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**Case Studies of first year teaching graduates: An analysis of mentoring practices undertaken in rural educational settings in relation to teaching literacy**

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## **Introduction**

Beginning teachers need a supportive environment, in which they have someone who will describe, negotiate and discuss practice in an atmosphere of respect, trust and acceptance of democratic values. However, what if they are in an environment with limited staff resources? Is it possible for them to receive the same assistance and support as those in larger and more fully staffed schools? Where do their mentors come from and how are they chosen? Can the key strategies identified by VIT (2004) be carried out? Also do the beginning teachers have the resources available as they grapple with their first year of literacy? Can they break down the barriers between themselves and more experienced staff so that they are able to disclose their problems with a staff member who may be their superior in status and/or have many more years experience? These are the questions we sought to answer in our study.

Currently, the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) provisionally registers beginning teachers for one year and during this year requests that schools provide

a year-long school-based induction program, which provides teachers entering the profession with a mentor and opportunities to consolidate their professional knowledge and skills (Education and Training Committee, 2005 p.225)

Mentoring is not a new idea in assisting new employees to settle into a workplace, and is used in industry as well as educational forums. Consequently many critical examinations by researchers have already taken place. Research has been published within Australia and internationally covering many aspects of mentoring (see Ramsey, 2000; Manuel 2005; Schuck Segal, Anderson, Balding 2000). Recommendations emphasising positive attributes and highlighting the importance of providing support to beginning teachers have been accepted widely by the educational community. As Gore, Williams, and Ladwig (2006, pg. 1) state “The induction of early career teachers has been widely acknowledged for decades as critical to their success.”

According to VIT (2004) the principles of effective mentoring contain the following components: the partnership should be a professional, two way relationship that addresses the

graduate's professional learning needs and concerns; the graduate's learning should be supported in positive and effective ways; there should be regular meetings for both parties to challenge and share critical and professional knowledge. Research findings also point to the importance of good mentoring in a number of aspects in the beginning teachers' year. For instance, mentoring is seen as vital in assisting in teacher retention and attrition (NCTAF, 2003), also to help and guide in managing workloads and planning, (Western Australia College of Teaching 2003); to assist in learning that theory and practice are very different experiences and need a variety of skills (Gore, Williams and Ladwig 2006); that pedagogy knowledge plays a vital role in competence (Gore, Williams and Ladwig 2006) and to assist with the complex procedures of monitoring and assessment of children (Cherednichenko, 2003).

Why, therefore, choose a study that is already established on a very strong research foundation? The idea to research beginning teachers within a specific environment arose from the curiosity to see if the students from the Graduate Diploma Course in Education (P-12) La Trobe University, (Albury-Wodonga Campus) encountered any specific or different experiences related to literacy teaching once they entered a rural education environment. According to Stokes et al (1999) there are three levels of concern about education in rural and remote Australia: provision, access and quality. We wondered if we could apply these three concerns to our study in terms of beginning teachers and their interactions with their mentors.

Two questions became a reflective element of our research project: firstly, did the course prepare teachers so that they entered the rural schools focused and confident in literacy teaching and secondly were the assigned rural school mentors able to assist in the same capacity as the department regulations specified?

From our experiences in practicum and the field, came a proposition that the surrounding rural environment may influence the mentoring process and therefore findings may differ from the majority of research projects which were carried out in more populated schools and environments. The beginning teachers were in an environment that could be considered remote from resources, in-servicing and mentor choices. The researchers acknowledge that this paper reflects upon a very small sample of beginner teachers, which was intended to explore initial assumptions before moving to a larger study. Recommendations from the report on the *Inquiry into the Suitability of Pre-service Teacher Training in Victoria* points to

the “importance of graduate induction and mentoring” (ETC 2005, p. 218) and specify a number of mentoring programs that should be established within the State of Victoria to ensure all beginning teachers are supported in their first critical year. The recommendations are general to all aspects of teaching approaches and teacher professionalism, but this study is limited to a focus on the mentoring partnership set out by the Victorian Teaching guidelines (2004) in relation to literacy learning and teaching.

Our study occurs at a time when the National *Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* (DEST 2005) has placed emphasis on the teacher’s “excellent knowledge of the domain” (DEST 2006, p. 14) and that the teachers’ “personal and professional characteristics ... appear to be key factors associated with notable gains in students’ learning outcomes” (DEST 2006, p. 35). In setting the context for mentoring, the Education and Training Committee (2005) stress that

It is improbable that any single pre-service education course is able to cover all the skills and knowledge contemporary teachers require, let alone provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to master them all (ETC 2005, p. 217).

The common understanding is that the graduating teacher still requires practical application of theoretical knowledge once they are employed. The Committee also focuses on the importance of induction and mentoring to continue the learning trajectory.

The National Inquiry Committee (DEST 2006) acknowledges new teachers encounter a steep learning trajectory within the first year. In their first teaching role they are likely to need socialisation into the culture of the school, and the ‘way of doing things’. They need a thorough knowledge of protocols and processes in all aspects of school life, as well as understanding how to achieve personal growth and levels of satisfaction in their profession. If all of these aspects are to be addressed adequately, the beginning teachers require “collegial support (that goes) beyond the role of mentoring” (Cherednichenko, 2003). Further, the recommendations arising from the ‘National Inquiry of the Teaching of Reading’ (2005), suggest that literacy teaching is becoming more complex and systematic. These changes have the potential to expand the role of a mentor to include, not only issues of teaching and learning, but also issues of management which raises questions about the knowledge base of rural mentors, particularly when newly qualified teachers may have a more up-to-date

theoretical understanding of new pedagogies and new literacies. How might these issues be addressed in small rural schools?

## **Methodology**

### **Making Contact**

The task of finding participants was not easy as graduates cited the heavy first year load as a main barrier to assisting in the research. We decided to restrict our pilot study to three graduates from the 2005 cohort of Graduate Diploma in Education (P-12) in order to find emerging themes that could be studied in a larger project.

We chose a case study approach as it was considered to be in harmony with the situation of a current phenomenon for which observations could be used to supplement information gained through interviews. To the researchers it was a brief snap shot in time of the context, purpose and nature of the research (Wiersma and Jurs, 2005). It was also in line with the low profile needed if we were to consider the well-being and the stress levels of the participants.

Initially phone conversations and introductory letters were the main sources of information about the study. We were anxious not to over burden our subjects who might leave the research if too much was expected of them. The beginning teachers were asked to refer to a number of sources to assist their memory of earlier work, for example: graduate teacher journals, reflective notes in connection to their teaching portfolios, teaching logs of programs and school policy documents in relation to mentoring and induction.

### **Method of Data Collection**

For consistency, one researcher visited the schools during terms 2, 3 and 4 and conducted audio-taped informal interviews. Each participant had two interviews lasting from one to two hours. Participants were asked to reflect on aspects of the mentoring process, the school's contextual factors that assisted or hindered progress and their general feeling about their teaching methodologies within a literacy focus. The informal discussions took place within the school environment, although one interview did take place within a subject's home. The

visit to the schools allowed the researcher to become familiar with the schools' setting and to share experiences within the teacher's new world.

Information was gained from the beginner teacher's perspective. The only other discussions were with the principals to gain permission for the research, to inform in relation to procedure and in establishing a context. The new teachers were encouraged to use notes, journals, logs and policy documents to jog memories and to assist with the interviews but in most cases interviewees referred to items or resources in their own classrooms or used displays or samples of the children's work.

### **The Study's Participants**

#### Peta

Before agreeing to participate, Peta questioned about the amount of work that would be needed. She had had a difficult start to the year and also had a lot of changes in her personal life (a new marriage and a death in the immediate family). Once she had been assured of the workload and the amount of time that the research would take, she was most accepting and helpful. The school that Peta had joined in a temporary capacity (a one year appointment) was the biggest of the three rural schools. Enrolments at this time were just over 100 children. There were six teachers in the school with Peta taking years 3 and 4, a total of 25 children. The children came from the small country town in which the school was situated and from the surrounding farming community.

#### Elle

Elle was in the smallest of the schools. The rolls showed an enrolment of 25 students. The school had two teachers, a principal and a classroom teacher, Elle. A library van visited the school once a week and an extra teacher was employed on a part-time basis to give help with the teaching commitments. The school was set in a very small community with only a few houses, a storage shed and a general store in view from the school's front gate. Elle from the very first was happy to assist in the research. She showed confidence and a great delight in being in an occupation that, to her, was a life ambition. She seemed settled at the school and

very aware of her responsibilities as a teacher. Her class was a composite class of grades 4, 5 and 6 with children of very mixed ability in a class of 18.

Rhonda

Rhonda responded positively to being involved in the research. Her school was set within a steep valley with the children coming from the small town and from the surrounds which contained farming and forestry industries. The school's enrolment was 38 with Rhonda teaching the preps to year 2. She was one of three teachers, with the principal having a limited teaching role. She had 20 children in her class.

### **Analysis**

The taped conversations were transcribed and checked for accuracy by the researchers. Both the transcriptions and the field notes were organized according to the emerging themes and any commonalities and/or contrasts. The following themes were discussed and examined: the process of selection of mentors; school policies relating to mentoring; school practices relating to literacy; school and community support; stress factors for the beginning teachers; leadership; and the effectiveness of pre-service teacher training for literacy teaching.

### **Findings**

The insights gained through our research are grouped under the six emerging themes, stated above.

#### **SELECTION OF MENTORS**

All three beginning teachers had experienced teachers within their own school allocated as mentors. Elle's mentor was the Principal and the only other full time teacher. Elle was not assigned a buddy or a mentor from an outside environment. Elle acknowledged that the principal was suitable as a mentor as she had a great deal of literacy knowledge to impart and understood the school and community well.

Rhonda's main mentor was, like Elle's, the Principal of her school. In addition, an extra mentor from another school was assigned by the Principal. This second mentor was an

experienced teacher from a larger school in Rhonda's home town, 20 minutes away. The Principal wanted to ensure that unbiased advice and opinions could be gained if needed. However, as a member of a three-teacher school, Rhonda regarded everyone as a mentor. All had undergone mentor training, and were competent in the teaching of literacy.

Peta was allocated a senior teacher at her school who had actually taught her in primary school. She surmised that this teacher was probably assigned the role, rather than volunteering for it, and he had no experience as a mentor. With three beginning teachers at the school, mentor choices were limited to the only experienced teachers left. Not one of the mentors had undertaken training, which had been offered early in the year, but no-one was able to make the long journey. They were able to attend at a later date. Peta was not informed about the information on the VIT website, which may have assisted both her and her mentor.

All three beginning teachers mentioned de facto mentors or buddies on which they relied. These were husbands, parents, other beginning teachers and fellow graduates. The majority of these de facto mentors, had no literacy teaching experience, however, and just acted as sounding boards.

### **SCHOOL POLICIES**

All three interviewees admitted to not having read school policies in regard to mentoring, though both Rhonda and Peta felt that their principals had indicated that policies were on a future agenda. According to the three beginning teachers, none of the schools had written policies about mentoring. All three graduates relied on Beginner Teachers' Meetings and Beginner Teachers' professional development to inform them of policy issues in relation to induction and mentoring.

Two of the three were most supportive of their schools' induction methods. The third interviewee admitted that the induction could have been smoother, but that improvements for mentoring had been mooted by the principal.

The three participants of this study could not find any documentation about literacy policies and practices and, therefore, relied heavily on assistance from their mentors.

## **SCHOOL COMMUNITIES**

Two of the interviewees talked about the tremendous support with literacy that came from parents and the surrounding community. As the teachers were known to be ‘beginners’ many parents and staff were sympathetic and often unasked support was forthcoming. Reliance on parents who had teacher training, casual staff or part time staff was evident during the taped interviews. Advice given seemed to arise on an ad hoc and needs basis. Peta admitted that at times she was reluctant to ask advice from her official mentor as she felt that maybe ‘she should have known that’. All three graduates acknowledged the literacy support that came from casual or part time staff. In one case, the whole literacy program was initiated and co-developed by a part time staff member and the graduate.

What is most evident from the transcripts is the overwhelming school culture that presses down on the beginning teachers (Zeichner and Gore 1990). The beginner teachers all considered that they entered the school with knowledge of methodology, pedagogy and curriculum in literacy, but the overwhelming and encompassing day to day happenings, routines and priorities seem to dominate. In Rhonda’s case, it was the nature of the prep children: ‘I had no idea that their attention span is so short ... having lots of frequent activities’. For Elle, it was having a student with learning disabilities and ‘having to think on your feet’. Peta was in the situation where her new classroom was being converted from a library and the working bee was in full flight. Peta admits to ‘just trying to get by and not knowing what resources were available at first’. She was finally directed to resources later in the year.

## **STRESS FACTORS**

All three interviewees agreed that they had experienced stress in teaching literacy. The factors that caused this stress were similar in all cases: managing student behaviour, managing workloads, planning, assessment and the tremendous amount of paper work (WACT, 2003). As Elle stated, it was ‘absolutely overwhelming the sheer amount of stuff expected ... I had no comprehension of the amount of paperwork’. Two of the three teachers had extra duties due to the size of the school, including yard duty everyday. There were many committees to sit on, including school council, and despite the VIT (2004) recommendations of beginner teachers having an extra planning allowance, this was not always possible in a small rural environment. If the Principal is also the relieving teacher, which was the case in all three

schools, any other commitments and emergency calls could clash with beginning teacher relief. All of these factors impinged on the graduates' commitment to literacy.

Within the literacy component, stress arose from not having sufficient documentation about the children to assign group work, and to know each child's work level, in order to put management strategies into place. All three, in time, received assistance from mentors and in one case from a regional literacy co-ordinator. However, it was the knowledge of what should be done, and the limited amount of time that seemed available to do it, that caused their concern. Underlying many contexts were issues in management and student discipline (WACT 2003). Peta spent some time reflecting on transferring her literacy learning from university to the practical situation: 'Being at uni, during it, you do not realise how important it is. So you may not take it in as much'.

Beginning teachers' meetings and conferences were seen to play an important role in alleviating stress. As Peta stated, 'It just made you realise that your feelings were normal and some people feelings ...oh that's all right, I'm glad I'm not that bad'. However all three teachers had to travel long distances to attend any professional development sessions and though they may be tired after school, the beginning teachers often elected to travel one hour to one and a half hours to get to them.

## **LEADERSHIP**

It is evident in this research that leadership can play a vital role in settling and establishing new teachers in small rural schools (VIT 2004). Two of the three Principals put aside a great deal of their time in the first few weeks to assist, support and team teach in literacy. This gave their beginning teachers much needed help. These teachers had a positive start in comparison with the third interviewee, who did not receive the same amount of assistance. Her mentor had a full teaching load and was building relationships with his own new class. He was not allocated time by his Principal to assist the new member of staff, and the Principal did not consider it was necessary to check that the system was working.

## **THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY**

All three interviewees felt that the university prepared them for the literacy theory in teaching, as they expressed confidence in pedagogy and knowledge of the curriculum. However, the interviewees had some suggestions about practical issues such as more practice in running

records and more hands on activities. Peta wanted a lot more experience in actually putting theory into practice. It is possible, though, that solely the school environment can provide this kind of practical experience.

Resources were vital for all three interviewees and in all three cases the resources in the school determined the basis of their classes' literacy programs. Though the university course may have covered a variety of programs, the beginning teachers chose from what was available in their classroom, the school resource room or the library even if they had never been introduced to the resource before. In two cases the mentors guided their mentorees in choice of resource material and in the third case there was a casual staff member to advise.

## **Discussion**

Commonalities were evident between the information in the initial literature review and our study. For instance the *Beginning Teachers Research Report* conducted by the Western Australia College of Teaching (2003), identified several factors that were common among the beginning teachers that were in their study, such as managing student behaviour and workloads, conducting assessment and planning and finding appropriate resources. All three teachers from our studies named these factors in connection with establishing their literacy program and as part of their initiation.

Rhonda and Elle had amazingly similar experiences in a number of areas, particularly in the support supplied by their mentors' literacy experience and knowledge. Both of these graduates were mentored by their principals, although this did not seem to be a difficulty. As stated by VIT (2004, p.5) 'Leadership support for induction is an essential component for success'. In both cases the relationships allowed certain degrees of initiative and incentive. Both Principals were well informed with up to date information in regard to literacy and were highly regarded by their mentorees. The same two beginning teachers expressed high satisfaction that their mentors spent the first few weeks in and out of their rooms assisting and advising. As Rhonda confided, "Col would come in and we would do team teaching for literacy in the mornings, and he had the big group first and then he would pull children out for phonics and reading. He was fantastic and he would make suggestions, mostly afterwards about what I didn't do, what I had missed and what was good too". This relationship was

obviously an effective one and it established collegiality and mutual respect from the beginning. Elle found her first few weeks was “absolutely overwhelming with the sheer amount of stuff expected, but it was not scary because Jay was there. In some ways I was chomping at the bit to be allowed to do a few more things. She would say ‘No I do not expect that of you’”. It may be that Jay’s advice and style allowed Elle time for reflection on her teaching strategies, and possibly alleviated some of the stress she had initially felt.

Both of these mentors also allocated extra time commitments to their colleagues. From Rhonda’s aspect, ‘I felt more relaxed as time went by. Col and I car pooled so we would do a lot of chatting on the way here and on the way home, which was great. He would make suggestions, mostly positive... Oh well they’re all positive, but of a critical frame perhaps.’ And in Elle’s case, “Every recess and lunch time we would sit down and we would talk generally about what is going on and we also made concerted effort there and then that even though there is only two of us every Monday afternoon having staff meeting and we were actually set aside time to do that because we know things get pushed to the side”. These conversations had the effect of building confidence and establishing collegiality (Cherednichenko, 2003) as well as giving the beginning teachers time to reflect and exchange information on a more equitable basis, colleague to colleague rather than mentor to mentoree.

Peta experienced more difficulty than the others. Peta’s mentor had no knowledge of the role and as Peta stated of the three school mentors within their small school, “The mentors didn’t really know what their role was. And they missed the first mentor meeting so they weren’t aware of it”. As the experienced teachers were busy with their own classes and had limited time, Peta and the other beginning teachers sought out each other and shared experiences and “planned roughly together.” They used each other for confidence building and information gathering. It emerged that a part time member of staff allocated to Reading Recovery was able to assist with Peta’s first week in literacy so she relied upon her for putting children into groups and arranging texts and levels.

There is evidence to suggest that the isolated rural setting did have an impact in the selection of mentors and the role of mentoring. The mentors were allocated with little or no consideration to relationships and personalities (VIT 2004). In two of our cases, the relationships were established and continued harmoniously because of the culture of trust and respect and the effort put in by both parties. The restriction in choice could have created

difficulties if personalities were different as VIT (2004) sees as critical the matching of relationships. If selection criteria had been applied then the principals could have allocated staff from other schools, but in these case studies all three interviewees appeared to gain the most when they were given support within their own classrooms. It appears from our research that mentoring is not just talking but showing and sharing in a physical environment. Having a mentor at another school might therefore be disadvantageous.

Each teacher had to travel great distances for professional development and frustration was expressed at travelling for an hour to an hour and a half only to find the meeting shortened or content not as advertised. The length in travelling also meant that in some cases, staff in their school may have to double up classes to allow the attendee to get away in time. To their credit, all three teachers made attempts to attend meetings in surrounding towns and cities and all stated they gained a great deal of satisfaction from meeting those of like minds and gaining relevant information and resources to assist their teaching.

On-line mentoring may be a way to solve the problem of travel. Brady and Shuck, (2005), who advocate for E-learning and network support, state that this would allow young teachers to share common experiences with others in similar positions. When questioned on this respect, one interviewee expressed concern that the computer was in the staff room and privacy was an issue. All of the interviewees however shared their delight in the social and informal aspect of beginner teachers meetings. At these they met their former fellow students as well as other teachers from different courses. Once more they were not just looking for communication but connection emotionally and socially. The researchers feel that this social aspect is perhaps one of the reasons that network support and online mentoring has not proved to be widely used by Australian teachers so far (Shuck et al 2000), and that the human factor seems to be important to the graduates.

One aspect shown by this research is that a school with a small number of staff seems to increase workloads and administrative responsibilities for all teachers not just beginning teachers. Not only did the teachers in our study have to cope with composite classes but committee work was also required as was administration and yard supervision. School communities seemed very supportive however extra duties arose owing to the schools' inclusion in the community. Rhonda spent many hours in term 3 on fund raising activities. She was also involved in driving children to locations for special activities such as skiing, as

well as driving them home on occasions. There were regular meetings of a varied nature: staff meetings, cluster meetings, beginning teacher meetings, school council, all squeezed in between learning and teaching time and the busy school routines. Many of these meetings involved lengthy travel.

Policy documents were absent from the schools, but the writing of these was mooted by two teachers as a future task that they would have to do. Where, in a larger staff, duties would be shared and allocated, in our rural schools the staff had to try to find the time to tackle everything.

All our research teachers spoke with knowledge about literacy curriculum and their awareness of VELs. However, all admitted to a lack of confidence in their own practical ability to marry theory and practice. According to all, stress arose in reference to levelling, taking guided reading and shared reading, building phonological awareness, including multi-literacies in their teaching and above all how to set it up. Time was needed to search out resources and lack of time became a constant worry. It seemed to the teachers that the school culture itself was restricting what they were trying to achieve, however. The perception for our participants was that time was often denied them, and their colleagues had similar demands placed on them. Planning time, for example, was often lost for both mentors and mentorees in these circumstances.

As Zeichner and Gore (1990) suggest, there is ‘no contest’ between pre-service programmes and the power, traditions and personalities of school culture. The school is all-consuming with the day to day happenings and routines that often are upset by personalities and priorities. As Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) concluded, the influence of the first is ‘washed out’ by the weight of the second. And this was what seemed to happen to our beginning teachers. Their pedagogy appeared sound but it was only when their confidence and knowledge was supported and confirmed by a mentor that their successes were made evident to them.

## **Conclusion**

The Victorian Government Education and Training Committee (2005) suggest that there may be a wider role for universities in supporting first-year teachers by continuing to provide “regular professional development to teachers through out their career” (p. 227). This idea of ongoing partnerships and networking among the stakeholders is also endorsed by the

Australian Education Union and the Association of Independent Schools, Victoria and could prove to be a way of supporting new teachers, rather than burdening them. Our research, in line with the findings of Stokes et al (1999), shows that support for rural schools is both necessary and vital, and there must be some consideration for the unique concerns and needs pertaining to the rural school environment.

Our research indicates that mentoring in small rural schools can be supportive and more enveloping than mentoring in larger schools. In two cases, the mentor's ability to move into the classroom during the first few weeks allowed literacy routines and practicalities to become established and was highly welcomed by the inexperienced teacher. The starting weeks of the school year seem to be crucial for confidence and it is then that beginning teachers need most assistance. The difficulties expressed by our study participants seem to arise from the transferring of theoretical knowledge into practical experiences related to the school's resources. Resources are critical, but time is needed for finding, sorting, reading and understanding of relevant material. Mentors who are familiar with school routines and culture are vital in assisting in planning and implementing, using the available resources. The literacy team teaching experienced by two of our teachers established a sound foundation for further work. In the third case, the reading recovery teacher assisted, but this was not until a later date, when stress levels were extremely high. In line with Stokes, Stafford and Holdsworth (1999) our research found that Universities can play a major role in providing professional development of beginning teachers. However our research further indicated, that small regional subgroups held in rural centres might remove pressure by alleviating the burden of travelling long distances. Travelling educators from regional universities who are familiar with teaching courses could ensure professional development was related to the beginner's initial understandings in literacy and ensure cohesion between the theory and practice.

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