Beginning teachers' achievements and challenges: Implications for induction and mentoring

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Abstract

It is recognised worldwide that beginning teachers require more support as reasons for high attrition rates (e.g., lack of appreciation from colleagues, unsatisfying working conditions, inadequate teacher preparation) indicate current systems are failing them. One way of addressing their specific needs is to understand their achievements and challenges during their first year of teaching. This qualitative study tracks 10 beginning primary teachers' achievements and challenges at two points (April and September) during their first year of teaching in Australian public schools. Findings showed that building relationships and behaviour management were considered achievements at these two points, yet behaviour management was also considered a challenge. Other challenges included: learning differentiation, working with parents, and negotiating a life-work balance. Induction into the school culture and infrastructure continued to be important, especially developing skills on handling difficult parents and creating a life-work balance. Simultaneously, they required mentoring for effective teaching in classroom management and differentiation. A two-prong approach of induction into the school culture and infrastructure and mentoring for effective teaching needs to continue throughout the first year of teaching, and possibly beyond.

Keywords: beginning teachers, early-career teachers, mentoring

Studies have uncovered reasons behind the high attrition rates of beginning teachers from the profession. In the US, Darling-Hammond (2010) and a list of other researchers (e.g., Exstrom, 2009; Russell, 2006) advocate changes in policies to arrest the attrition rates, particularly as it costs approximately US$2.1 billion per year. Studies in Australia (Goddard & Goddard, 2006; O'Brien & Goddard, 2006) also highlight the high attrition rate for early-career teachers at great cost to the government. In the US, Australia and elsewhere, reasons for leaving the profession have some commonality but are also varied and include: the lack of appreciation from students, parents and colleagues (Gavish & Friedman, 2010), low salary, unsatisfying working conditions, inadequate teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2010) and/or considering themselves unsuited to teaching (Cooper & Stewart, 2009); yet all agree that there needs to be more support for beginning teachers as the high attrition rate indicates existing programs are not successful (Cooper & Stewart, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Hudson, Beutel, & Hudson, 2009; Keogh, Garvis, & Pendergast, 2010).

Research has shown that beginning teachers need more support with calls for more effective and formal induction programs (Russell, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Vong & Wong, 2009). Most induction programs seem to deal with the school culture and infrastructure with limited input into the core business of teaching in the classroom. Despite recognition that induction can assist the school in its vision, the focus on the core business of teaching and learning mainly addresses student behaviour and not the many other facets of teaching in the classroom. For instance, findings from an Irish study (Aitken & Harford, 2011) included beginning teachers "handling discipline problems;

working with colleagues; negotiating a new school culture; and dealing with management" (p. 355). Yet research shows that a well-structured mentoring program can assist novices in the development of their practices. For example, two separate studies by Davis and Higdon (2008) and Stanulis and Floden (2009) provided qualitative data around two groups of beginning teachers in an experimental-control group setting. Although participant numbers were small in each case, qualitative evidence suggests those with a mentoring-induction program developed more confidence in teaching than those without the program. Another control-experiment study on preservice teachers' mentoring also had significant effect sizes for those involved in a specific mentoring program (Hudson & McRobbie, 2004).

It is important to recognise that supporting beginning teachers requires induction and mentoring (Kent, Feldman, & Hayes, 2009); however there are inequities in mentoring (e.g., Hudson, 2010). For example, Kardos and Johnson (2010) investigated 374 beginning teachers' mentoring experiences in their first two years of teaching with results that showed 91% of beginning teachers from high-income schools were allocated an official mentor compared with 65% in low-income schools; however their study did not determine the quality of mentoring received. Although school locations may have an impact on being assigned a mentor (e.g., metropolitan vs rural), educators argue the need to have induction and mentoring, with a rationale "...to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession" and to have a "...focus on the mentee's ability to facilitate learning" (Hobson et al., 2009, p. 207). Indeed, in Australia and elsewhere there are numerous calls and recommendations for schools to provide "a carefully constructed high quality mentoring program" (Marable & Raimondi, 2007, p. 35) and that such programs need to be implemented over time (Piggot-Irvine, Aitken, Ritchie, Ferguson, & McGrath, 2009). Others, such as Sharplin, O'Neill, and Chapman (2011), recommend timely "intervention for retention" at crisis points during the beginning teacher's first years (p. 136). Though this current paper argues an "aim to retain" as a proactive measure to target beginning teacher's needs based on research and contextual analyses.

Investigations into mentoring during the first years of teaching, lead by research teams conclude that beginning teachers require community support (Martin, Andrews, & Gilbert, 2009) or a community of mentors at various vantage points (Hudson & Hudson, 2011). It needs to be recognised that mentoring is a two-way process, hence, beginning teachers need to be "open to critiques and suggestions and they should have sufficient self reflective, metacognitive skills to process, contemplate, and use the information provided" (Roehrig, Bohn, Turner, & Pressley, 2008, p. 700). As a two-way process, beginning teachers' input into their progress can assist in addressing issues and concerns during their formative years in the profession. Understanding beginning teachers' achievements and challenges during their first year of teaching may assist in determining the level of induction and mentoring support required and how to specifically deploy that support (e.g., Aitken & Harford, 2011; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009).

The research question for this study was: What are beginning teachers' achievements and challenges in their first year of teaching?

Context and data collection methods
There were 26 final-year preservice teachers completing a Bachelor of Education (primary) at this small university campus located in a lower socio-economic community from which 22 completed a demographic survey indicating: there were 23% final years with children of their own, 55% were the first in their family to attend university, 55% had part-time work to finance their studies (14% relied on family, 18% scholarship), and their main reasons for attending this campus included proximity to home (77%), small size of campus (18%) and the university coursework (9%). Nineteen of the 26 were employed after graduating from this campus, and 10 beginning teachers out of the 19 were selected purposefully for proximity and availability, and were emailed information about the research inviting them to participate in the study.

This qualitative study investigates 10 beginning teachers' (2 males, 8 females) self-reported achievements and challenges at two different stages during their first year of teaching. Part of identifying the achievements and challenges was an indication of what advice they would provide to preservice teachers and what they think of their career at each of these two stages of the year. Two participants (one of each gender) were over 30 years of age while the others were between 20 and 29 years of age. Their classes varied with eight participants teaching single classes between Year 1-7 in the primary school, one teaching multiple grades in the lower primary (i.e., a Year 2/3 composite class) and Participant 10 was a teacher of French to various classes in the upper primary. Six of these early-career teachers taught in schools located on the outskirts of the city and four taught in schools within the Brisbane metropolitan area.

Data collection methods included an extended written response questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions. The questionnaire required written responses about: their greatest achievements and challenges, teaching as a career, effectiveness as a teacher and advice they would provide to preservice teachers entering the profession. Each written response was then discussed between pairs of beginning teachers who self audio recorded. This paper focuses on the achievements and challenges at the two points during the school year only.

After securing university ethics approval, and departmental and principals' approvals, all invitees provided consent and were released from teaching to engage in the research at the university campus for a two and a half-hour period. This Teacher Education Done Differently (TEDD) project (www.tedd.net.au) paid for a half day release on two occasions during the year (April & September). The school year in the Australia coincides with the calendar year, students beginning their school year at the end of January and conclude the school year around mid December. There are four terms with about two weeks break between each term and a five week break for summer, commencing mid December. The first half an hour of data collection was assigned to completing the aforementioned written response questionnaire, and the final time was dedicated to the interviews and focus group discussions. Audio recorders were used by participants to interview each other with semi-structured interview guidelines along the lines indicated on the questionnaire. These guidelines provided initial questions but also allowed for further questioning and probing.

The author and two other academics with research capabilities (i.e., one with a PhD and another completing a PhD) facilitated the interview environment. For example, while pairs of participants were randomly matched (and swapped three times within the timeframe), the researcher and academic assistants monitored the interviews, and asked probing questions when appropriate. Audio-recorded focus group discussions occurred at three points during the afternoon. All data were transcribed by the research assistant with a PhD. Data were analysed for emerging common themes (Hittleman & Simon, 2006) and conclusions were drawn from the triangulation of information occurring between the questionnaire and interview data.

Results and discussion
April - achievements
When asked to outline their greatest achievements in the first three months of teaching, six out of ten participants focused strongly on behaviour management (Table 1), while Participant 7 included among her achievements: "Starting my new job and still loving it, building positive relationships with my students, having a behaviour management plan down pat that works". The main focus on behaviour management was on individuals or small groups of students, for instance, Participant 9 wrote "improving the behaviour standards of some specific students within the class" while Participant 6 wrote about behaviour management in relation to surviving as a teacher: "Getting a handle on behaviour management (especially the language) working out how to teach grade 1, surviving at keeping on top of most things". This is their first year of developing teacher-student

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relationships independently, which also is associated with effective behaviour management. Participant 10 noted her greatest achievements were being passionate for teaching and developing positive teacher-student relationships: "I am enthusiastic and passionate everyday and I connect my students by listening to their needs". She also emphasised her ability to establish a positive learning environment by providing "a bright stimulating classroom the students love coming to – they know they are welcome to come in and discuss anything with me".

Gathering an understanding of learning differentiation became an achievement for Participant 2: "Figuring out how to differentiate for and include all the students in the class by catering to their individual needs, behaviour management - individual strategies for individual students and positive relationships, being flexible and organised with reading groups". Three participants (3, 6, 9) claimed an achievement as incorporating ICTs into lessons in meaningful ways (Table 1). Another three beginning teachers wrote about "gaining the trust and respect of my students and staff" (e.g., Participant 1) and one wrote about staff support for survival: "working as part of a strong supportive team, getting through this term" (Participant 5). The notions of "getting through this term" and "surviving at keeping on top of most things" infer the overwhelming nature of being a beginning teacher. There were two participants who went beyond the classroom context, commenting about liaising with parents as an achievement, for example, "accomplishing parent-teacher interviews" (Participants 1 & 3). There were single comments indicating challenges such as paying for teaching resources, student health issues, teacher health issues, balancing homework, changing teaching style according to grade levels and speaking up during professional meetings at the school. They spoke about needing an assigned mentor in their schools but many relied on "the teacher next door" to assist them in understanding and dealing with their issues and concerns. Indeed, the proximity of the mentor was emphasised as a way for these beginning teachers to address immediate teaching and learning concerns.

Table 1. Beginning teachers' achievements and challenges at two stages in the school year

	April		September	
	Achievements	Challenges	Achievements	Challenges
Securing a position	1, 7, 10		3	
Student achievements	10	1, 2, 7, 8, 9	1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10	
Covering the curriculum		4, 6, 7, 8	7, 8, 9	
Working as a team	1, 4, 5, 8		2, 6	
Learning differentiation	2, 9, 10	4, 9	9	2, 3, 10
Surviving teaching	5, 6	5	5	
Embedding ICT	3, 6, 9		3	
Behaviour management	1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10	2, 3, 4, 7, 9	1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10
Building relationships and respect	1, 2, 4, 7, 10	2	1, 4, 5, 6, 10	7
Timetabling the curriculum	1, 3, 8			
Assessments and reporting	3	4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10	1, 7	4, 5
Working with parents	1, 3			1, 6, 7, 8, 9
Work-life balance		1, 3, 6, 7		3, 4, 5, 6, 7

NB: Numbers indicate the participant in the study

September – achievements
By September, the beginning teachers were more insightful about their achievements and as six participants (Table 1) focused on student achievements they now had more evidence, as written by Participant 2:

> I have a boy who has ADHD and he is II and at the beginning of the year his writing was almost non-existent; when he did write it was large, very messy, he couldn't spell at all and there was little writing; now he can write on one line at a nice small size and his spelling has greatly

improved. Successfully handling the behaviour of my class which has grown to 29 students...
working with other teachers to put together a staff performance and year seven performance.

The teacher-student relationship is fundamental for managing student behaviour, which was recognised by Participant 6: "Building positive relationships with my students – my students are quite challenging (behaviourally) – building relationships with students was the most important thing which I achieved; building positive relationships with staff". There was a sense of achievement by September on managing students more effectively and creating supportive learning environments, for instance, Participant 3 wrote: "Developing a behaviour management program that works and has effective tangible results; developing an online virtual learning environment that supports and fosters learning within my classroom as well as for homework/supplementary support". Two participants spoke favourably of their mentors who further guided their practices towards achieving results.

April - challenges
Even though most of the participants claimed behaviour management as one of their greatest achievements, nine out of ten emphasised behaviour management as the greatest challenge that they continue to face (Table 1). Five of the ten beginning teachers highlighted behaviour management with more than one student or they had phrased their comment around whole classroom management programs. Participant 4 was concerned about her "Behaviour management – I have a few high behaviour children who are not responding as well to my behaviour management system". Participant 3 found "dealing with extremely challenging kids that don't fit into the standard classroom behaviour plan" challenging while Participant 8 was challenged by "special-needs students' behaviour". Indeed, three participants focused on one student rather than whole class behaviour management issues, for instance: "Dealing with a student who can be quite defiant and bullies students openly but does not recognise it as bullying" (Participant 2). In some cases, the issue of managing students was not necessarily about their behaviour but rather the student learning. For instance, Participant 2 raised the challenge of having homework completed by the students "homework – students (majority) don't complete it – have tried many strategies rewards and detentions and vary the homework each week (asked the students when they preferred to have homework given out and due)". They clearly showed they were in training as new teachers in this initial period and their comments indicated their stage of development: "Implementing a 4 to 1 ratio of positive to negative behaviour reinforcement – it's still something that I have to train and remind myself to do" (Participant 3).

Beginning teachers are learning significantly during their first year in a school. They have not had the full range of school experiences while studying at university as there can be many other activities required of the teacher during a school year. Four participants had indicated a need to create a personal-work life balance as a challenge: "Personal time management – haven't had a weekend for nine weeks" (Participant 7), and "balancing my work life with my social life particularly learning how to work smarter and not harder" (Participant 3). Indeed, the only participant who tried to create a work-life balance appeared to suffer from guilt, to illustrate: "knowing I might not be doing all I can for the kids in my class because I choose to put time aside for me and my family/friends" (Participant 6). Thus, understanding how to create a balance between the professional and personal life without feeling guilty may assist the beginning teacher in maintaining stamina for the profession rather than experiencing burn out early in their careers.

Having confidence and opportunities to speak at various professional forums (e.g., school meetings) appeared as challenges for some of the beginning teachers: "speaking up in year level meetings – at first I didn't want to say much as I felt that my thoughts were not as good as the experienced teachers" (Participant 2). One participant wrote that maintaining the speaking voice was a challenge: "getting a sore voice" (Participant 10). In addition, curriculum and other learning issues

presented as challenges for these beginning teachers. For instance, three participants mentioned "NAPLAN [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy] pressures" (Participants 4, 8, & 9) and "coping with assessments" (5, 10) while others stressed over "covering everything that needs to be covered for the term – there are so many concepts in the curriculum not enough time to teach them all in depth" (Participant 4). Two highlighted the challenges of providing appropriate learning for students with disabilities, for example: "Managing the learning of one of my students with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder]" (Participant 9). There are numerous disabilities, many of which would not be covered within either university coursework or professional school experiences. Consequently, beginning teachers require support with students who have disabilities, particularly as each case will be unique. Some of the participants spoke about the need to observe teaching practices but also having a mentor or school executive observe them teach and provide feedback for advancing their practices.

September - challenges
By September, these beginning teachers outlined and discussed their main challenges, which mainly included behaviour management, learning differentiation, working with parents, and negotiating a life-work balance (Table 1). Behaviour management continued to be a challenge for more than half the participants, although there were less that found this challenging compared with their April challenges. Nevertheless, the continuation of behaviour management issues continues as one of the three most challenging aspects of their first year of teaching, for instance: "Managing the behaviour of a few students in my class, trying to keep students engaged when there is so much going on outside and around them, dealing with home issues with students" (Participant 9), and extending to the extremities of behaviour management with physical violence was an issue for Participant 8. Learning differentiation appeared for Participant 4 only in April, however, by September three participants (2, 3, 10) emphasised this as a challenge, as shown by Participant 2: "learning to successfully handle grouping and differentiate in my classroom – such a large range of learners in my room". Working with parents was not an issue in April but became an issue for half the participants in September for two reasons, viz: those who do not send their children to school (Participant 8) and those who were "cranky parents" (Participants 1, 6, 7, 9). "Beginning teachers often experience anxiety (Bullnough *et al.,* 1991; Erb, 2002; Lortie, 1975; Tickle, 1991) because of the complexity of learning to teach and the uncertainty of achieving goals. Beginning teachers are also anxious when they interact with parents" (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003, p. 334).

Although, only Participant 1 highlighted induction with the school infrastructure as a challenge, a more pressing challenge was creating a work-life balance. Indeed, participants 4 and 5 joined the April group (except Participant 1) to indicate the work-life balance was becoming a greater issue, for example, "work/life balance – I need to stop living at the school" (Participant 3) and "keeping up with the workload and having a family life" (Participant 6). Only Participant 7 indicated that she needed recognition from her colleagues "getting my team of more experienced teachers to view me as a professional". Only Participant 1 found that negotiating the school infrastructure with administration requirements became a challenge at both points during the year. At various stages, the participants indicated a need to have an assigned mentor who could assist them within the school context at key points during the year (e.g., assessment time, key events, parent interviews).

Conclusion
The achievements of these ten beginning teachers tended to cluster around recognising their students' achievements, behaviour management, building relationships, and working within a team. The challenges focused mainly on student achievements, behaviour management, building relationships, assessments and reporting, learning differentiation, working with parents, and creating a work-life balance. More participants acknowledged student achievements as an achievement in September compared with earlier in the year, probably because there was more evidence that suggested this to them. Indeed, assessment and reports were an issue for six of the ten

participants in April but for only two of them in September. Interestingly, working with parents was not visible as a challenge in April but became an issue in September. The frequencies indicated in Table 1 highlight ways schools can further support beginning teachers in both induction and mentoring processes at key times throughout the school year; indeed this support needed to be timely. It seemed apparent that these beginning teachers required support around behaviour management, student achievements, assessment and reporting as an ongoing mentoring process while creating a work-life balance needed to be a continuous induction process. Even though these needed to occur from the beginning of the year, learning how to work with parents from experienced colleagues would have assisted their development as the year progressed. Most importantly, school executives need to be vigilant in providing their beginning teachers support, particularly as they may not seek support with the sense that this could be an indication of failure. Gathering information about beginning teachers' achievements and challenges can be used as formative assessment for providing timely and targeted support.

It is well recognised that beginning teachers need induction and mentoring as part of an enculturation (Cherubini, 2007; Cooper & Stewart, 2009; Parker, 2010; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008). Gavish and Friedman (2010) suggest that burn out may occur before the beginning teacher commences full employment in the school and yet for other beginning teachers problems are usually temporary and resolved from learning about how to negotiate their challenges. Large numbers of beginning teachers leaving the profession, infers that their challenges in the profession need to be tracked from a much earlier stage, that is, even as early as their first year as a preservice teacher involved in practicum. Further research may show that those who are psychologically inclined to be stressed in their first years as a preservice teacher may also carry this through as a beginning teacher; hence it may well be an unsuited vocational choice in the first place. Despite the filtering out of unsuitable potential teachers during university coursework (including practicum experiences), the notion that around a quarter leave the profession within five years warrants a new approach, namely, an "aim to retain". This does not mean retaining all beginning teachers but rather establishing procedures through research and contextual analyses to support those that can be retained.

Through the beginning teachers' perspectives, this study investigated the achievements and challenges of beginning teachers to propose how schools can support them in their new educational environments. Key issues focused on: managing student behaviour and creating a work-life balance, in which resilience strategies needed to be part of the preservice teacher development (Keogh et al., 2010), including problem-solving techniques and ways to manage people within the work environment (see also Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010). Creating a work-life balance can be difficult for those new into teaching positions. Experienced staff can provide strategies they have developed to create this balance to ensure the level of engagement in work maintains at a quality standard and that beginning teachers do not begin to feel overworked with little recreation to alleviate the pressures. Also the proximity of a willing and capable mentor is important as this mentor can assist in addressing immediate teaching and learning concerns and issues. Intervention for retention may be a necessity at crisis points (Sharplin et al., 2011), however this study shows the focus should be an "aim to retain" as a first step by eliciting prior knowledge of beginning teachers' achievements and challenges.

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