

What Principals Think of Their Beginning Teachers

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Our aims were

- to find how satisfied principals were with the beginning teachers, they had chosen;
- to find out how beginning teachers might teach better in their first two years of teaching.
- what strengths, if any, did beginning teachers show?
- were there any common weaknesses colleges could help overcome?

IN DECEMBER 1991 we attempted to contact all the primary principals who had employed beginning teachers from the Auckland College of Education (ACE) since 1989. (Prior to 1989 principals were not directly responsible for whom they employed.) Our study is part of an on-going research project, earlier work having been published in *set* in 1990 and 1992.

The study had two parts, a questionnaire about which we report here, and individual interviews with 20 principals/ which will be published elsewhere.

The Questionnaire

We needed to ask about issues and questions of significance to those who are directly involved in teaching so that the research will be of interest and value to teachers.

Therefore we designed the questionnaire jointly with an advisory group of school principals.

The questions focused on three types of tasks teachers have to do and on personal qualities. Teaching is more than skills and techniques; it is, essentially, a moral and ethical undertaking. So in the section on personal qualities we included interest and concern for pupils, integrity and trustworthiness, personal commitment to teaching, and the willingness to learn and to seek help. There were also 14 items which assessed professional skills such as curriculum knowledge, planning and organisation, and classroom management. We also had one item on handling administrative tasks.

The first section of the questionnaire (quantitative) asked principals to rate their beginning teachers as 'outstanding' 'very satisfactory' 'satisfactory' 'showing some problems' or 'unsatisfactory' for each of the 22 items. There was also an opportunity for the principals to add their own observations and comments.

The second section (qualitative) asked them to comment on specific strengths and weaknesses shown by their beginning teacher which they considered could be attributed to their courses at college.

We knew of 228 schools who had employed our graduates in 1989 and 1990. Some had more than one. Seventy-eight percent of schools responded and we got reports from principals on 255 beginning teachers.

The Results

Table 1
Principals' Ratings of Beginning Teachers

	Outstanding	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Some Problems	Unsatisfactory
Personal qualities	33.7	43.4	17.5	4.6	0.8
Professional skills	22.7	43.4	25.0	7.5	1.4

Quantitative

Closer analysis showed that 14 percent were having some difficulties with behaviour management. Principals' comments indicated that they were aware that this is a complex task; 'All beginning teachers find managing a big group of kids a challenge' said one. Principals' ratings of the 22 attributes were then analysed separately.

Personal Qualities

Principals appreciated the personal characteristics of their beginning teachers most. Four out of six of the personal qualities we asked about were at the top of their lists. The next attributes were participation and co-operation, also reflecting personality.

However one personal attribute showed considerable deviation, and was significantly different from the others in this category: over 9 percent of beginning teachers were seen as having some interpersonal problems. Supporting comments from principals suggest that learning to get along with colleagues is difficult for a significant minority of beginning teachers. 'Teaching is good, but interpersonal skills and respect for fellows is lacking.' 'Needs to be more sensitive and aware of her place in the total scheme.' 'Needs to communicate with staff on a wider basis.' 'Has excellent future if keeps opinions to herself.' These were typical.

Several commented that while beginning teachers are understandably enthusiastic and eager to implement their ideas, their needs and wishes need to be balanced with the overall goals of the school, the resources available and the wishes of other teachers. As one put it 'The most important thing is that the trainees do not come into schools thinking that they have ideas and principles that take precedence over what the school wants.'

Professional Skills

The ability to create a positive learning environment is the most highly rated professional attribute of these beginning teachers. This is followed by a willingness to learn and to seek help. Classroom organisational skills are ranked next. Curriculum knowledge is the lowest ranked of the professional attributes. That is, principals feel that these young teachers know how to get the kids working but they need more knowledge of what to teach and how to teach it effectively.

Two of the professional attributes need comment: communication skills with colleagues were not good enough (also mentioned as a personality problem), but their attitudes to equity issues were better than perhaps expected.

Classroom management skills, basic administration, programming for special needs, and curriculum knowledge create the most challenge for beginning teachers, the principals say.

A minority (10 percent) of beginning teachers need to manage administrative tasks more effectively. Twenty principals indicated that this was an area which could be

improved. 'There is a lot of admin and we expect people to do it.' Several said their beginning teachers had difficulties with time-management, particularly meeting deadlines.

Qualitative Data

Overall Performance

Principals were invited to make an overall comment about the overall performance of their beginning teacher; 209 did so, and 132 were unreservedly positive, making comments such as: 'Her level of professionalism and depth of understanding is quite outstanding.' 'Outstanding teacher with the best class control in the school' 'Intuitive. Has the X factor. Motivated, sensitive and dedicated.' These, and many others, express high overall satisfaction.

Fifty principals made comments (on 20% of these young teachers) that, while generally positive, indicated that their beginning teachers had required assistance to develop. Some took a while to settle into their new roles but with guidance they developed into satisfactory teachers. This is reflected in comments such as: 'Most problem areas have been converted to *very satisfactory* by tutor guidance'; 'Took a while to mature'; 'Initially had trouble asking for help, but not now'; and 'Took until second year to fully participate - now an asset to the school'. Six percent identified some ongoing difficulties: 'Most satisfactory, but lacks wider vision and ability to accept criticism' and 'Mostly pleasing start, but some weaknesses in initiative'. Six commented on the well known tendency for new teachers to 'catch every disease going' and one mentioned 'tiredness due to health problems'. Some beginning teachers were seen as too intense about teaching: 'A super girl who needs to work a little less'; 'Needs to be less emotionally involved'; and 'Very capable teacher but is too idealistic and sets too high goals'.

Interestingly, several principals found that the well developed personal attributes of their beginning teachers masked teaching difficulties: for example, 'Some problems in basic planning and records which were hidden by bright personality'; and 'We have loved her, but it's personality getting her through'.

Several principals pointed out that their beginning teachers did not easily make the transition between being a student and becoming a teacher. Some beginning teachers were unprepared for the amount of 'sheer hard work' required from them at the beginning of the year and were shaken by having almost total responsibility for a group of children on an on-going basis. One beginning teacher 'initially suffered from not having the reality of the classroom impressed upon her.' Others started off well, but had problems sustaining the effort required.

What about the four students that principals rated as unsatisfactory overall? Remember that these beginning teachers, under the new system in New Zealand, had been appointed on the advice of the principal now writing about his or her own choice. One of them was assessed as being

'A disappointing teacher overall. Has had enormous help from a teacher whom I consider to be very highly skilled. Despite this she continues to disappoint'. (This person was appointed by an earlier principal.) Another appears to have refused to accept the philosophical values of the school and may have performed better in a school which was closer to his particular value system. The third principal felt that he had been 'misled by the college report.' As did the fourth. He characterised one of his two beginning teachers as 'a lazy, self indulgent, immature girl. She has not shaped up as a professional and should in my opinion not have graduated - the class has fallen further and further behind'.

Specific Strengths and Weaknesses Attributable to the College Programme

Fewer principals chose to answer this section, possibly because, as one principal said, 'Not being familiar with the Auckland College of Education curriculum it would be difficult to say what "caused" the performance'.

Principals mentioned mostly personal qualities such as enthusiasm, attitude towards children and youthful energy. It is unlikely that these qualities result from their college programme. Some said their teachers had 'an up-to-date focus on current trends in all curriculum areas'. Strengths in specific curriculum areas were rarely mentioned and certainly followed no pattern. Fourteen principals mentioned gaps in key curriculum areas, for example 'Lack of knowledge of programme content and resources'.

The area of most concern to principals was that of basic administration. Twenty principals pointed to weaknesses in carrying out the routine tasks (and time management skills) which are required of teachers. Assessment and evaluation of children's work and the need to monitor standards was mentioned by twelve principals. Report writing was another area mentioned.

Several principals acknowledged the critical importance of on-going support and guidance provided by tutor teachers. In some cases they felt that this had not been adequate.

Several felt that skills in communicating with parents needed development. One principal, in a country area, pointed out the need for confidentiality in social situations particularly in a small community.

Discussion

This research shows that by and large principals are very satisfied with their (own) choices of beginning teachers. They found personal qualities better developed than professional skills, which is not surprising: beginning teachers have had at least twenty years learning to be people, and only a short period learning to be teachers. There is also a possibility, although we have only anecdotal evidence for this, that some principals may select their beginning teachers on the basis of personal qualities, rather than professional skills. Personality is, after all, the more obvious in interviews.

Assistance

How can we assist beginning teachers to function better in the classroom? The study does not provide any definitive

answers but does point to some areas that could be developed.

In colleges we need to strengthen the development of effective professional skills. This must include a sound knowledge of curriculum, planning, assessment and evaluation skills, and communicating with parents. We may need to look more closely at the area of interpersonal skills.

The survey points to a need for college staff to prepare students for the complexities of teaching. This is a real challenge because becoming a teacher is a highly idiosyncratic process, dependent upon personal background and personality and upon fitting into an (as yet) unknown school context. A good way may be to assist teachers to analyse and talk about their own teaching with a view to improving the quality of learning in classrooms. Professional action involves 'making judgements in situations of unavoidable uncertainty.'

This study also raises questions about what Colleges of Education are supposed to teach. Most school administrators hold the view that effective teacher education prepares students to fit into the existing norms and practices of schools. This is the 'good employee' model - students are trained to slip unquestioningly into the teacher's role. Our principals' responses suggest that they prefer beginning teachers who accommodate easily to the particular culture of their school. A survey of secondary school principals in 1990 supports this view.

Certainly our principals' comments indicated that they had a low tolerance for beginning teachers who challenged current practices. Yet, questioning the apparent 'givens' of schools, can be a helpful impetus towards school development. Some beginning teachers obviously got 'offside' with their colleagues because of their outspokenness and what was seen as insensitivity to others. Fitting into 'the way we do things around here' is not always easy for a new staff member. It can be particularly difficult for beginners since they are juggling many new responsibilities at the same time as they negotiate a new role for themselves.

New Zealand principals expect to provide support and guidance to beginning teachers; their replies showed that. When young teachers do not get support and guidance becoming a teacher is inordinately more difficult, and can overwhelm. In the USA, 30% of beginning teachers fail to make it to their second year. Few of the beginning teachers in our survey were in this position. We hope this reflects both their teacher education and the guidance provisions built into the system.

There are definitely general needs and concerns about classroom management, teaching children with special needs, and working with parents. Structured programmes of assistance from outside the school during the first two years of teaching may need to be added to the education system.

The study identifies the need for the principals and tutor teachers to induct beginning teachers into their school's particular administrative ways. Pre-service (college) courses can give only generalised help. Young teachers need to cope effectively with 'the paperwork'.

Missing from this survey, of course, are the perceptions of the beginning teachers themselves. Research in progress should give an added dimension to our understanding of the transition between college and classroom.

Notes

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This research can be read in more detail in a report / *Principals' Assessments of Their Beginning Teachers*, published by Auckland College of Education and available from the authors.

A useful summary of research on beginning teaching, including comment on the gaps in that research is

Reynolds, A. (1992). What is competent beginning teaching? A Review of the literature. In *Review of Educational Research*, Spring Vol.62, No.1, pp.1-35.

Discussion section:

The full quotation 'making discretionary judgements in situations of unavoidable uncertainty' is from

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Interpersonal skills feature in the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* recently promulgated.

Auckland College of Education has attempted to address the issue of how to prepare students for the complexities of teaching with a new course in pedagogy at the 3rd year level.

The view of most school administrators, that effective teacher education prepares young teachers to 'fit in', is revealed in

Doyle, W. (1990). Themes in Teacher Education Research. In *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. R. Houston (Ed.), New York: Macmillan.

The confirming study of secondary school principals is

Stephenson/Land Stonehouse, G. (1990). *Teachers for your school in the 1990's. How can the Auckland College of Education train them better?* Unpublished manuscript, Auckland College of Education:

The USA figure of 30% of first-year teachers not continuing to teach is from

Bullough, R.V. (1989). *First Year Teacher: A Case Study*. New York: Teachers College Press.

The research in progress on teacher's college students' views and first-year teachers' views has begun publication. It is

Renwick, M. and Vize, J. (1990, 1991, 1992). *Windows on Teacher Education*. Wellington: NZCER.

See also

Renwick, M. (1993) *Innovation in Teacher Education*, Wellington: NZCER.

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