The experiences of a beginning History teacher in a regional high school

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This paper reports on the findings of a beginning History teacher’s experiences in the first term of teaching. The study focuses on the beginning History teacher’s induction within a high school and History department, and skills transfer to teaching practice from university coursework, in the first term of teaching. Data was gathered using a semi-structured interview by telephone at the beginning and at end of the first term of the school year. The culture of the school and department emerge as powerful factors in determining the kind of identity the teacher develops early in their career.

Introduction

A substantial volume of literature about teacher change and development exists, most of which points to improvement in teaching and teachers, but some examines negative situations (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Various authors have described the experiences of beginning teachers as a “baptism-of-fire” (Breusch, 2004; Eberhard, Reinhardt & Stottlemeyer, 2000) in which they are expected to either “sink or swim” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) in an environment of “heaven or hell” (Bobbitt, 1993). Beginning teachers are expected to begin teaching with “a full repertoire of teaching skills … with a full teaching load” (Wojnowski, Bellamy & Cooke, 2003), and often outside their areas of subject specialization with little guidance or support (McCormack & Thomas, 2003). At the same time they are often told to forget about the impractical ideas promoted by university educators because they are “out of touch with classroom realities” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001:1020). It is little wonder then, that new teachers experience what is called “praxis shock” (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) or “reality shock” (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Much of the literature on the experiences of early career teachers is generic with scant attention paid to beginning teachers’ experiences within subject areas. The literature on beginning History teachers primarily focuses on their knowledge of the discipline and their expertise in teaching History (Wilson, 1988; Wilson, & Wineburg, 1988; Wineburg, & Wilson, 1991; Gudmundsdottir, 1990; Wilson, 1988, 1991; McDiamid, 1993). The purpose of this study is to investigate the way in which the professional identity of one beginning History teacher is shaped in the first few months of teaching, especially through the interaction between History colleagues and the head teacher.

Literature review

The first few years (Moir & Gless, 2001), or indeed, the first few months of teaching (Breusch, 2004) are critical because these early experiences will “set the professional norms, attitudes and standards that will guide practice over the course of a career” (Moir & Gless, 2001:1). Additionally, teachers’ personal histories, preservice education, as well the school culture and leadership will determine how teachers will develop in the early years of teaching (Flores & Day, 2006). The “trial-by-fire” method of launching a teaching career exacts a high price on new teachers; in attempting to deal with the difficulties of getting started they often develop coping strategies that impede effective teaching (Reiman & Edefelt, 1990), or they become disillusioned and leave the profession.
Workplace conditions are a “powerful variable in the process of becoming a new teacher” (Flores, 2001:140). The beginning teachers in her study felt that they were not encouraged to plan and implement curriculum projects and to develop professionally, and hence had negative views about the schools’ policies and leadership. Studies by Kilbourne and Roberts (1991) and Schempp, Sparkes and Templin, (1993) show how school cultures can act as significant barriers for teacher acceptance, because there are the traditions and trademarks, “the codes of culture, that give meaning and purpose to the established practices and patterns of daily school life” (Schempp, et al. 1993:461). Beginning teachers often felt a sense of fear, conflict (Smith, 1993) and strangeness in school cultures because they have left the familiar culture of the university to move into a “strange one that is both attractive and repellent – the ‘hope and despair’ situation” (Sabar, 2004).

A number of studies of teacher development have noted that beginning teaching is a period of uncertainty (Veenman, 1984; Smith & Rhodes, 1992; Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; McNally, Cope & Inglis, 1997; Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu & 2002), and a time when teachers see their images of teaching shattered (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Britzman (1991) described the dilemma confronting the novice teacher as one that involves being in conflict between the traditions of the school and their own desire “to carve out one’s own territory, develop one’s own style, and make a difference in the education of students” (p.19).

Fuller and Brown (1975) identified three stages of learning to teach: concerns about self (survival); concerns about tasks/situations (mastery of routines and procedures); and, concerns about impact on students (settled and resistant to change or becoming responsive to his/her students). This model endures to this day because of its clarity, as other teacher educators have noticed similar concerns with their own student teachers, and because the model’s ultimate concern is about student learning. While this outward development from self to task to students has been established, others have recognised an inward focused development involving the beginning teachers’ personal capacity to grow as their understanding of teaching changes (Conway & Clark, 2003). The role of mentors in such development is central (Pendry, Husband, Arthur & Davison, 1998).

A mentor acts a guide in familiarizing the beginning teacher into “the school’s culture, climate, and values” (Robinson, 1998:7). A large body of literature exists concerning the support for early career teachers to improve their professional practice. A study of 3000 early career teachers by Batten, Griffen and Ainley (1993) found that having a mentor or buddy arrangement rated highly in terms of addressing the challenges of teaching. Contributing factors are having a mentor from the same field (Patterson & Luft, 2002), and both mentor and beginning teacher sharing the same staffroom (Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 1998). New teachers should also have the opportunity to plan with other teachers in the same subject area, and have regular collaborative meetings with other teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). In short, these collegial meetings

...provide connection because they are structured within learning communities where new and veteran teachers interact with each other with respect and are valued for their respective contributions (Wong, 2004:50).

The relationship between the mentor and new teacher should be seen as a journey that is based on a unique and equal relationship, characterised by trust and moral support, rather than a role with a set of preconceived duties (Awaya, McEwan, Heyler, Linsky, Lum & Wakukawa, 2003). The latter is
likened to a ‘dating service’ where placements are made arbitrarily, and determined by the availability of cooperating teachers. The success of the relationship model will be determined by the input beginning teachers have in the selection of their own mentors (Queensland Teachers Union, 2004; Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 1998), and the consequent negotiations between the mentor and beginning teacher that include goals for development and strategies for achieving goals (Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 2002).

In terms of classroom practice, the mentor can help the new teacher “bring to consciousness some useful information … with regard to their practice” (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love & Stiles, 1998:127). Novice teachers should also observe the reflective practices of their mentors, so they can see what works, why it works, and therefore make decisions about their own teaching (Dewey, 1904/1974). In this way, learning is a joint activity between the novice teacher and the mentor, with the mentor providing demonstrations, giving explanations, and offering support.

Head teachers are leaders of their departments, in terms their knowledge of teaching and learning in their curriculum area. Whilst they may delegate the role of mentoring to experienced teachers within their department, head teachers are the ones who should publicize the learning message, such as ensuring continuing professional development as a major goal in normal departmental practice (Harris, Jamieson & Russ, 1995; Knight, 2001). When the head teacher promotes an integrating culture, that is, a space for learning activities in regular departmental meetings, beginning teachers will have a greater opportunity of enhancement of knowledge and practice in a culture of collaboration, rather than professional isolation (Williams, Prestage & Bedward, 2001; Kardos & Johnson, 2007). Apart from having their ideas, attitudes, and behaviours and questions answered (Cole, 1991), new teachers can make a dynamic contribution to their department and school community (Szabo, 1989). Importantly, they begin to develop the commitment, skills, and knowledge required for teacher leadership.

**Methodology**

The study is the beginning of a longitudinal study, used qualitative research and case method to investigate the experiences of one early career History teacher. The participant for this study has been given the pseudonym **Pericles** because of his interest in Ancient History. Pericles is a young man in his first year of teaching having completed a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) and Graduate Diploma in Education at a regional university in Australia. He entered university in the year immediately following his secondary education in a medium sized public high school, also in a regional centre. At school he developed an interest in History through the enthusiasm of his mother and grandmother, and his Ancient History teacher who specialised in Egyptology. He followed his interest at university by majoring in Modern History and Ancient History, and studying some English and Theatre Studies, and through his involvement in the debating society. While at university he mixed easily with other students and staff, and achieved above average academic results. He enjoys a ‘wine and cheese night’ more than going to the pub to talk football but he is ‘quite happy to sit in that circle and talk’.

Data was collected through two telephone interviews, using open questions, with Pericles at the beginning and at the end of the first term. The telephone interviews were conducted away from Pericles’ workplace. The two interviews, which lasted approximately an hour and a half each were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.
Findings
The school where Pericles is teaching is a small, comprehensive high school in a small inland regional centre. Students are drawn from the local town population and from the rural area that it services. There are about 420 students in the school, from Year 7 to Year 12. Pericles described it as a diverse environment for teaching: there are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with a range of socio-economic backgrounds represented in the school population. He was impressed that students were quite knowledgeable, especially about the wider world, a fact that he found refreshing. He teaches mostly English classes, in Years 7, 8, 9 and 11, and one class for History at Year 9 level. While he has been teaching History topics to that class, he will shortly have to teach them Geography, which was not a subject studied during his degree. The school provides a range of extra-curricular activities for students such as a swimming carnival, school social, and a homework centre, all of which Pericles was involved in during his first five weeks there. As well, the school involves parents in activities: Pericles met the parents of Year 7 students at a school-run barbeque.

Within the school staff are divided into groups teaching particular subjects. The head teachers and teachers are co-located according to their main teaching area. Pericles’ desk is in the English staffroom, necessitating regular visits to the History staffroom. He has noticed differences in how he relates to colleagues between the various subject groups. Most of the staff at the school are experienced and have been at the school for several years. There is one other teacher in his staffroom who is new to the school, but is experienced in teaching Years 7-10 classes. His colleagues’ experience and their familiarity with the resources available for teaching within the school mean that the staff “know exactly what they are doing” with “things done well in advance”. Pericles describes the staff as “really involved, [a] very tight teaching community”.

Pericles described his initial experiences of teaching as one of “ups and downs”. He was surprised that teachers and students treated him like a preservice teacher on practicum – a new face on the school landscape where it was seen as acceptable to probe him with personal questions. In general he has found teaching very demanding. “I’m definitely still swimming at this stage. My head’s just above the water – but certainly not below”. He was experiencing difficulties with his History class; students had been misbehaving – “one of the hardest classes I teach” – and therefore was behind in the History unit “because the kids were too busy giving me a bit of a rough time at the start”. But just lately he noticed that students were beginning to apply themselves to class work. He made some changes to alter the classroom dynamic. For example, the horseshoe layout of classroom furniture meant he could not negotiate with his students as they would engage in cross-room conversations so he rearranged the furniture to increase his central position in the class.

Even though he had completed the required practicum during his education program and anticipated hard work to come with full time teaching, he was not prepared for the effort required at his new school. He described the workload as extreme, and now he has a new found respect for teachers. His practicum experience was nothing like teaching up to 6 x 40 minute classes a day, which he found exhausting. “Some days…you come home and all you want to do is sleep because you’ve been challenged all day long”. He was quick to point out that these were positive challenges to which he responded by developing strategies to cope such as staying at school into the evenings to prepare the next day’s work, often entirely alone in the building. He arrived at this solution through discussion with his close friend from university now teaching at another school. His initial experiences of school teaching had been more exhausting than expected.
In terms of his relationship with staff members, he has found the History staff very positive, unlike his experiences with other staff members and English teachers in particular. He found some teachers were patronising and assumed that since this school was his first appointment from university, he had little to offer. He was especially frustrated with the English teachers who made little effort to inform him of curriculum matters because they seem to have the attitude, “well you’ve got a degree, you must know what you’re doing so I don’t need to explain to you”. A further complication has been having colleagues’ children in his class who report on his difficulties to their parents who comment unhelpfully in the staff room.

Whilst Pericles’s account of his relationship with some staff members was problematic, he was enthusiastic about the support he was receiving from the principal and deputy principal. He said “they’ve always got the time of the day for me”. He found that both head teachers were supportive but in sharply contrasting ways. The head teacher from the English department is aloof and steeped in tradition, but she does follow through with directions and generally ensures things are going to plan. Pericles describes his History head teacher as “old school” but “fantastic” - a person whom Pericles admires because he relates well with students, and has Pericles’ interests at heart. He is knowledgeable about students’ backgrounds and their academic history, and students respect him. He is supportive of Pericles both in and out of the classroom, and will seek Pericles’ input during subject meetings.

He described the support from the History department as “wonderful”. Pericles was especially impressed when the usual end of year History staff meeting was rescheduled to include him – an indication “that to me, showed what a valuable member they thought I would be to the future of the high school, and they listened to what I had to say…I felt very at home”. He said colleagues were sensitive to his needs, such as sharing of resources, and giving gentle reminders about being on task. He said, “that helps very much. They are very encouraging like that”. One experienced teacher who arrived at school the same time as Pericles has been especially helpful in the area of History teaching, and has become a close personal friend on staff. Such support has given Pericles confidence to decide that some curriculum advice was not useful: suggestions for assessment tasks were inappropriate for his low ability students, for example. Nevertheless, Pericles praised his History colleagues because they “really go out of their way to make sure that I know what’s happening – that I’m on target”.

Pericles has had input into the History department, since staff are always “open to new ideas”. His advice has been sought on matters relating to technology, because there are some teachers who are “very afraid of the internet still”. Because he has these skills, Pericles was able to make a significant contribution to the compilation of resources to the History units relating to Federation, the First World War and Second World War. Pericles said that his input into staff meetings had been welcomed – “I was able to make suggestions about – oh, we covered this at uni, or, oh look at this idea”.

Pericles has not yet told his colleagues about the core inquiry approach he learnt and practised whilst at university including during his practicum. At present he admits he is still “flying by the seat of his pants” but intends to raise this pedagogy in the future at the mid year History planning day. The kind of inquiry practiced by History teachers at the moment is the three-step process of questions; resources; and assessment, that is, students answer questions from a textbook or other resource and then report to the teacher. Pericles has found that students in his History class like an
exposition supported by stimulus material, usually with in-depth dot points, and then students quiz him about these dot points.

Pericles felt that there were a number of workshops in his university History methods course that prepared him well for teaching. The civics and citizenship workshops, for example, had been very helpful when teaching a unit on Federation. He said that he also benefited from the curriculum knowledge gained in the workshops, especially his knowledge of the syllabuses, and resources and how and where to access them. The same could be said about the core inquiry sequence. Having a knowledge base of inquiry pedagogy gave him an advantage because there were staff members who have come into HSIE teaching for the first time who do not understand inquiry learning. Even information he had considered not relevant at the time, he now realises has been useful.

Developing extra content knowledge and access to resources will help Pericles feel more confident about his ability to be a History teacher. He felt that so far he is the only one looking critically at his lessons to identify how he could improve. He wants to be at the school in five years time when he hopes to have some of the top classes where the ideas will be more abstract. To do this he will have to show that his classes do well in assessment, “that they improve as I do”. “I have to make the most of the classes I have now. I have to think what do I want the kids and I to get out of it?”

Conclusion
From Pericles’ point of view his first term as a teacher has been about surviving, building identity in the school, and looking forward to being established and accomplished. So far he has worked within “the system”: the existing subject departmental structure, school organisational context and student, staff and community cultures. The school has supported him in his transition from being a preservice to an inservice teacher through processes of active supervision and interested responses to his expressions of need. But, he has also been choosing and building a supportive framework for himself. He has identified people at the school with whom he wants to align academically and professionally, and he is drawing on contacts with former student colleagues at the same stage of professional development. He is developing a social network in the school and the local community. His understanding of History and his expectations developed through his study at university underpin the framework he is developing. In this he exhibits the “heightened reflexivity and attention to development of self-as-teacher” described by Conway and Clark (2003: 465).

While he has been supported in developing his perspectives and overviews by the way the school operates and with established teachers who have involved him across the school’s activities, Pericles has experienced a significant difference between the way the two departments he works in have supported his professional establishment and growth so far. Both have acknowledged his expertise and competency but in different ways, affecting Pericles’ sense of self-efficacy and resilience in relation to his work in the two different departments. On the one hand, the English group have on the basis of his graduate status, expected him to be competent and able, and consequently have left him to work independently. In contrast, the History group have provided for his independent work but have also actively sought his input in planning across classes with other teachers. By recognising and drawing on his existing expertise the History staff have supported and buoyed him during this early career phase so often characterised as difficult. Even though Pericles’ experience in this school has not been one of “sink or swim” and isolation, he has nonetheless been challenged by the realities and caused to change his expectations and practices. His success in positioning himself in the school and its work has been greatest where the acknowledgement and
affirmation of his potential as a teacher has involved providing him the opportunity to contribute to the knowledge and the resources of his more experience colleagues. Because he has been well supported, his concerns have involved more than himself such as in the first stage of the Fuller and Brown (1975) model. Even at this early stage of his career development Pericles exhibits concerns across all three of the stages identified by Fuller and Brown (1975). In line with Conway and Clark’s (2003) suggestion, Pericles’ aspirations and hopes have counterbalanced his concerns and fears, facilitating professional growth that involves both a journey inward and outward. The significant factors enabling this growth have been the mentoring that involved his self-perceived strengths, and the element of choice Pericles has exercised in developing supportive networks as part of the mentoring and induction process provided in his school.
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