Student Teacher Perceptions of Preparedness for Teaching

Kelly Turner, Elizabeth Jones, Michael Davies, & Sheryl Ramsay

Griffith University

T he teaching profession has been described as "essentially conflictual…dilemma-ridden and… constrained by factors beyond an individual teacher's control" (Cains & Brown, 1998, p. 97). Consistent with this perspective, it is not surprising that teachers often suffer from emotional exhaustion and stress. What may be surprising however are recent reports that teachers appear to be experiencing burnout much earlier in their careers than expected. Goddard and O'Brien (2003) discovered that teachers were reporting symptoms of burnout as early as in their first year of employment. This clearly has significant implications for teachers and the teaching profession in general and is an issue that needs to be addressed. The current study aims to examine how well Universities prepare their students for the teaching profession. Final year Primary Teaching students will be followed as they make the transition form University study to the workforce. Their perceived level of preparedness, their commitment to the profession, their expectations about the workforce, their teaching self-efficacy and their attribution style will all be examined as possible predictors of emotional exhaustion in their first year of teaching. This paper examines the results of the first stage of data collection.

Transitions

"…It hasn't really been what I expected. It was a bit of a disappointment, quite a substantial one actually…" (p. 74). This is how 'Jason', an Australian commerce graduate described his experiences after university in a poignant case study by Perrone and Vickers (2003). Unfortunately, Jason's experience is not unique and many graduates from all fields of study find this transition particularly difficult and disappointing. This transition is often quite significant for the graduate since completing the program of study is something that the graduate has been working towards for many years and might also signal a move into adulthood roles and responsibilities. Perhaps not surprisingly then, too many individuals are overwhelmed by this transition, and find that the workplace does not live up to expectations. The shock often felt as a result of disappointing early experiences has been termed 'reality shock', is linked to unrealistic expectations about the workforce (Graham & McKenzie, 1995, Perrone & Vickers 2003, Taylor, 1988). Interestingly, it has been suggested that graduates are more likely to develop high expectations than other newcomer populations and are therefore more likely to experience 'reality shock'. In fact, in a comprehensive study, Graham and McKenzie (1995) found that virtually all graduates experienced transitional problems to some degree. Additionally, it has been found that these transitional problems can have significant implications for an individual's level of anxiety, job performance, job

satisfaction, intention to stay, working identity, self-efficacy, self esteem and sense of belonging (see, Mackenzie-Davey & Arnold, 2000).

More specifically in terms of the present paper, recent work by Goddard and O'Brien (2003) examined the emotional well being of teaching graduates as they entered the workforce and found that these individuals were developing alarmingly high levels of burnout during their first year of teaching. Clearly then, this is a transition that is particularly worthy of attention with significant implications for both the individual and the organisation.

The transition to work is a highly complex process that arguably begins well before the graduate even enters the workforce (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). As such, the causes of a graduate's disappointment are likely to be numerous and related to both the individual and the organisation. While a detailed examination of all likely causes is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, principles from theories of Person-Environment Fit as well as Social Cognitive Theories will be used to explore some of the factors that may impact on the adjustment of newly qualified teachers to the workplace. The current study forms part of a larger longitudinal study examining how pre-service student teacher expectations about teaching and perceptions of competence developed through university training predict their well being at the end of their first year of teaching. This paper reports on Phase 1 of the study and will focus on final year pre-service teachers' expectations and perceptions of competence, as well as teaching self-efficacy.

Person-environment fit

Theories of person-environment fit have been argued to be particularly useful in examining the transition process as they place equal emphasis on the needs of both organisations and individuals (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). In this way, it is equally as important that the individual be satisfied with the organisation as it is for the organisation to be satisfied with the individual. High levels of satisfaction for both parties are indicative of a good 'fit' between individual and organisation and are thought to result in good performance outcomes, high job satisfaction, job stability, retention and tenure. Conversely, should the needs of either party fail to be met; the system will be compelled to change, which can result in the exit of the individual from the organisation. As such, it is suggested that a smooth transition to full time work is the result of a match between the individual's skills and abilities and the organization's needs, as well as a match between the individual's needs and an organization's rewards. This paper focuses on describing the person in terms of how prepared they perceive themselves to be at the end of their university training. A number of other variables are considered to be important in understanding how well teachers adjust to the transition into the first year of teaching. These include their perceived adequacy of skills and abilities, their expectations about the workforce, their teaching self-efficacy and their attribution style.

Perceived adequacy of skills and abilities

It is clearly very important that an individual enters the workforce with adequate skills and abilities appropriate to the profession and to which universities are expected to make an important contribution. What may be surprising however are reports within the literature that graduates are not meeting the requirements of employers. Graham and

McKenzie (1995), for instance, discuss reports that employers do not feel that graduates possess the necessary skills and abilities and are arguing for more practical work based experience. Several improvements have been suggested within the literature for the way graduates are prepared for the workforce, with the most commonly discussed improvement being the introduction of wide workplace experience during university education, as occurs within education courses.

Graham and McKenzie (1995) argue that if university education is designed to closely mimic the standards and procedures of work required by the workplace, as well as to equip students with the skills and knowledge valued by employers, then the graduates will not only adjust to the workplace faster and more effectively but will also begin contributing to the organisation sooner and with less workplace training and development. Likewise, according to Bailey (1997), work placements help students to clarify their personal goals, make informed career choices, develop a work ethic and sense of confidence in the workplace, increase their earning potential and consolidate their academic learning through practical application. Taylor (1988) also argues in favor of university practicum placements and suggests that they assist students to make the transition from university study to full time work in several ways. For instance, they give the students an opportunity to identify the outcomes of work that they value as well as the personal attributes, skills and abilities that will elicit those outcomes. As a result, these students are then more likely to elicit positive outcomes from their first job, be more satisfied, and therefore be more likely to remain in that job. Practicum placements also expose the student to the work culture while they are still exposed to the university culture, allowing them to resolve the differences between these two cultures whilst still receiving the benefit and support of the familiar university culture (Taylor, 1988).

As can be seen above, the apparent benefits of university practicum placements are numerous and well documented. It is ironic then that teachers, as one of the groups of students to arguably receive the most workplace experience during study, would also be a group experiencing high levels of burnout during their first year on the job (Goddard & O'Brien, 2003). The present study aims to contribute to understanding the experience of teaching by examining important person and environment factors identifiable near the end of the final pre-service year.

Expectations about the world of work

Another factor that may contribute to the early experiences of graduates as they move into the workforce are the expectations they form about the world of work. This is a common theme in the literature on the transition to full-time work, with many suggesting that graduates may have higher expectations than most (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2003; Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Taylor, 1988). A graduate may form unrealistic expectations regarding a vast array of factors such as workplace rewards, the degree of difficulty and nature of the work they will be doing, their likely workload and time pressures and the social structure or culture of the organisation itself. This paper will describe our findings about the expectations of pre-service teachers with regard to their skills and the workplace in general.

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Teaching self-efficacy

Another important factor in the move to work is that of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy may influence how an individual will adjust to this transition once they have entered the workforce and is a core concept in social cognitive theory. At the simplest level of analysis, social cognitive theory examines the interplay between self-efficacy, outcome expectancy and goals, as mediated by other person and contextual variables (Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999). It is thought that self-efficacy influences whether an individual will initiate, persevere and succeed at a given task, and arises from the individual's personal experiences with success, their observations of others experiences, the reactions of others to their previous efforts, and their own internal environment (mood states, physiological reactions etc.).

Common to the literature on the experiences of teachers is the importance of achieving a high sense of teaching self-efficacy. High teaching self-efficacy has been linked to positive gains in teacher performance, student learning outcomes, the selection of learning activities, responses to student attempts, selection and use of classroom management techniques, responses to difficult students, stress management and job satisfaction (Friedman, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Additionally, it could be argued that an individual with a high sense of teaching efficacy would be more likely to respond to the experience of 'reality shock' in an adaptive way (through a shift in strategy, information seeking etc), and effectively improve the person-environment fit. As such it would seem vitally important that student teachers develop a realistic sense of their likely effectiveness in the classroom and that this efficacy be as high as possible.

Attribution style

While self-efficacy is clearly of interest in the current study, social cognitive theory also highlights the importance of the complex array of attributions an individual makes about the likely cause of their success or failure (Lent et al., 1999). Personal experiences of success for instance are likely to have a positive influence on self-efficacy if the individual attributes that success to their own ability and effort. Conversely, personal experiences of failure may lead to unrealistic self-efficacy beliefs if the individual does not attribute that failure to their own performance at an appropriate level.

Importantly, there have been reports that teachers are likely to be attributing their own performance and effectiveness in the classroom to personality characteristics. Cains and Brown (1998), for example, discuss a report on teacher stress that places extraordinary emphasis on a teacher's personality. The suggestion that teachers may be attributing failure in the classroom to their own unchangeable personality characteristics rather than situational factors or changeable internal factors (such as increasing skill levels) is significant. Furthermore, Weinstein (1988) argues that there is too much emphasis on following the teaching methods with limited discussion in teacher preparation programs of useful strategies and approaches for dealing with failure. This, along with the suggestion that teaching is instinctual may lead students to assume that personality determines success. Such attributions may reduce person-environment fit by decreasing graduates' confidence to develop their skills and impact on the environment in a positive way.

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In summary then, while a detailed examination of all possible causes of a graduate's disappointment with the workforce is well beyond the scope of this paper, several important factors have been identified that may impact significantly on the experiences of graduates. Perhaps the most obvious factor is that of appropriate workplace preparation and the ability of universities to provide that preparation.. Other important factors for determining how well an individual will adjust to the workplace include the expectations the individual forms about the workplace and the appropriateness of their career choice as well as their self-efficacy and attributional style. The present study aims to add depth to the literature in terms of understanding self and environment factors as perceived by pre-service, final year teachers.

The present paper reports on Phase 1 of a longitudinal study. The experiences of primary teachers will be examined due to their exposure to the workplace whilst studying. The research questions centre on how pre-service students rate self-perceptions of their teaching self-efficacy; preparation for teaching; competency levels, attributions regarding student learning and their expectations about workload. In phase 2 of the study, newly qualified teachers' levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction will also be measured to examine how well they are adjusting to the transition when they are resurveyed.

Method

Participants

Participants were 77 students in their final year of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) at a Queensland University. The mean age was 25 years ($M = 25.16$, $SD = 6.62$) and 82.3% of the participants were female. 10.1% of participants had completed another degree in addition to their Bachelor of Education and 31.6% indicated that teaching was not their first career preference. All participants intended to commence work as a Primary teacher next year.

Materials

Teaching Self-efficacy Scale- Short Form (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001)
This scale consists of twelve items describing various tasks specific to the classroom. Participants are asked to rate to what extent they feel that they can perform each task successfully on a 7-point likert scale. Example items include *"To what extent can you use a variety of assessment strategies?"* and *"How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?"* Participant ratings were averaged to calculate a total Teaching Self-efficacy Score.

Teachers self reported preparation
This was measured by asking participants to rate on a 7-point likert scale the extent to which University had prepared them to face various challenges associated with the teaching role. Nine challenges were taken from the literature (see Cowley, 2003 for example), through discussions with teachers and from the "Professional Standards for Teachers" as outlined by Education Queensland, the major employer of teachers in Queensland. Example items included *"Write a Lesson Plan"*, *"Deal with problem behaviour effectively"* and *"Build relationships with other school staff"*. These challenges were then listed

again and the participants were asked to rate on a 7-point likert scale how important they believe it is that university prepares teachers for each of the challenges.

Self reported competency

Each of the twelve professional competencies as outlined by Education Queensland were listed and participants were asked to rate on a 7-point likert scale how well prepared they felt in terms of each of the competencies. Example items included *"Create Learning environments that are safe and supportive"* and *"Assess and report on student learning"*.

Attributions regarding student learning

Participants were asked to rate on a 7-point likert scale how important various factors are in determining student learning outcomes. The eight factors addressed the impact of the school, the child, the home environment, the teacher and good luck. Example items included *"the ability of the child"* and *"the teacher's skill level"*. An item addressing the teacher's personality was also included to test the contention that teachers are attributing their performance to their own personality.

Expected workload

An open-ended question was used to assess the expected workload of first year teachers. Participants were asked to indicate how many hours per week they expected to work next year, including marking and preparation time.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire during one of their classes. Participation was voluntary and participants were also asked to indicate whether they wished to be contacted next year with a follow up questionnaire. Those who wished to participate further were also asked to provide contact details. Time one questionnaires will be matched to time two questionnaires through the use of an identification code provided by the participants. Confidentiality was preserved by providing participants with separate envelopes for the return of their consent forms and their questionnaires.

Results

A factor analysis was conducted for the twelve competencies outlined by Education Queensland (20000000). Two factors were identified. Competencies loading on the first factor related to structuring lessons and encouraging student learning. Sample items included "structure learning experiences that foster the development of literacy and numeracy skills" and "create learning environments that are safe and supportive." On average students rated themselves as moderately well prepared to meet the competencies related to structuring lessons and developing student learning ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 0.73$).

Competencies loading on the second factor mainly related to teaching activities outside the classroom. Sample items included "meet ethical accountability and professional requirements" and "building relationships with the wider community". On average students rated themselves as adequately prepared for teaching duties outside the classroom ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.03$). Students rated themselves as significantly less prepared for activities outside the classroom than activities related to structuring lessons and developing student learning ($t (78) = 5.66$, $p < .001$).

A factor analysis was not conducted for the nine challenges faced by teachers, so that a comparison could be made between students' ratings of preparedness for each of the challenges and students' ratings of the importance of being prepared for these challenges. Means for both the adequacy of preparation and the importance of preparation for each of the challenges are presented in Table 1. Means for both adequacy and importance ratings were compared using a repeated measures MANOVA. As can be seen below, pre-service teachers on average felt most prepared to write a lesson plan, followed by create fun and enjoyable lessons and then present subject material that connects with the students' lives and interests. Pre-service teachers felt least well prepared to build relationships with parents, followed by building relationships with other school staff and assisting students with special needs. Conversely, pre-service teachers felt on average that dealing with classroom behaviour in general, as well as problem behaviour more specifically, were the most important, followed by presenting subject matter that connects with the lives and interests of students and changing lessons in response to student needs. Pre-service teachers rated being well prepared to write a lesson plan as least important, followed by building relationships with school staff.

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for pre-service teachers self reported preparation for the challenges of teaching and the importance of that preparation

CHALLENGE	ADEQUACY OF PREPARATION		IMPORTANCE OF PREPARATION	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Write a Lesson Plan	6.31	0.95	5.66	1.44
Create fun and enjoyable lessons	5.72	0.98	6.51	0.95
Deal with problem behaviour effectively	4.93	1.30	6.79	0.76
Manage classroom behaviour in general	5.10	1.34	6.75	0.77
Assist students with special needs	4.47	1.31	6.63	0.89
Present subject matter that connects with the students' lives and interests	5.30	1.02	6.61	0.82
Build relationships with other school staff	4.41	1.41	6.27	1.00
Build working relationships with parents	3.94	1.40	6.39	1.04
Change lessons in response to student needs	5.13	1.15	6.61	0.81
N = 77				

A factor analysis was also conducted for the Teaching Self-efficacy Scale. This factor analysis revealed two distinct factors, one relating to the management of classroom behaviour and the other relating to the learning of students. Sample items from the behaviour management factor include *"How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?"* and *"How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?"* On average, students rated themselves as being able to do 'quite a bit' to manage classroom behaviour ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 0.73$) indicating moderately high levels of efficacy relating to behaviour management. Sample items for the student learning factor included *"How much can you do to help your students value learning?"* and *"How much can you do to get students to believe that they can*

do well in schoolwork?" On average, pre-service teachers rated themselves as being able to do 'quite a bit' to encourage student learning ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.59$) indicating moderately high levels of efficacy relating to student learning. However, students rated their efficacy for the student learning factor significantly lower than their efficacy for the behaviour management factor ($t(73) = 2.81$, $p < .01$).

The attributions regarding student learning outcomes were analyzed by calculating the mean importance rating for each factor and compared using a repeated measures MANOVA. These means are presented in Table 2. As can be seen below, good luck was rated as least important for student learning, followed by the ability of the child and the school policy and procedure. The amount of effort made by the teacher was rated as most important. Interestingly, the teacher's personality was also rated as very important in determining student learning outcomes, together with the teacher's skill level, the home environment and the school environment.

Table 2

Pre-service teacher's attributions regarding the relative importance of determinants of student learning outcomes

DETERMINANT OF STUDENT LEARNING	M	SD
School Policy and Procedure	5.32	1.06
The teacher's skill level	6.16	0.84
The home environment	6.16	0.97
The teacher's personality	6.14	0.93
The school environment	6.30	0.77
The ability of the child	5.46	1.09
The amount of effort made by the teacher	6.61	0.64
Good Luck	2.80	1.74
N=77		

Finally, the number of hours per week the pre-service teachers expected to work next year was examined. On average, the pre-service teachers expected to work 47.36 hours per week ($M = 47.36$, $SD = 15.17$). The minimum number of expected hours per week that was reported was 10 and the maximum was 75. The majority of participants reported expecting to work 50 hours per week (30.3%).

Discussion

The present paper highlights the value of examining person and environment factors (Swanson & Fouad, 1999) in the final year of teaching. While these results are only preliminary and are far from conclusive, there are some interesting trends. The pre-service teachers are reporting reasonably high levels of confidence in their preparation for the workforce. It is suggested that the teachers may find the classroom a more difficult environment than they had anticipated. Interestingly, they report feeling better prepared for the competencies relating to classroom activities than they do for the other more general tasks of the teaching role. While this may not be surprising, it could have significant implications for their experiences next year. Additionally, it could be argued

that exposure to the school culture during their practicum placements would have been expected to prepare them for the more general aspects of their role such as developing relationships with staff. On the other hand, the practicum experience can be very focused on the specific activities of the classroom, with little exposure to the broader culture of the school, which may reflect how students and supervising teachers and university staff perceive their roles.

Such concerns then appear to be duplicated in the pre-service teacher's ratings of their abilities to face the various, often wider, challenges of teaching. Pre-service teachers for instance, reported feeling least prepared to build relationships with parents and staff. Additionally, they reported feeling best prepared to write a lesson plan but then report that this preparation is least important. Interestingly they also rate being able to build relationships with staff as less important. This also may have significant implications for their adjustment and well being next year. Clearly the ability to develop positive relationships with the people around them is vitally important to any newcomer, and first year teachers in particular would be expected to benefit from the social support that other staff could provide, including the practical and emotional support potentially inherent in these relationships (Mackenzie-Davey & Arnold, 2000).

Pre-service teachers also reported moderately high levels of expected teaching efficacy. Provided this efficacy is realistic and based on previous experiences with success, these teachers may deal with this transition in a more adaptive way than others with lower levels of efficacy. What was unexpected was the finding that they rated their efficacy in dealing with behaviour management higher than their efficacy in dealing with student learning. This appears contradictory to their ratings of the adequacy of their preparation to deal with classroom behaviour. Clearly, however, their reported efficacy next year is going to be of most interest in this study as it will provide comparative data across the years.

In addition, attribution theory would suggest that a balanced assessment of causes for successes and difficulties would assist professional development (Hewstone, 1989). Previous research (Cains & Brown, 1998; Weinstein, 1988) has found that teachers attribute their performance largely to personality. Our results similarly find personality rated as an important determinant of student learning, but not as high as the amount of effort made by the teacher. This is an important finding in terms of adjustment to the teaching role and the achievement of person-environment fit because effort can be more controlled and directed by the teacher than personality (Hewstone, 1989). Thus, beginning teachers who attribute their difficulties to their own efforts are likely to focus on positive improvements to their work through reflective processes (e.g. more preparation, more help-seeking and so on). Furthermore, it was surprising that the ability of the child was not rated as more important, given the substantial research identifying the importance of this factor in student learning. While this finding needs further investigation, it raises the question of whether pre-service teachers are making an appropriate range of attributions in relation to their future careers.

Pre-service teachers were expecting their workload next year to be high. This is reassuring and probably a realistic estimate of the time that will be involved. In all, the present results indicate that students feel reasonably well prepared for their teaching role. However, the data also highlights a number of questions and points for discussion for

students, supervising teachers, principals and university staff about the practicum, including attributions about critical incidents relating to perceived successes and disappointments, as well as broader school cultures. In particular, the important role of person-environment fit and how this may be facilitated within the practicum warrants further consideration.

Phase 2 of this study will involve resurveying these students at the end of their first year of teaching. Phase 2 has two aims. First, to examine how the participants' perceptions of their preparedness may have changed and secondly, to examine whether their ratings of preparedness at Phase 1 predict their wellbeing and life satisfaction at Phase 2. Together, these studies will give significant insights into the perceptions and experiences of pre-service and new graduate teachers, making an important contribution to understanding of transition processes and potential points of intervention for the education and professional development of teachers.

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