schools within the Brisbane metropolitan area.

Data collection methods included an extended written response questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions. The questionnaire required written responses about: becoming a teacher, university coursework, and career choice. After university ethics approval, and departmental and principals' approvals, all invitees provided consent and were released from teaching to engage in the research at the university campus for a two and a half-hour period. The first half an hour was assigned to completing the aforementioned written response questionnaire, and the final time was dedicated to the interviews and focus group discussions. Audio recorders were used by participants to interview each other with semi-structured interview guidelines. These guidelines provided initial questions but also allowed for further questioning and probing. The author and two other academics with research capabilities assisted in facilitating the interview environment. For example, while pairs of participants were randomly matched (and swapped three times within the timeframe), the researcher and academic assistants monitored the interviews, and asked further probing questions when appropriate. Audio-recorded focus group discussions occurred at three points during the afternoon. All data were transcribed by a research assistant with a PhD. Data were analysed for common themes (Hittleman & Simon, 2006) and conclusions were drawn from the triangulation of information occurring between the questionnaire and interview data.

## FINDINGS

To gain a sense of the beginning teachers' motivations for teaching, they were asked why they wanted to become teachers. All of them indicated in various ways that they enjoyed teaching children and wanted to inspire them, case in point: "Because I enjoyed working with children and during my time as a student in schools I had many inspirational teachers who impacted upon my life as it is today" (Participant 4). Two outlined clearly they wanted to make a difference (Participants 2 & 10), two suggested they wanted to be positive role models for students (Participants 6 & 9), and one claimed she was "always told I was a born teacher" (Participant 7). Participant 10 encapsulated the responses by writing: "I wanted to show kids how powerful they are and give them the tools to achieve. I know that I have the personality and enthusiasm to make the difference for every student, every day. I love working with kids". These comments presented altruistic motives with a view that they can make a difference to students' lives.

Reflecting back to their university preparation, the participants were asked to list preservice teacher education units or content that helped them to become beginning teachers. All mentioned at least three or more university units that assisted them in their preparation, including literacy, numeracy, psychology and practical teaching ideas. Not surprisingly, seven participants placed as their first preference "behaviour management" was an area where university units assisted (Table 1). Participant 9 (male) claimed that the "university prepared us pretty well for classroom management" but also said, "it's a fluid kind of thing...

one thing isn't going to work in all cases but I feel that we got a good range of ideas and skills and techniques that we could use". This fluidity in practice indicated the varied contextual circumstances in which beginning teachers are placed.

**TABLE 1**  
**BEGINNING TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR UNIVERSITY PREPARATION**

Participant No./ Gender	University units that assisted	University units required
1 Female	Literacy, psychology unit, Indigenous.	Literacy program , more debriefing sessions
2 Female	Field experiences, lessons and resources, behaviour management.	First day in first week, spelling and phonics
3 Male	Behaviour management, reading programs, differentiation and engagement.	Parent interaction/meetings, behaviour differentiation, first week of a classroom
4 Female	Behaviour management strategies, literacy units, all MDB* units.	First few weeks of the year, students from difficult backgrounds, More on teaching literacy and numeracy
5 Female	All of the MDB units, the art unit.	First few weeks of term one, more literacy/numeracy, teaching in SES areas, internship period for six months
6 Female	Behaviour management course, practicum, art portfolio.	Teaching lower grades, teaching writing/reading
7 Female	Behaviour management, literacy units, science and maths units, all of my prac units, TEDD**.	Organising reading groups, direct teaching of reading, dealing with parents
8 Female	Behaviour management, lesson units.	Setup of first week in the classroom
9 Male	Behaviour management, psychology, MDBs, Indigenous studies.	First day/week of school, how to work in a low SES area
10 Female	Behaviour management, stuff about different learning styles, hands-on practical teaching ideas and games.	More optional LOTE units

\* MDB units include: teaching two primary science, primary mathematics, primary ICT, primary robotics, science and mathematics integrated coursework.

\*\* TEDD is an acronym for Teacher Education Done Differently, and included school-based experiences as lead up days to practicum or for specific teaching areas (e.g., art, gifted and talented, reading squadron).

The participants were asked to suggest university units that would prepare them better for teaching in the first year of school, which included literacy, numeracy, differentiation of student learning, and understanding the first few weeks of teaching (Table 1). For instance, Participant 1 wrote, "A better literacy program – I feel really unprepared when it comes to teaching reading, would love more of these get-together session – great way to share ideas". Debriefing sessions were also mentioned as these provided opportunities to unpack experiential learning and to reflect on what may constitute effective teaching practice. Two participants at this three-month period into their first year claimed that dealing with some parents presented a difficulty: "I've spoken to a few of my parents and I find it's very confronting". Spontaneous interactions with confronting parents becomes a challenge for beginning teachers for which Participant 7 stated, "I think that's one thing we're not prepared for at university, you are not prepared for that parent to come in and question you over your pedagogy because you've got to think on your feet". Role play through real school scenarios at the university was noted as one possible way to negate these potential challenges.

They were asked how effective they perceived themselves as teachers for which all were very tentative in their responses. For instance, “I guess I am somewhat effective, I’m teaching and my kids are learning and doing work, obviously I’m not so effective in some areas” (Participant 5) and “Not sure as I don’t have anything to measure against (experience) but I would think it is fair, I can tell because I can see gradual improvement through observations and assessment” (Participant 6). Despite tentative responses on outlining their effectiveness as teachers, anecdotal self-assessment appears insufficient and several of these beginning teachers relied on more objective evidence about their teaching, for example: “My kids are learning, they want to be there so I can’t be bad; parents and other teachers and administrators are giving me positive feedback” (Participant 7). A few participants determined their effectiveness in terms of student achievement: “Fairly effective, I can see through my students’ work that they have learnt new concepts, have been able to get reluctant students to engage in lessons, students following routines” (Participant 4) and “students are showing progress in the concepts we are studying” (Participant 2). Observation of student learning was also noted when the beginning teacher can ascertain student knowledge transference to other contexts: “I think I’m okay, I can see my students progressing... but I can always do better, students are transferring knowledge from one topic to another which makes me understand that they have knowledge of the topic” (Participant 8). There was considerable recognition of the need to improve in various areas of teaching but this was also couched in terms of having more experience. Nevertheless, confidence in one’s abilities to enact a teaching task towards mastery experiences (Bandura, 1987) was stressed: “I have confidence in my abilities though and I think this is the most essential quality” (Participant 1) but beginning teachers need to meet expectations and determine a work balance:

For a first-year teacher I believe I am pulling above the expectations but always feel that there is more that I can do, is the kind of job where you can give and give and give but you have to reach a reasonable balance. (Participant 3)

It seemed these beginning teachers need more objective viewpoints on their practices to develop confidence about their effectiveness: “Sort of effective, my relationship development is working well and students want to be in my class, learning is progressing” (Participant 9). The responses indicated tentative confidence in their abilities, while affirmations by school executives, mentors, and other staff of their development tended to aid self efficacy. Indeed, they had stated specific strategies that made them feel successful with teaching such as: “Literacy and numeracy coach, placing me next to an experienced and supportive teacher” (Participant 2), “support for ICT use” (Participant 4), and “no tolerance of bad behaviour” (Participant 10).

As an indication of teaching retention levels, they were asked what they thought about their career at this three-month stage. Four participants (1, 2, 7, 8) specifically stated “love it”, two said it was worth the effort and rewarding (3 & 4), and two claimed they were happy to be teachers as “it’s a great career” (9 & 10). There were reasons and caveats around these positive comments. Reasons included the school support and the teaching environment, for example, Participant 1 stated that “I think my school has a lot to do with my happiness”. There was also a sense of full commitment to the profession at this early stage in their careers: “happy to be a teacher – never see myself doing something else” (Participant 9), “it’s hard work but worth every moment, I can see myself being here for a very long time” (Participant 7), and “enjoy working with students so much and helping them progress emotionally and academically, is a great career, as demanding and overwhelming as it is” (Participant 10). Although Participant 10 placed a caveat about the demands of teaching, there were other caveats in their written comments as well: “so much extra work outside the classroom (extra paperwork – IEPs, constant interruptions)” (Participant 2, parenthesis included), “rewarding, exhausting, challenging, worth the effort” (Participant 3), and “lot of work (we were warned) has its difficult moments, has its rewarding moments too, a massive learning curve” (Participant 4, parenthesis included). These responses highlighted the demanding, challenging and emotional work of teachers but at the same time recognised the intrinsic value of teaching as a career.

There were two participants who did not provide positive comments. These comments were based on the practicalities of the profession for which they may have felt unprepared: “It’s full on (but knew it would be) - time-consuming, there is so much to learn that four years at uni can’t teach you everything but does prepare you somewhat” (Participant 5, parenthesis included) and “Super busy, not sure if it’s for me at this stage of my life as I can’t 100% commit, do I want to have a life totally (pretty much) committed to work? will it get easier?” (Participant 6). Analysing these last two comments, which would constitute 20% of this cohort, appeared in keeping with previous studies linked to beginning teacher attrition rates (Goddard & Goddard, 2006). These comments signify the extensive workload, which also brings forward the need to create a work-life balance before burn out occurs.

These beginning teachers provided advice they would give to other university students undertaking a teaching degree. Their comments were overwhelmingly based around survival around the contextual learning and teaching workload, while trying to impart advice about the real-world of teaching. Two participants explained reasons why university students should not enter teaching, underlying the key reason for entering the career in the first place, “Don’t do it for the money or the holidays because you will be sorely disappointed, do it for the love of challenge and the joy of working with children” (Participant 3) and “Don’t do it unless you are willing to give it everything and unless you are passionate about kids” (Participant 10). Their advice extended to the practicalities of being organised (Participant 5), collecting as many resources as possible (Participants 1, 2), and networking with teachers when in schools (Participants 1, 4, 8). Participant 6, who had not provided a positive comment about teaching as a career now, summarised how to develop realism about teaching as a career, to illustrate:

Spend one week with a teacher at have a better understanding of a typical day – from start to finish e.g. 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., have a beer ready in the fridge, they tell you teaching is hard but I don’t think you realise until you do it, do teacher aid work to get an idea about what teaching is.

Advice on the reality of a beginning teacher can be summed up by the following three comments: “Hang in there because once you get your own classroom it’s so worth it” (Participant 1), “I’m sure that will probably get easier as you, you know, kind of develop a bank of resources and ideas and ways that you work” (Participant 9) but “never think it will be easy” (Participant 7).

The beginning teachers were asked about their plans over the next five years for which four participants’ (1, 7, 9, and 10) comments were about improving teaching practices. Two focused on survival, that is, “get experience, survival, build resources” (Participant 6) and “don’t give up, build up a range of resources, keep working in the upper middle years if possible” (Participant 2), while three claimed they will seek teaching experiences in other fields such as special education (Participant 4), overseas and high school (Participant 3), and teaching in lower grades (Participant 8). Participant 5 was uncertain due to contractual arrangements, “not sure, it’s not set in stone which is the problem, silly contracts”. Nevertheless, most were determined to achieve in their new found positions, even Participant 10 who claimed she was not supported directly in the school wrote: “I love my job, challenges can be overcome”. Outlining that challenges can be overcome leads to a positive frame of mind, part of which can instill resilience skills for teaching.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study supports the findings of Beck et al. (2007) that beginning teachers wanted further understandings about setting up a classroom in the first few weeks of school and assessment procedures at key times through the year. In addition, the findings indicated that university preparation needed more literacy (particularly reading and spelling), numeracy, and catering for lower socio-economic students, along with understanding behaviour differentiation and communicating with parents (Table 1; see also Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). In comparing beginning teachers’ views about their tertiary education, reports from beginning teachers show that they value practice more than theory, which was indicative of

the types of university topics selected that assisted them in their first year of teaching (Table 1; see also Allen, 2009; Cochran-Smith, 2005). Even though Allen's (2009) findings showed that beginning teachers reverted to traditional school practices and "conform to the status quo" and do not employ university-instructed innovations unless they are supported by school staff (p. 653), this current study did not show any incidences that these 10 beginning teachers were stifled in any innovation brought from their university studies. Many of the support programs focus on induction and lack a stronger focus on the core business of education, which is teaching and learning. Learning about the school culture and infrastructure is essential for beginning teacher induction; yet once induction is undertaken, beginning teachers are left largely unsupported on the core business of teaching (Hudson et al., 2009). Furthermore, supporting beginning teachers may be advocated by education systems but supporting beginning teachers' connection of theoretical knowledge learnt at university to practical applications in specific school contexts is left up to school principals and executives.

There can be an assumption that beginning teachers who have completed four years of an undergraduate study with about 20% of the course time involved with schools during extended practicum and internship periods (e.g., United States, Australia) are equipped to cater for the immense diversity that exists within education systems, schools and classrooms. University studies cannot cover the enormous contexts in which schools operate and need to be more astute about the coursework design. Schools contain as many human conditions as there are in society and, for instance, learning about autism for the depth of understanding required for teaching students with this condition may well require a medical degree or part thereof. In addition, primary teachers spread their practices further still as they are required to teach across all key learning areas, including the extensive extended curriculum and extra curricula activities. A beginning teacher entering the school will need support for the various human conditions, curricula knowledge and pedagogy, socio-cultural contexts and the range of other interpersonal skills necessary for ensuring collaborative working environments. Although beginning teachers have completed four years of teacher education, they are expected to accomplish teaching tasks similar to their veteran colleagues, and, indeed, some within more extreme conditions (Hudson et al., 2009).

Australia (O'Brien & Goddard, 2006), America (Algozzine et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010), and many other countries have significant attrition rates of beginning teachers from the teaching profession; thus timely support in the form of induction and mentoring is recommended, with consensus, as an avenue for retaining teachers (Ganser 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, retaining beginning teachers requires getting to the root of the problem, and tackling the problem by developing resilient skills as suggested by some authors (e.g., Castro et al., 2010; Le Maistre & Paré, 2010) may be too late to avert the attrition. Although favourable working conditions and mentoring support in schools must be a key part of the solution in supporting beginning teachers (Barrera, Braley, & Slate, 2010), further knowledge and skills (e.g., see Table 1) need to be included in teacher preparation. Ongoing research is required to understand how to prepare preservice teachers for the types of events and circumstances that can occur in today's education systems, schools and classrooms. Therefore, supporting beginning teachers will require a two-pronged approach: (1) timely induction and mentoring that caters for school and classroom contexts, and (2) up-to-date knowledge on addressing beginning teachers' issues for universities to provide responsive tertiary coursework. As education is constantly changing, this will require universities to embed research on beginning teachers' first years to ensure findings are included in coursework to address the many varied issues that preservice teachers may eventually face.

Universities and schools have partnerships in preservice teacher education but this partnership generally becomes detached for supporting beginning teachers. One way of assisting beginning teachers is for universities to continue the support of beginning teachers in a partnership arrangement for a few years into the profession (e.g., Bezzina, 2006). It is essential that universities join in the challenge of supporting beginning teachers, particularly tackling the problem at its formative stage by advancing university coursework to provide praxis for real-world teaching. Intervention for retention is paramount within the school system (Sharplin et al., 2011); nevertheless such intervention also needs to occur at the root of the problem, thus, governments must allocate funds for universities to undertake timely research on beginning teachers' needs within their first years of teaching. If for instance, a key issue is behaviour

management, then research must uncover specifics about beginning teachers' issues to embed solutions within tertiary education coursework. Similarly, skills on communicating with confronting parents need to be embedded in the course design. It is also important as a two-pronged approach to understand that a university degree signifies the beginning of one's career and not mastery of the profession, hence necessitating timely induction and mentoring in schools.

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