Original Research Study

Too Much, Too Soon?
The Multiple Roles and Identities of Newly Qualified Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract

As recent legislation and future policy directions in the early childhood sector emphasise the importance of teacher qualification, there is a need to examine how this may be impacting on teachers, and in particular on those who are newly qualified. This paper reports on research which examined the experiences of a group of eight newly qualified teachers in the 18 months following the completion of their initial teacher education. The notion of communities of practice, originally developed from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), was used as a means of viewing and analysing the teachers’ experiences. The findings of the study suggest that for all of the teachers in the study, being qualified resulted in an immediate change of identity, and with this new identity often came multiple roles and/or increasing levels of responsibility in their centre. The conflicting nature of these roles and identities meant that for some of the teachers in the study, very little support or acknowledgment of their newly qualified status was given to them in their first years of teaching. This paper concludes that further consideration and recognition of the experiences of newly qualified teachers in the early childhood sector is warranted to ensure that teachers get initial support, and that as a consequence, the retention of teachers is promoted.

Key Words: Teacher support, qualification, newly qualified teachers

Introduction

The beginning years of a teacher’s career are repeatedly referred to as being the most influential (Assuncao Flores, 2001; Lang, 1996; 2002). According to Brock and Grady (2001) the conditions under which new teachers carry out the first year have far-reaching implications and determine the effectiveness, attitude and behaviours that the teachers will develop and sustain for an entire career. Literature on teacher attrition and retention also highlights the importance of these ‘critical’ beginning years in determining whether a teacher will remain or leave the profession (McCormick & Brennan, 2001; Sumsion, 2002). Despite the numerous acknowledgments of the
importance of the years following initial teacher education within the international literature, there is a lack of research and literature concerning beginning teachers in New Zealand, and in particular, the early childhood sector (Cameron & Baker, 2004). From the small body of New Zealand research that has been undertaken, much has been conducted within primary and secondary school contexts, thereby making its generalisability to early education questionable. Apart from a study investigating early childhood training (Renwick & Boyd, 1995) and a small study regarding the experiences of a group of early childhood educators (Mahmood, 1996) there has been no specific attention given to the experiences of beginning early childhood teachers, nor comparative studies on whether the issues and experiences of early childhood teachers are similar or different to those experienced by school teachers.

This paper is drawn from the findings of a larger study (Aitken, 2005) on the experiences of a group of newly qualified early childhood teachers. The findings of this study suggest that many of the experiences and issues facing newly qualified early childhood teachers are different from those issues described in the general literature on school teachers. These experiences are being exacerbated by recent changes in legislation and the ever present demand for qualified teachers, particularly in major New Zealand cities such as Auckland where the study was conducted.

New funding requirements have moved the early education sector closer toward the directions outlined in the strategic plan Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002). Funding for teacher-led services for example is now determined by the proportion of hours covered by qualified and registered teachers. An additional support grant for provisionally-registered teachers also provides money to services to help fund the associated costs of gaining full teacher registration (Ministry of Education, 2005). What remains unclear is the impact these changes are having on newly qualified teachers.

In this study the term newly qualified teacher (NQT) has been adopted as an alternative to the commonly used term ‘beginning’ teacher. The recent history of many early childhood services in New Zealand has included staff who have not been required to hold a Diploma in Teaching qualification (with the exception of kindergarten teachers) and who have thus collectively represented a range of ‘levels’ of different qualifications and experience. A number of current newly qualified early childhood teachers have had experience within the sector before and/or during initial teacher education, and are therefore not ‘beginning’ or ‘new’ to teaching in the sense that is described in the general literature.

**Literature Review**

**Views about Learning**

Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory claims that the process of learning is not an individual one but one that is commonly shared, supported, and sometimes challenged by others in a setting. This perspective is a visible influence in the early childhood curriculum document Te Whaariki (Ministry of Education, 1996) and in the way
children’s learning is being understood and supported by teachers in the early childhood sector. Conversely, much of the beginning teacher literature reflects a reliance on developmental theory to explain teacher learning and development. Teachers are frequently viewed and described as individuals on their own hierarchical journey toward expertise, likened to particular stages in a journey from ‘beginning’ teacher to ‘experienced’ teacher. Viewing teachers’ adjustment and progression through a developmental lens is insufficient as it gives little attention to the context or setting in which teachers are placed, and the social and cultural influences that occur within that setting. Learning and teaching should be regarded as a process that is by its very nature social, cultural and situational. Just as early education curriculum and pedagogy has moved away from a reliance on viewing children’s learning as linear or sequential, so too should our view of teacher development.

New Zealand research undertaken by Hatherly (1997) and McLeod (2003) has shown that the organisational culture of an early childhood centre can be influential in shaping the learning environment for both children and staff. Inherent in the term culture is the opinion that certain things in groups are shared or held in common. These are referred to in the literature on organisational culture through terms such as norms, values, assumptions, behaviours, rituals, artefacts, and traditions (Hatherly, 1999, Schein, 1992). It is said that individuals working within a particular setting ultimately try and decipher the norms and assumptions that are operating within the setting in order to understand the expectations that exist.

Organisational culture is a relevant concept in furthering the examination of the context in which a teacher works, and the impact that this context has in shaping learning and experience. Although there is evidence of organisational culture being considered in some early childhood professional development initiatives and collaborative approaches with early childhood centres, there is a lack of substantive research on how the context-based qualities and organisational cultures of early childhood centres impact on the experiences and development of newcomers such as newly qualified teachers.

**Communities of Practice**

The notion of communities of practice provides an alternative to understanding learning by viewing learning as social participation in the practices of a community. In this sense, the term participation refers not just to engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998). Participating in a work team, for example, is both a form of action, and a form of belonging. Thus our participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are, and how we interpret what we do.

A community of practice is a node of mutual engagement that becomes progressively looser at the periphery, with layers going from core membership in the middle, to extreme peripherality. The interaction of all these levels affords multiple and diverse opportunities for learning. Different participants contribute and benefit differently, depending on
their relations to the enterprise and the community (Wenger, 1998, p.118).

For Lave and Wenger (1991) initial participation in the communities of practice is legitimately peripheral and over time the newcomer moves centrally towards full participation as they gain knowledge and learn the community’s customs and rituals. More established members are also seen to play a key role in helping the newcomers to learn the practices that count in the community. Consequently, the knowledge produced is built on and tied to the ongoing history of practice in the community.

**Mentoring and Support**

Traditionally the newly qualified teacher is regarded as a novice - someone who requires support from external support systems and from other teachers. Mentoring is an example of a workplace learning practice where a more experienced individual provides support for a less experienced learner.

The functions of traditional mentoring practice rely on the notion of a ‘hierarchy of expertise’- the presence of a more qualified experienced teacher who can assume the role of mentor to the less experienced novice. Ideally the mentor and novice teacher are also located at the same site so that the benefits of the relationship may be realised. However, the varying qualification status of teachers in the early childhood sector may make these traditional or preferred mentoring practices unlikely, or at least problematic.

Increasing expectations and requirements linked to teacher qualification in the early childhood sector (Ministry of Education, 2002) means that the number of newly qualified teachers is expected to grow. Furthermore, the proportion of recently qualified teachers in ‘need’ of mentoring and support may outnumber the ‘would-be’ mentor teachers who are traditionally also qualified and more experienced. The opportunities for mentoring are clearly challenged if the human resources required are not at hand.

**Support of Newly Qualified Teachers in New Zealand**

Comparatively to other countries around the world, the induction and support of newly qualified primary and secondary school teachers in New Zealand is considered to be well-funded and it has been presented as a model for other countries to consider (Clement, 2002). Currently in New Zealand, primary and secondary schools are eligible to receive an additional staffing entitlement of 0.2 (equivalent to one day per week) for the first year of a permanent teacher’s employment. This allowance has recently been extended to 0.1 for a second year for secondary teachers, and a new tutor teacher allowance in the primary sector (Cameron, 2004).

According to the Ministry of Education (2003), the proportion of early childhood teachers who qualify for registration is expected to increase to 50 percent by 2007 as a result of initiatives outlined in the Strategic Plan. Funding initiatives are now available in the form of the Support Grant for Provisionally Registered Teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005), introduced this year to assist qualified early childhood teachers in undertaking provisional teacher registration. It is currently unclear how effectively it is
being used to support NQT and it will require monitoring to ensure its effectiveness. Financial assistance toward the teacher registration process will not necessarily equate to release time for newly qualified early childhood teachers or result in improvements to practices of support within individual centres.

Method

Research Questions

The study’s research questions most relevant to this paper are:

- What does the identity shift from student teacher to qualified teacher look like for different newly qualified early childhood teachers?
- What issues surrounding the experiences of newly qualified teachers are unique or particularly relevant for early childhood education?

The Participants and their Involvement

The participants were eight newly qualified teachers who had completed their initial teacher education at the end of 2003. All of the participants were women. Collectively the participants represented different types of initial teacher education backgrounds (including pre-service, field-based, distance models of teacher education). On commencement of the study the eight teachers were employed in a range of early childhood centre-based services, namely, kindergartens and childcare centres (both privately owned and community-based). In New Zealand, early childhood services cater for children up to school starting age at five years. Many childcare services include infants and toddlers whereas kindergartens have typically taken three to five year olds only although more are now accepting toddlers.

Methods and Data Analysis

Multiple methods of data collection were used in order to establish different views of events and in-depth investigation over time, and to respond to the limitations of each single method. The participants were involved in: four focus groups of two hours duration; an individual interview of one hour (at the end of the first year of study); and documentary sources in the form of representations, records and flexible journals (see Aitken, 2005 for further detail). Given the qualitative and interpretive approach to the research, data analysis was closely tied to data collection, allowing the researcher and the participants to jointly respond to the data. Two principle types of coding were used to sort and analyse the data in to themes, categories and patterns. These were elective coding and open coding, as described by Goodwin and Goodwin (1996). Elective coding can be likened to grounded theory, where new and emerging theories are constructed from the data itself, rather than from a top down approach conducted at the end of data collection. Open coding involved the general categorising and comparison of the information from each focus group, in addition to noting themes individual
themes from focus groups, interviews and flexible journals. During the research, participants were also asked for their reactions to emerging themes and relationships

Methodology

An interpretive and qualitative framework was employed in this study. This meant that rather than seeking to understand the teachers’ experiences from any objective or impartial standpoint, an attempt was made to understand and reveal their multiple experiences and realities. The reliability and validity of the data for example, was not achieved by an attempt to reveal generalised truths about all NQT’s, but by attempting to make meaning from the group of teachers’ collective and individual stories. A sole reliance on the researcher to tell and interpret the findings was resisted. Alternatively, the metaphor of the researcher as storyteller (Wolcott, 1994) or choreographer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) was employed, whereby the findings were written as a narrative account containing individual and collective voices. The study opted to reflect a participatory view of learning through the consideration of sociocultural theory, organisational culture in the workplace, and the view of learning as participation in a ‘community of practice’ (COP). This alternative view of learning was employed not only as a methodological and theoretical underpinning, but as a means of understanding and analysing the teachers’ experiences.

Ethical Issues

Due to the nature of the research topic ethical issues of confidentiality and the disclosure of sensitive information were most likely to occur within the group situation. Individual interviews and flexible journals provided alternative methods which allowed the teachers in the study to reveal any personal experiences or responses which they did not want to disclose in a group. Secondly a collective agreement to retain confidentiality within the group was developed with all of the participants at the beginning of the first focus group and was then sent to each participant to sign and return. Data deriving from individual interviews, journals and focus group discussions did not use the teachers’ names - only initials of pseudonym names were used. Any detailed or identifying information about the centre where the teachers’ worked was also edited or omitted in an effort to protect the identity of the teachers in the study.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study showed the experiences of the group of NQT’s to be varied and very dependent on the context of the local community of practice (early childhood centre) in which they worked. Changing identities, multiple roles and responsibilities, and workplace conditions were the key themes which emerged from the teachers’ stories and group conversation.
Changing Identities

Regardless of the form of initial teacher education the teachers had completed, their level of experience and/or whether or not they were ‘new’ to the centre in which they worked, having a recognised teaching qualification seemed to immediately result in an altered perception of themselves as teachers, including the belief that others also viewed them differently. Thus, being qualified was equated with forging a new identity as a professional teacher or respected ‘expert’ in the field – someone who had knowledge to guide and support the programme and others.

Changes of identity were described in both positive and negative terms by the teachers. For one teacher for example, being qualified meant that she was more confident to change and extend her level of participation and contribution within the centre.

I’ve had to step up, and my role has become more ‘out there’ is one way for me to describe it…The other thing with this shift from student to qualified teacher would be my confidence with speaking to parents as well. I’m a lot more confident, where as before, I would have just stood back and let someone else do it (laughs).

For another teacher, qualification caused her to believe that she was being sought after by employers because of what she could ‘offer’ a centre rather than her suitability as a teacher/employee. She also expressed a greater sense of accountability and responsibility for a centre’s practices, regardless of her level of participation or support for these.

When I left my job I struggled with it (being qualified). I didn’t know whether the requests for me to stay were because I was a good teacher or because I provided the centre with a higher funding…for such precious people, we’re treated the worst. We feel guilty for having a holiday, or being sick…Personally, I also feel guilty if a centre isn’t running how it should be or how I think it should, even if it isn’t my responsibility.

Despite the varying experiences and levels of responsibility amongst the teachers in the study, they also identified as ‘novices’ or newcomers in many respects, believing that their adjustment and status as NQT’s meant that they still required support and further learning. A desire for feedback was mentioned by a number of the teachers who believed that this was one of the key ways in which they could have been better supported in their centres. One teacher remarked:

People are just assuming that I know that I’m doing alright…I’m not getting any feedback at all from anyone except the children. It’s been like four months now, or five months and I kind of just want to know whether or not I’m improving or whether there are places I could work on…I feel like stuck, still floundering around.
Multiple Roles and Responsibilities

Whilst the teachers were able to identify areas in which they felt a ‘novice’ they also articulated their contrasting role as ‘experts’. According to their stories, most of the teachers described having multiple roles and levels of responsibility in their centres. This often meant being required to work longer hours (in order for the centre to meet the regulatory and licensing requirements), answering or responding to enquiries whilst ‘on the job’, and supporting other adults in the centre (including unqualified staff, staff in-training, relieving teachers, and sometimes, student teachers). One teacher remarked:

> I was on a high for a while but yeah, it came down pretty fast with work because (laughs), they changed my hours too…so I was opening and closing and it was stressful.

Some of the NQT’s in the study were in positions of responsibility formalised by their employers whilst others were not. Regardless of their position, supporting other adults seemed to be a key feature of the work and practices that many of the teachers described. All of the teachers in the study who were employed in childcare centres described having to support others. The two teachers who were employed in kindergartens did not experience having to support others to the same degree (principally due to the absence of unqualified staff) although they did mention providing collegial support to relieving teachers or student teachers at times. The teachers varied in their level of acceptance and tolerance of these responsibilities. A number of the teachers did not express resentment at being expected and/or required to supporting others, even when they believed they were being inadequately supported.

> …so I am supporting three of them (staff) in my area…one girl she is finishing her course at the end of the year, but she comes quite often to ask “what should I do? How should I do my assignment?” all those things. So I feel as if I’m supporting all that time but I still need support myself.

> …new staff are looking for reassurance from us but I am not sure about my job. Maybe everything will be fine. I am taking more responsibility and boosting up everyone to cheer up and (by saying that) changes are normal in early childhood education sector. I am also guiding them in their study which is helping them to face the changes and build confidence in senior staff…

> …I can go a whole day or go to lunch time and actually haven’t sat down with a child and done anything.

Some of the other teachers did express resentment and frustration at the expectations being placed on them and the lack of support and acknowledgement they were receiving from others in their centre. Their comments reflect their awareness of the demand for qualified early education teachers and the recent changes to regulations regarding the qualification of the ‘person responsible’.
…the people are looking for Diploma people and saying “yes they have got what we need”, but maybe the people employing them don’t realise that they (also) still need support, and they’re chucked in the deep end basically. They’re suddenly given responsibility and they have staff under them that need that support but they haven’t actually considered how they can support them, and get support themselves’.

…when I’m at work in my position, I’ve got people (children/families) who do half days and they’ll come in and want to pay at 12 o’clock when I’ve got 15 plus children wanting to have lunch and then I’ve got staff wanting to go for lunch and then we’ve got a child who needs to have a nappy changed and all this stuff happening. Yeah, it is totally different, you can’t just do one thing, you can’t just be on the floor and be a teacher…

**Workplace Conditions**

The findings of this study concur with other researchers who describe the importance of contextual conditions surrounding the first years and the significance it has on a teacher’s adjustment (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Mahmood’s (1996) study reported that the differences in experiences by the teachers were seen to relate to the different types of early childhood centre and the working conditions of each. This is a reminder of the diversity of services within the early childhood sector in New Zealand and how they may impact differently on the individual experiences of newly qualified teachers.

Workplace conditions appear to be a powerful variable in the process of being a teacher. In this study, the nature and culture of each centre/community of practice was different with regard to whether regular support was provided to the NQT’s, and the expectations placed on the teachers varied across services and individual centres. Those teachers who worked in childcare centres reported having considerably more responsibility and stress than those who worked in kindergartens.

I think the consistency (in a kindergarten) is probably a lot higher than in a day care type centre. You’ve got your consistent staff who know those routines and it’s easy for a newcomer to come in and watch and think “Oh yeah that’s where that goes or this is how it’s done”. Where you’ve got a change over of staff in (childcare) centres. One person will do it one way one week, the next week that person’s gone and you could watch somebody else, and they’d do it completely different the next week.

The existence of a ‘hierarchy of expertise’ (having qualified/more experienced teachers in the setting) was one feature of kindergartens that seemed to better promote mentoring/support opportunities for the NQT, as well as the view that kindergarten teachers had more time in their day for professional shared dialogue. Making generalisations about specific services is not constructive, however it is vital to know what the features of services that either promote or limit support opportunities to newly
qualified teachers look like, particularly if future support systems are to be developed. Aspects of organisational culture were also alluded to in the teachers’ comments and explanations of the practices in their centres.

I think it depends on people’s personalities…like we could write all of that down (our philosophy) in our CV’s, but it doesn’t mean that we’re going to fit into the centre we are applying to

I guess that would be like when I was at (name of centre). The staff used to gossip, including the boss and I never got in on that and I was never part of the team

I would have stayed a newcomer the whole time I was there, and I was there eight months…and that was partly why I left because I was never part of a team or part of the unit or anything, but then going to (name of centre currently employed) I was straight back up the top because I was the first one on board, I guess.

These comments highlight the importance given by the teachers to team work and belonging to a team, and demonstrate that the level of the teacher’s participation and resulting perceptions of membership in their COP/centre were seen be influenced by other organisational practices and workplace conditions.

Membership in a Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of a legitimate peripheral participant is founded on the premise that the full members or ‘old timers’ in the community of practice who take the role of guiding the newcomer are more experienced and qualified than the newcomers and that on that basis, they serve as appropriate role models. This is also similar to the position of the mentor teacher (Clement, 2002; McCormick & Brennan, 2001).

For some of the NQT in the study the equivalent ‘old timers’ or existing members in the centre had less formal knowledge than they did. The qualifications and roles of the members of the community of practice varied and these differences created very different balances of power, knowledge and expectations of practice for the NQTs. It is assumed that holding a recognised teaching qualification is an indicator of membership in the wider (global) early childhood community of practice, however for the newly qualified teacher who entered their centre as a newcomer, a teaching qualification did not necessarily help their movement from the peripheral to the centre of the community of practice as Lave and Wenger suggest through the term ‘legitimate peripheral participant’.

The newly qualified early childhood teachers in the study instead represented a number of roles according to Lave and Wenger’s descriptions: newcomers; legitimate peripheral participants; or full members in the COP in which they worked. In some instances the NQT’s elected to be non-participants in the practices of the COP by leaving the centre.
and finding new employment. What constituted membership and how this was defined varied between each early childhood centre. A person’s level of experience/history in the centre, having a shared philosophy, working full-time, and being involved in decision-making were some of the features of full members described by the teachers.

**Issues Unique to the Early Childhood Sector**

The findings show that the newly qualified teachers were engaged in a wide range of practices and responsibilities, many of which were additional to the role of educating and caring for young children. In fact, there was very little reference made by some of the teachers to their practice and engagement in teaching, despite this being the key focus of what any initial teacher education qualification ‘prepares’ teachers for. These experiences, coupled with current legislation and regulatory changes in the sector clearly impact on the organisational culture of a centre, the relative ‘status’ of the NQT in relation to the centre’s existing members, the ability and expertise of those already in the centre to guide and support the NQT, and the ability of the NQT to influence future norms and practices.

Responsibilities and practices such as supporting unqualified colleagues, relievers and student teachers, and answering phone calls and enquiries are not typical to the practices of newly qualified school teachers as described in the literature. It is unlikely that a ‘beginning’ school teacher, for example, would identify issues raised in this study such as being responsible for the support of other colleagues, or being required to answer phone calls and enquiries whilst engaged in the practice of working with children. Working directly alongside other teachers and adults is also a strong characteristic of working in an early childhood centre and is in contrast to the ‘egg crate environment’ described of school teachers and their physical isolation from one another (Richardson, 2003).

Many early childhood services are currently experiencing a lack of qualified teachers, thereby representing a community of practice starkly different than the ones described by Lave and Wenger or the literature outlining positive induction and support models for NQTs. In sharp contrast these centres more accurately depict the features of ‘novice-orientated cultures’- school cultures characterised by a lack of experienced teachers that were seen to result in new teachers feeling pressurised and uncertain (Kardos, Moore Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001). These feelings were reflected by the teachers in this study and have ongoing implications for teachers’ continuing learning and development and their desire to remain in the profession (Sumsion, 2002).

**Conclusion**

Examples of release time and induction/mentoring practices in schools in New Zealand reflect the importance of on-going learning and situated learning and the recognition that newly qualified teachers need on-going support. Early childhood centres would greatly benefit from similar approaches. However, the context and learning environment of the early childhood centre and its teachers is different in a number of ways. To be effective, induction and support programs would need to reflect and respond to these
contextual differences. The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) was a useful framework for understanding the experiences of the participants from a social standpoint. Viewing the early childhood centre as a local community of practice helps to give recognition to the context in which teachers work, and the significant impact this context (and the people and practices within it) can have on whether a teacher feels adequately supported or not. However as the stories of the participants demonstrate, the current complexities of the early childhood environment raise some challenges to the trajectories of membership (from the periphery to the centre) that Lave and Wenger describe.

Many early childhood centres also currently struggle to reflect the ‘hierarchy of expertise’ evident in the mentoring and communities of practice literature. This would mean that any formalised support methods may need to occur outside and across local COP (centres) until such time when a hierarchy of expertise exists across the different early childhood services and centres. Alternatives such as peer mentoring or beginning teacher support groups may also be a more realistic means of achieving support and guidance without the reliance of a more experienced teacher in the setting. An attempt to cultivate the principles inherent in communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002), may also be a useful point of reference for the development of any continuing support and induction process. The development of a formal support system for NQTs is vital for the early childhood sector in the lead-up to 2012 and beyond, particularly in a climate where NQTs are finding themselves in positions of responsibility/leadership as a direct result of qualification. It begs the final question for the early childhood sector: Will our current newly qualified teachers be the short-term casualties for the sector’s (anticipated) longer term gains?

References


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