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## **Lessons from the Classroom: First Year Teachers Report about their Perceptions of Life as a Beginning Teacher**

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### **Abstract**

The Knowledge Building Community (KBC) Program at the UOW was designed as an alternative model of teacher education and an intention of its underpinning framework was that it would produce beginning teachers who were confident with problem solving and collaboration. It was hoped that by exposing the students to contextual based learning and a mentoring culture they would be equipped to cope and or seek support in order to deal with the rigours and demands of the primary school classroom. This paper will look at four school and classroom features identified as significant to beginning teaching success namely: Total Responsibility, Behaviour Management, Time Management and Mentor Support.

### **Introduction**

We are living in a society that demands that our children be well educated. “A basic education is no longer adequate preparation for life” (Ramsey, 2000, p.9). In an era when new innovations in teacher education are necessary for classroom preparation, it is important that preservice teachers be equipped with alternative teaching strategies that challenge the telling and rote learning model (Gunstone, Slattery, Baird & Northfield 1993; Brown, Doecke & Loughran, 1997). Le Cornu (2003) adds that because ‘there are so many issues confronting teachers, the teaching profession, school systems and teacher education’ (p.2), teaching has become more complex. She cites that not only are teachers faced with major changes and challenges in the curriculum, significant economic, political, cultural and social changes also impact upon the role of the classroom teacher.

Luke (2000) refers to schools as ‘the shock absorbers and buffers for societal change’, while Rumble (1999) proposes that the challenges schools encounter are reflected in the quest they must endure to reform their structures and systems and become more effective within this new environment (both cited in Carrington & Robinson, 2001 p.1). Yet despite these challenges, teachers and schools are still charged with the responsibility of providing a suitable and effective learning environment for all children, while at the same time trying to maintain their professionalism. This demanding climate awaits graduate teachers and therefore teacher preparation programs need to make an attempt to prepare them for this environment.

### **Teacher Education**

The preparation of teachers and teacher education programs according to Tripp (1994) has not stood up well to public scrutiny. He says that many people, particularly teachers, administrators, and governments, believe that many teacher education practices are an inadequate preparation for teaching. Teacher education in many tertiary institutions throughout the world are under pressure (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999) and it has evolved to the point where “the professional school’s prevailing conception of professional knowledge may not match well with the actual competencies required of practitioners in the field” (Schön, 1987, p.10).

The aim of any teacher education course is to produce competent beginning teachers. However, it must be reiterated that teaching is not easy; it is a combination of skilful activity that demands professional attention. The challenge, therefore, for teacher educators, is to create programs that will prepare the beginning teacher for the intricacies of life in the classroom. The transformation of students to teachers is a combination of complex events, which needs to take place in both universities and schools.

Furthermore, teaching is an activity that requires life-long learning and continual improvement and the effective teacher, according to Barry and King (1998), will be the person that maintains and understands this aspect. Student teachers have stated that in order to be a competent beginning teacher they need to have qualities such as caring, personal, psychological and social growth, compassion, patience, nurturing and imagination (Brousseau, Book & Byers, 1988; Weinstein, 1989; Mahlios & Maxson, 1995; Wilson & Cameron, 1996). With experience the beginning teacher's concerns shift from these ‘motherhood statements’ to emphasise classroom management and by the fifth year of service are usually centred and focused on instructional and management techniques (McCullough & Mintz, 1992). Therefore the effective teacher is seen as one who can combine management, content knowledge and interpersonal skills (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, Holloway & Wyld, 1990; Hughes, 1994). From the research it can be determined that these attributes or qualities of effectiveness increase with experience in the classroom setting.

Therefore a major function of teacher education is to prepare beginning teachers for the reality of the classroom and equip them with the basic skills necessary to manage in their first years of teaching. Teacher education needs to maintain the empathetic and humanistic concerns that preservice teachers bring to their teacher education courses. In conjunction with this empathy for the pupil the preservice teacher needs to understand that, with time, it can be supplemented by the managerial and technical expertise associated with the craft of teaching (Wilson & Cameron, 1996).

### **An Alternative Teacher Education Program: The Knowledge Building Community Program at the UOW**

In the light of suggestions from many reports that the structure of teacher education needed to change, an alternative model of teacher preparation

was developed at the University of Wollongong. In January 1997 a small group initiated an informal, but searching series of discussions within the Faculty of Education at the UOW. This Reference Group began meeting regularly and negotiating details with the overall intent to explore issues inherent in changing two major aspects of teacher education at the UOW:

- the teaching/learning culture of undergraduate teacher education; and
- the traditional mindset and culture associated with practice teaching/internship in schools.

Given this rationale, the faculty supported a proposal to design a research project that would investigate, as a pilot, an alternative approach to initial teacher education through:

...implementation and evaluation of an inquiry and problem-solving approach such as that used in medicine and the health sciences; and a greater integration of the practical field-based component of the teacher education program with the theoretical.

(Cambourne, Ferry & Kiggins, 2002, p. 2)

Based on this premise the Faculty of Education at the UOW, together with the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation developed the Knowledge Building Community (KBC) Project, which commenced in 1999. Its design was to explore a number of issues that are of critical importance to models of teacher education in NSW (Ramsey, 2000, p.57). The KBC is significant because its design offers students the chance to work and learn in a context-specific environment. Cambourne (2000) stated that:

...it is possible to reorganise the knowledge bases of undergraduate teacher education subjects so that they are more integrated with school and classroom culture, and therefore more relevant, more meaningful, better appreciated by student teachers, with less duplication across subject areas (Cambourne, in Ramsey 2000, p. 57)

### ***What is a Knowledge Building Community?***

Although the concept of knowledge building communities had been explored for students in schools they had not been implemented in teacher education. For the purpose of the UOW project the definition of a KBC proposed by Hewitt, Brett, Scardamalia, Frecker and Webb (1995) was adopted. They proposed:

A Knowledge Building Community is a group of individuals dedicated to sharing and advancing the knowledge of the collective. What is defining about a Knowledge Building Community is a commitment among its members to invest its resources in the collective pursuit of understanding. (p. 1)

In order to effectively initiate a repositioning of teacher education delivery from a 'campus-based-lecture-tutorial' mode to a 'problem-based-learning-within-a-school-site' mode, the KBC in operation at the UOW was underpinned by three learning principles. These three underlying learning

principles of the KBC are Community Learning, School-Based Learning and the vehicle which drives these two sources of learning is the facilitation of Problem-Based Learning.

*Community Learning (CL)*

This is achieved through the sharing of ideas and experiences with other community members, these being the preservice students themselves, the facilitators (university lecturers), and school-based teachers;

*School-based learning (SBL)*

Is achieved through participating in the school context over a regular period of time. An important principle in the pilot has been to shift the approach in the practicum component from supervision to mentoring and;

*Problem-based learning (PBL)*

This is the notion of a curriculum created around a version of problem-based learning designed for use at the University of Wollongong. The use of PBL will enable students to engage in-group discussions and data collection to address real life problem scenarios found in school settings. The use of PBL in teacher education places professional practice at the center of the student's learning, which encompasses the learning of the student teacher and the mentor.

This approach as identified by Cambourne is consistent with the directions identified throughout the Ramsey report (2000) as necessary to improve the quality of initial teacher education. It was thought that the KBC Project (by 2001 it gained Program status) would produce beginning teachers who were confident and had the ability to tackle problem solving and collaboration. It is this aspect of the design brief that this paper will now focus.

**The KBC Graduate Beginning Teacher**

Informants for this paper were students from the pioneer KBC group through to the most recent of graduates of 2006. The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) employed all the participants for this paper (except Lucy). Data were collected via the use of e-mail correspondence (a virtual necessity). The use of electronic communication for this research paper proved to be an invaluable, convenient and popular tool with both the participants and the researcher. With the expansion of the Internet, e-mail correspondence has become part of our culture and the use of e-mail correspondence has become a very reliable and popular tool for data collection. The graduates stated that the use of e-mail was by far the most convenient method of data collection. They said that being able to read and think about questions 'posted' to them enabled them to take the time to think about their replies. This meant that the replies or thoughts were not rushed as they had the advantage of 'think time'.

To reiterate one of the major ideals of the KBC program is to prepare beginning teachers for the reality of the classroom and equip them with the basic skills necessary to manage in their first years of teaching. It was under this premise that the graduate teachers were asked to consider how the KBC Program had prepared them for the realities and challenges of the classroom. In addition the KBC graduates were asked as to whether they

felt confident and prepared for their role as a classroom teacher and to consider the availability of mentor support.

The responses that the graduates gave to the above questions were analysed for common themes and trends. An interesting response that the graduates gave was the need for a successful final year school-based practicum. The graduates said that as this was their final experience as a student teacher it was vital that this practicum be successful. The graduates stated that if this were a successful, supportive practicum then they would feel confident and ready to start as beginning teachers. The following four categories however, are the major themes that emerged from the graduates' first year as classroom teachers:

- Total Responsibility
- Behaviour Management
- Time Management
- Mentor Support

Each of these themes will be addressed.

### ***Total Responsibility***

The realisation that I am totally responsible for the planning, teaching and learning activities and assessment for the students in my class hit home when I was informed that I had my own class. As a student teacher this was always the class teacher's role and although we were doing segments of planning it was not for the whole year and we certainly didn't have the total responsibility for it. This was a very daunting aspect in the early days of term one. Louise

Lucy also said that planning took up a great deal of her time and she echoed Louise's comments about the total responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the classroom. She said that getting a real understanding of the outcomes that her class were working towards was for her an important responsibility that she needed to undertake early in her planning prior to school commencing in term one.

Karen agreed that planning is an ongoing responsibility but she also said that classroom presentation is an added expectation that as a student teacher she took for granted. She said that she totally underestimated how long it took to make her classroom "look nice".

However, it was Helen who said that the enormity and the responsibility of the job ahead hit her on Boxing Day. She said:

When the last of the presents had been unwrapped and the dishes put away I realised that it was now 'after Christmas'. I was starting my teaching job 'after Christmas' and therefore it was time to get ready. What would I do on my first day? How would I organise my class? How would I introduce myself? I wonder what the classroom has in the way of reading books? I had so many questions and I needed to get started. Helen

The graduates stated that total responsibility included planning, programming, assessing, reporting, and classroom presentation but also reported that it also included yet another new challenge: the children's parents! As student teachers the 'real' classroom teacher had handled any concerns and queries voiced by parents. In their new role as classroom teacher this aspect now also fell their way.

Public relations with parents is a new challenge for me, some parents have realistic expectations of their children while other parents' expectations are quite unrealistic and when I am talking with these parents I find myself choosing my words carefully. Louise

Well I had an interesting experience the other day, I had parents at the school swimming carnival using digital cameras to dispute the results of their child's race, I should say at this point that it was only a novelty race. Working with parents is just another thing I am learning a lot about. Shane

From the data gathered however it was Maree who reported a disturbing aspect concerning total responsibility and the parent-teacher relationship, she stated:

On Thursday a parent yelled at me in front of children and parents... a very humiliating way to end the day. This was coupled by having another parent in tears at the same time because of how poorly her child was misbehaving and how far he has fallen behind in six weeks, which of course I was getting the blame for.... too many of the parents of my children have attached the stigma of "first year out teacher" label to me. Most mornings another teacher accompanies me to lines in the morning so the parents leave me alone. Quite often I am in tears I am tired and in over my head in what the school Executive have now termed my "baptism of fire". Maree

The question must be asked what were the Executive doing to alleviate the "baptism of fire" that Maree was experiencing. However, Maree was not alone in her dismay at the perceived lack of support when it came to life as a classroom teacher Amy, reported:

This whole experience is definitely an eye opener no matter how much training you get it really is a rude awakening when you are faced by the day-to-day reality of a classroom teacher. By the end of first term I was getting really crabby and mean because I was so worn out. But I am feeling refreshed and relaxed after the two week break. I am all ready for the next nine weeks. Amy

When asked how the KBC program could have prepared them for any of these aspects Karen stated:

When I started I felt like someone should have been there in the room with me I almost wanted my hand held. But then I started to think about it some more and came to the realisation that I could stay at university for 5 or 6 years and still feel exactly the same way. I don't think that in any job there is someone to hold your hand at all times. I mean when starting any job there will be things to learn about the workplace, the people who work

there, the work ethics and the culture of that workplace. I know teaching is a little bit different but I still think there is always something to learn about your job. I think university could have maybe helped me a little bit more. But if you put your head down and work then I don't really think it's that hard to learn and it's the type of job where you're always learning, no matter how long you have been there. There is always something new to learn. Karen

Karen admitted that staying at university longer would not necessarily equate to greater preparation she also stated that teaching is life-long learning and there is always something new to learn. Maree whilst disillusioned about her lack of support agreed that there is no length of time that can prepare you for the total responsibility of the classroom because 'prac teaching' is artificial and that support in the beginning years must come from the school site.

### ***Behaviour Management***

The stresses and strains of first year teaching are often exacerbated by issues relating to classroom management (Brown, Doecke & Loughran, 1997). McCullough and Mintz (1992) believe that beginning teachers emphasise classroom management as one aspect that they need to get under control. They estimated that classroom management can dominate classroom practice and that it is not until the fifth year of service that graduate teachers are usually centred and focused on instructional and management techniques.

How then did the KBC graduates manage their classes as first year teachers? Shane stated that she was doing everything she had ever dreamed of and by her own admission she could not get the smile off her face!

However, the following excerpt from Karen is an insight into her first few weeks as a fulltime beginning teacher.

Until the classes were sorted out I had a Year One class, and I wish I could say that they were angels, but they were not! I had never met any little kiddies who were so naughty! I yelled on the first day, I had plenty facing the back wall! One little boy was sent to the room next door (with Year 5, which he didn't like!) because he was being so rude! They were very talkative, and you wouldn't believe how much they fought! I had fighting and tears everyday, because one boy was being a bully. I was hard on them though, and they did listen to me, but they just seemed to be at each other all day! In this class I also had some students with special needs such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, one with speech impairment and two with severe asthma. This was my introduction to teaching and my new school it kept me on my toes. I tried so many techniques that I learnt at university, which I am pleased to say worked okay. Karen

Karen was not alone with her Year One class of children with challenging behaviours in the excerpts that follow Louise, Maree and Ann describe their classes.

There are 28 students in my Year One class; of which there are 5 particularly difficult students. This is very draining. When they are out of the class (with the STL<sup>1</sup> teacher), the classroom is peaceful and the children are quietly working. When these children return to the room the classroom dynamics change immediately. Louise

I have a Kindergarten/Stage 1 composite class which means programming from 2 different stages and then four weeks into the term I gained a refugee from Sierra Leone, who is the most violent six year old I have ever seen. We have had stealing and graffiti in the classroom, and a lot of frustration as my parent of a child with Asperger's Syndrome has refused funding and given the many behavioural issues that I have in my class I just can't accommodate his special needs. Maree

I have a child with bipolar disorder in my class he is only five and his behaviour is all over the place, he is very violent and has hurt me, the other children, the principal and the teachers' aides. It has only been this week (week 1 of term 2) and the last week of term one that I actually had a teacher's aide with me, which could be the reason that I was so stressed out last term. The problem is how do you teach the whole Kindergarten class when you have a student who demands so much time and energy? It is frustrating me and upsetting me that the other children have to wait for me to manage this child, and it is not as simple as giving him warnings it is physically restraining him and forcing him to sit still and calm down, which takes a lot of time. Amy

Faye teaches in the Far West of NSW and she was scathing in one of her first e-mails as a beginning teacher she complained that we had not given her enough techniques for all the challenging children she was coming into contact with in her dual roles of a casual and job sharing teacher. Given the scenarios cited above it would certainly prove difficult to meet the needs of our graduates in their varied classrooms. As a KBC facilitator I communicated with Faye through several e-mails suggesting that it was not possible to give a recipe for every known (and unknown) aspect of misbehaviour but reminded her that she was a confident empowered beginning teacher and to utilise the skills of KBC and investigate what options the school had and who could assist her. In the mid year break, Faye reflected on her first few months of teaching.

My major challenge was classroom management and I think that I made that clear if I remember rightly! I had planning under control even though I only had 3 days notice. Lots of work but I knew or felt that I knew what and how to do the planning. I think I could say I was wise enough to watch, look, listen, and learn (thanks to KBC). I have now a greater understanding of why children misbehave in class, the children that misbehave in our school are generally the ones who don't come to school, so they have not learned to *do* school, let alone read. They will then misbehave to not draw attention to the fact that they do not know how to do the work.

After e-mails with you and my KBC colleagues, I went to my principal for advice, textbooks and the school councillor. I have to say the school councillor was of the most help to understand why the children were

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<sup>1</sup> Support Teacher Learning

behaving this way. My principal was of the most help when it came to practical ideas on how to handle the children on a daily basis. But I do have to say that I quickly realised that it was my problem to solve and I set about gathering information and putting some ideas to the test. I also knew that time and patience was needed. I am a lot better at managing the behaviour of children. I am now a lot more confident to walk into a class of children that I do not know. There are a few children that I have in my permanent classes that are a constant challenge, as a school we try different things to keep them on task, to learn the skills that they will need to support them when they get to middle and senior school. I am working on their self-esteem and the one student that I have that has only had 14 days at school this year is now my biggest worry.

Faye

*"I set about gathering information and putting some ideas to the test"*, as a KBC facilitator this comment from Faye was exciting to read. The KBC Program is concerned with empowering students to have the confidence to inquire, question and in general act as educational anthropologists. One of the underpinning structures of the KBC Program is Problem-based learning (PBL) and it was always the intention in the planning phase of the KBC Program that our graduates would have the skills to solve professional problems using the principles of PBL. Although Faye admitted that she was quick to assert blame on the university for not preparing her, once she was reminded of the skills that she did have she was able to work her way through the difficulties she was having in her class. She also stated that she knew that it was going to take time and patience in regards to classroom management. Faye concluded her July reflections with the following:

I just love my job. I know I have a lot more to learn; I am open to ideas, enthusiastic and committed to my new career.

Faye

The common theme running through the above graduate teacher experiences would be the degree of challenging behaviours that these first year out teachers were facing on a daily basis. From an outsider's perspective it would appear that the graduates were on more than one occasion doing so with varying levels of support from their more experienced colleagues.

### ***Time Management***

The graduates have reported that time management is a constant struggle. Louise made the following analogy:

The huge time factor involved in preparing lessons, organising the classroom and marking work is enormous I have never felt so exhausted

Louise

Helen said that time was the currency used in the school. She went onto explain:

Throughout our KBC experience we discovered that schools valued time. As a beginning teacher I knew this but also found out that time could be

traded, through RFF<sup>2</sup>, library allocations, timetable rotations, and playground duties. However, what surprised me the most was that the teacher's conversations in my staff room centred on the value of their time in relation to the effectiveness of activities or extra duties they were asked to perform. Helen

Lucy described her day as thus:

I get to school at 7.30 each morning to assist me with my preparation for the day. Yet I am forever having panic attacks about some of my 'less able' children (that I love deeply) and I feel very frustrated that they still aren't getting some of the concepts we are learning (even though I practice modeling, guided and independent teaching strategies) but I know that it is because I am not able to spend as much quality time with them as I would like! For example this term I have been doing narrative text writing, and I really feel as if I would like to spend more time with a small group of children extending this text type to them, but of course I have programmed to move on to another text type next week so I cannot do as I want as I'm tied into moving on or I will not cover all the text types if I don't. Lucy

Lucy's concern for covering the required number of text types was a reflection of her status of a beginning teacher and her programming was driving the decisions she was making in her classroom on a daily basis. She knew that as a beginning teacher her program would be examined and she was struggling with not wanting to have it incomplete. Lucy had a supportive mentor that allayed her fears and allowed her to progress past this struggle and enjoy her teaching. Lucy's mentor told her to relax and to remember: "she is only human and that she couldn't do everything". Lucy said that in hearing this she immediately felt that she could stop trying to create perfection.

The kind of support offered to Lucy in the context of this research proved to be the exception rather than the norm. The support and mentoring offered to the participating beginning teachers will now be looked at in greater detail in the following section.

### ***Mentor Support***

Mentoring is not a new concept. The origins of the term mentoring can in fact be traced back to Greek mythology. A mentor needs to view their mentee in a holistic way. Caldwell and Carter (1993), state that the mentor-protégé dyad is a 'mentorship'. They describe this mentorship as a learning partnership between two or more individuals who wish to share or develop a mutual interest. The mentor serves as an advisor, a guide, a net worker, and as a role model to the learner who seeks to explore the mentor's experience. The graduates reported varying levels of support from their respective schools. The overriding theme however was that a supportive school was vital for their wellbeing as a beginning teacher. The DET actively and aggressively recruits final year preservice teachers via their Graduate Recruitment Program. Among the many features of their advertising

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<sup>2</sup> Release from face-to-face teaching

program the DET states that:

“New teachers are supported in their first years through our beginning teacher induction program. All teachers are involved in an annual school-based assessment program that aims to ensure ongoing professional development within a supportive environment. Schools with significant numbers of new teachers are staffed with a teacher mentor, who works collaboratively with new teachers to support quality teaching in classrooms, guide professional development and provide new teachers with a reduced teaching load”.  
(NSW DET 2007)

This assertion will now be examined in light of the reality that the KBC graduates from 2001-2007 reported. Karen knew that she needed a mentor; she clearly knew that her beginning classroom experience could have been made easier:

I didn't have a mentor until term 2, when she came on board and started to help me I was able to see connections but had she been there from the start my transition to full time teaching would have been a lot easier. Karen

Amy also reported that she did not have a mentor and that she was conscious not to ask too many question for fear of wearing what Maree referred to as the 'first year teacher label'. Amy, like Maree found herself in a school where the appointment of a first year teacher was a very rare occurrence. She asked and received support from her principal when things were getting beyond her in regards to the child with bi-polar disease. It was interesting though that it was the principal that offered her in class support. This act of support then made her feel at odds with the majority of staff who do not appreciate the principal's progressive ideas. The question must be asked as to why support only came when the beginning teacher asked.

It has taken me a full term but I do feel like I belong in the school. The rest of the staff while very much older are lovely and supportive, I am conscious of how many questions I ask and what I ask though. While I was worried about how I would get on with the Principal I find her very easy to talk to and confide in. We have become partners with dealing with my 'special boy' (child with bi-polar) and she was the only one last term that at my request came into my classroom and team taught with me to give me some pointers and help. I really respect her and appreciate all of her work, which sometimes puts me in a very awkward position because not many of the other staff feels that way about her. Most of the other staff have been at the school for up to twenty years and don't like her expectations and high standards.  
Amy

It is necessary for beginning teachers to have mentors in place from the beginning of the school year. Lucy reported that she did and the support and guidance that she had was “fantastic”. Karen knew she needed this kind of support and when it was finally realised it made her day-to-day classroom life easier. Faye experienced support from her school not from one mentor but from various sources as discussed previously but then found herself in the position of acting as a mentor.

I am not the only new teacher at the primary school. There is one older lady who has been teaching out in the country and another girl. We talk a lot and this poor girl is feeling overwhelmed. She is a 4 year trained graduate but said that she only did one class on programming and we were told on Thursday that by week 5 our programs are to be ready and what they want in them. So here am I as green as grass mentoring this other teacher. She said to me that, as new staff we should have a mentor. But the reality is that the teachers here are so busy; there really is no time to mentor anybody.

Faye

Maree was appointed through the DET's Graduate Recruitment Program she has however been left wondering when her teacher induction program is likely to occur and just where the supportive environment might be located. She also questions why she was given a composite Kindergarten/Year one class when her supervisor has the smaller 'straight' Year One class. Is this the kind of support that the DET has in mind for its beginning teachers?

My supervisor and principal...who? My supervisor only stepped foot into my classroom for the first time in week 5 of term 1. Because of the experienced nature of the staff, I think they forget I am here and I am left to do whatever I want...deep end first!

Maree

Although Maree was disillusioned by the lack of support offered towards her and the difficulties she was dealing with on a daily basis both from the children and their parents the email below illustrates the total despair that she was feeling towards the end of her first term of teaching. There is a desperation and sense of hopelessness emanating from the email. It should be reiterated that this student was an independent and successful learner as an undergraduate.

I am not coping and I can't keep showing up hating each day before it has even begun...and as you know the staff doesn't exactly rush in and help. I just want to have a week where I am not in tears almost every afternoon and a day when I don't regret the decision I made to take the job. I can't speak to mum and dad about it, they already want me to quit the public system and move home because they are sick with worry... I know it shouldn't be like this but the reality is that it is. I am developing resilience very fast ... it will all be okay, I am tough... this just isn't the dream experience that everybody thought it would be. The school has told me that I can take a mental health day if I need it! I am walking proof that the DET and the government needs to stop fiddling around publishing reports on beginning teacher drop out rates and start bothering to do something to fix the problem! But that will never happen.

Maree

This school's answer to support was to encourage Maree to take a 'mental health day'. This is a euphemism for sick leave, when one is not sick! This strategy is a short term solution for an issue that requires effective leadership and management. This beginning teacher needs a mentor. According to Ramsey (2000) 'the induction period is a major test of the extent to which employers, school leaders and the profession are interested in and committed to the quality of teaching in schools' (p. 64). In Maree's case it would appear that the principal and executive have failed this test to

date.

However, having a mentor does not always mean that one's transition to school and classroom life is guaranteed to be smooth. Helen was assigned a mentor from the beginning of the school year but as so often happens in any human relationship the match was far from compatible. After three months Helen's mentor had not even asked her where she lived or even what her interests were.

The efficient delivery of mentoring can only be achieved when all parties are aware of its definition. Problems with the practice of mentoring have arisen when programs have been implemented with too little conceptual understanding of mentoring, unrealistic expectations, poorly thought-out implementation strategies and the lack of formal arrangements, with regard to the rights and responsibilities of partners (Little, 1990; Long, 1994). It is doubtful whether Helen's mentor truly understood the nature of the role she had been assigned. The fact that there was no rapport between Helen and her mentor meant that the classical traits of mentoring were not occurring. The mentorship should be self-selecting it should be a mutual arrangement between the two parties. It must be a venture that has been undertaken willingly not an imposed assignment.

Helen's reflections during this period were recorded as thus:

Having come through the KBC Program I knew what I was looking for in a mentor. I knew the theoretical aspects of mentoring and as a KBC student teacher I had experienced the practical aspects that a mentoring relationship can provide. The fact that I was now in a position where I was 'assigned' a mentor who did not want to be my mentor was disappointing to say the least. I wanted to find my own mentor but wondered how to do this without making 'life' difficult. This aspect was spoiling my experiences as a classroom teacher. I enjoyed my class we were having fun, the children were learning we were working towards or meeting the prescribed outcomes yet I was not happy. I felt alone. I felt constantly criticised and scrutinised.

Helen

From the above citations the varying levels of school support appear to have had the greatest influence on the lives of these beginning teachers. They had coped with the total responsibility of the job; they were learning how to handle the difficulties of behaviour and time management but what they were yearning for or appreciated the most was collegial support.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to inform about the experiences of some of the KBC graduates from 2001-2006 and what they encountered as they made the transition from the campus to the classroom. This preliminary research would appear to confirm that the principles of the KBC program have supported the students in this transition.

The lessons that the graduates are learning and sharing about life as a beginning teacher point to the fact that as teacher educators it is important to provide them with skills that will enable them to survive as members of a

school staff. The KBC Program's founding principles of community, school and problem-based learning given the above stories are equipping the KBC graduates to make the transition to full time classroom teaching. The KBC graduates know what they are looking for and even if they need a reminder they still have the ability to use the principles of PBL to help them solve the professional problems that they are encountering on a daily basis. By their stories and reflections it is obvious that community learning has taught them the benefits of collegiality.

Where the beginning teacher was being supported and guided by their mentor the graduates reported that their advice was invaluable. From the data though it was obvious that the support of a mentor was sporadic at best. The degree of support (or lack thereof) plays an important role in the success of the beginning teacher. Ramsey (2000) stated, 'there are undoubtedly many exemplary induction programs within schools, which provide beginning teachers with an outstanding induction into the profession' (p. 64) these exemplary programs did not feature in the narratives of these participating beginning teachers involved in this research. Many of the themes from the participants of this research would suggest that induction programs were completed poorly, if at all. The Development Directorate of the NSW Department of Education and Training has prepared a number of resources to assist the induction of beginning teachers, in the cases of Amy and Maree they weren't utilised.

Apparent also was the use of the term 'mentor' it was loosely applied or its true definition was misunderstood and/or not carried out. Where teachers are too busy to lend support to beginning teachers would seem to confirm what Le Cornu (2003) described as the contemporary business and demanding nature of our school systems, it is hoped that this is not a lack of genuine willingness of the teachers themselves. What cannot be ignored and must be paid more than lip service is Maree's plea for concerted efforts to support the beginning teacher instead of just reporting about 'drop-out' rates.

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