From surviving to thriving: an induction program for early career teachers of personal development, health and physical education

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From Surviving to Thriving: An Induction Program for Early Career Teachers of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education

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Abstract This paper is a discussion of a project with both face-to-face and online components designed to support early career teachers from the key learning area of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) across three teacher employing authorities in New South Wales, Australia. This paper reports on the findings of Phase 1 of a project designed to support early career teachers of PDHPE during the transition from teacher education to entry into the teaching profession. The project was initiated in 2005 by the NSW Branch of the Australian Council for Health Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER NSW) in conjunction with the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme. Research findings presented will include the effectiveness of the conference model used and identification of issues to be considered in the development of future programs for early career PDHPE teachers.

Introduction

The professional development program for NSW Personal Development, Health and Physical Education early career teachers - From Surviving to Thriving - was initiated in response to recent reports on the high rates of attrition among early career teachers, particularly in the first five years of teaching. Whilst the figures have yet to be studied comprehensively in Australia, particularly in relation to physical and health education teachers, the recent Review of Teacher Education in New South Wales highlighted the upward trend in "early career teacher resignation rates in New South Wales (NSW) over the past four years" (Ramsey, 2000, p.197). In the year 2000, the highest numbers of resignations were from teachers aged 25-29 years. Whilst teachers in this age group "make up a very small percentage of the current teaching service, the actual number resigning is far higher than for any other age group" Leete (2001, cited in Williams, 2002, p.4). Even as recently as 2006, results from a survey of 1200 teachers with less than four years experience indicated that they were disenchanted and that they did not intend remaining in the job in 10 years time (Trenwith, 2006).

Such statistics are also reflected internationally where despite increasing attempts to attract quality graduates into teacher education and growing support for induction and mentoring of early career teachers, it is well "established in countries in the Western world, such as England, that between 25% and 40% of all newly-recruited teachers resign or burnout in their first three to five years of teaching" (Ewing & Smith, 2003, p. 15). Darling-Hammond (1990) states that it is often early negative experiences that are the most detrimental and without adequate support and assistance, it is these experiences that result in early career teachers leaving within their first five years in the profession. As recently as 2003, figures from the USA
indicated that "one-third of America's new teachers leave teaching sometime during their first three years, and almost half depart after the first five years" (Fulton, Burns & Goldenberg, 2005, p. 299).

A review of the literature specifically identifies the issues of concern related to early career teachers. These issues may either act alone or in conjunction with others to result in those early negative experiences. From an Australian context, issues that may contribute to the negative experiences of early career teachers are associated with adjusting to the demands of teaching fulltime (combining management, programming and extra curricula activities); negotiating colleague relationships; staff room, school and community cultures; issues of professional identity and lack of rewards for professional growth, and conflicts between the idealism of being a early career teacher and the reality that awaits (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (CDEST), 2002; Ramsey 2000; Ewing & Smith, 2003; McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2004). In addition, physical and health education teachers often face specific challenges. These have been identified as perceived low status of their subject, physical isolation within the school setting, fewer colleagues for support, lack of appropriate resources or specialist teaching spaces, and their expected social identity (Macdonald & Kirk, 1996; Schemp & Graber, 1992; Smyth, 1995; Wright, 1997; cited in McCormack & Thomas, 2003).

Such an array of issues identifies the need for a range of measures to be undertaken to support early career teachers, including system led policies that address issues related to reducing the demands of teaching fulltime. Most importantly however, the range of issues underlines both the need for a range of measures to be implemented for early career teachers over time (Ganser, 2002; McCormack, et al., 2004; Ramsey, 2000; Schuck, 2003a) and, that a range of stakeholders be involved in their provision; teacher employing authorities, individual schools, universities, professional associations and early career teachers themselves (CDEST, 2002; Schuck & Segal, 2002; Ramsey, 2000).

**Professional Development for Early Career Teachers**

Given the clear link that has been established between the provision of quality induction programs which include mentoring and collegial networks (CDEST, 2002; Carter & Francis 2001; Kane & Russell, 2003; McCormack, et al., 2004), and early career teachers' future performance, one of the most recent major reports into teacher education in NSW has highlighted the inadequate provision of induction programmes and structures in teaching as compared to other professions (Ramsey, 2000). Indeed, others have also agreed in the harshest of terms, referring to education as "the profession that eats its young" (Halford, 1998, cited in Schuck, 2003a, p. 51).

The Ramsey Review (2000) led to the mandating of supervisors for early career teachers in the state system, along with an expectation from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) that mentors also be provided (60 mentors have since been provided in DET schools). Beginning teacher websites and the development of induction kits to be used by schools were also developed. However, despite these recommendations change was slow in occurring with research by CDEST (2002) and McCormack and Thomas (2003) indicating that fewer than half of early career teachers had participated in formal induction
programs. Ewing and Smith (2003) in their longitudinal study also found that “the majority of early career teachers felt that their introduction into the first year of teaching was neither systematic or well planned and managed” (p.30). They also reported that only 40 per cent of early career teachers had been provided with a mentor and that only half of the respondents were assigned a supervisor.

A recent small scale study of PDHPE early career teachers from across education systems in NSW (Webb, 2005) indicated that there may have been some small improvement in the support offered to early career teachers, with 84% of the study sample of 54 teachers reporting that they had access to a school based induction program. Of these 66% were involved in in-school early career teacher networks. However, only 55% indicated that they had access to an appointed mentor. It would therefore seem that the situation for early career teachers is improving, however, still more needs to be done to ensure a large number of early career teachers ‘do not disappear between the cracks’.

Whilst studies have shown there was general satisfaction by early career teachers with induction programs and mentoring within schools when it did occur, mentoring was seen to be of more value if provided by experienced teachers, teacher educators and other early career teachers from outside the school (Fulton, et al., 2005; McCormack et.al, 2004; Schuck & Segal, 2002). The reasons for such a view were related to issues of confidentiality and the desire not to disclose their difficulties to their colleagues and supervisors (Schuck & Segal, 2002).

Given the affordances of ICT, it is now possible to overcome many of the concerns expressed by early career teachers about mentors within the school context. Whilst the provision of mentors at the school site is also of value, Schuck (2003b) found that “electronic support communities are of value to beginning teachers and mentors and that many of the problems experienced by traditional dyadic mentoring relationships … can be overcome through this medium” (p.1909). She is further supported by Bruffee (1993) and Naidu and Olsen (1998) who have highlighted the potential of technology to support early career teachers by having continued and frequent contact with others thus supporting a philosophy of collaborative learning; sharing their practical learning experiences towards the development of a collective body of knowledge; discussing content material and their understanding of that content in light of their practical learning experiences; engaging in reflective practice that is valued by mentors and peers; developing a support network to facilitate ongoing information sharing; and combating isolation through the development of a networked community that includes access to peers, mentors and resources.

The Project – From Surviving to Thriving

Whilst it is clear that the various education employing authorities are moving to provide professional development opportunities for early career teachers in general, there still existed a void in subject specific professional development programs that would support early career teachers. Given the research that has been identified earlier, (Fulton, et al., 2005; McCormack et.al., 2004; Schuck & Segal, 2002), ACHPER NSW believed that as a professional association, it would be able to contribute significantly to the growth of physical and health education professionals. This could be achieved by providing sustained learning opportunities over a period of time with increased opportunities for professional learning.
This project builds upon other online resources that have been developed for the professional development of early career teachers, for example: the Ontario Teachers' Federation's *Survive and Thrive Virtual Conference for Beginning Teachers* and Indiana University's *The Novice Teacher Support Project*. Unlike these programs, this project consisted in the main of PDHPE teachers who attended the induction conference as well as experienced PDHPE practitioners with a willingness to support their new colleagues as well as further develop their leadership skills.

Recognising the need for professional development programs to commence early in a teacher's career and to clearly meet the distinct needs of participants the project has been developed with the following guidelines in mind:

- Involvement of a variety of high quality professional development opportunities such as, an induction conference, mentoring opportunities and collegial networks.
- An ICT framework that supports teachers not creates additional time demands
- Ongoing and responsive to negotiated teacher needs
- Encouragement of professional dialogue about teachers' work
- Involvement of a range of education stakeholders
- The provision of professional development opportunities for experienced PDHPE practitioners with future leadership aspirations

ACHPER NSW with funding from the Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP) initiated a partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Training, Catholic Education Commission, Association of Independent Schools, NSW PDHPE Teachers' Association (PDHPETA), NSW Professional Teachers' Council and the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, to implement a professional development program for early career teachers of physical and health education that commenced in early 2005. To assist in the organisation of the induction conference and coordinate the mentoring program, a professional officer was appointed on a one-day a week basis for the length of the project.

*Phase One - The Induction Conference*

A two-day conference for early career teachers of PDHPE in their first two years of teaching and was organised by a management group coordinated by ACHPER NSW. This group consisted of early career teachers, practising teachers, education consultants from each of the employing authorities, two PDHPE professional organizations, and academics from two universities involved in the training of physical and health education teachers.

The conference was conducted towards the end of the teachers first term of teaching, providing the required time to adjust to the profession and the new demands they were experiencing. Furthermore, it was believed that by providing more time for school experiences, participants were more likely to have a firmer context by which they may relate the insights from conference presenters and their discussions with colleagues. The program covered a range of PDHPE specific activities (such as implementation of the new Years 7-10 PDHPE syllabus and practical workshops) as well as the investigation of issues of a general nature for early career teachers (such as the NSW DET Quality Teaching Framework, Professional Teaching Standards expectations, and early career teacher induction
issues). In addition, participants were involved in activities that enabled them to clarify and work towards meaningful professional learning goals in relation to the development of teaching standards.

In framing the program a number of guiding principles were adhered to.

- Firstly, it was important that a thorough needs analysis was carried out that allowed the program to be tailored to meet the needs of early career PDHPE teachers from across all education sectors who were represented at the conference.

- Secondly, the content of many of the sessions was designed to build upon, not repeat, what had been covered in pre-service training, providing experiences that would improve the learning outcomes of school students.

- Thirdly, the selection of presenters also had to reflect the diversity of education systems as well as their implementation of a range of strategies that they had put in place to move from surviving to thriving. With 52 participants representing rural and metropolitan schools, and from across each of the education systems, the organising committee ensured that presenters and workshop leaders were representative of the various education authorities. This approach further enhanced the relevance of the content for the participants. This meant that they provided a range of perspectives as well as presenting utilising a collaborative rather than a deficit approach.

- Finally, extra time needed to be provided for participants to reflect on each of the sessions in relation to their own context, as well as establish an extended network of PDHPE teachers that will provide professional and on-going personal support during their early years of teaching.

Over the two days, it was also seen as important for each of the committee members to be in attendance with education consultants from each of the systems to lead sessions and provide advice and establish a support network for teachers once the conference had finished.

*Phase Two - Online Mentoring*

As a result of the induction conference, 24 early career teachers volunteered to be involved in online mentoring over a further two terms. Whilst all who wished to be involved were accommodated, priority would have been given to early career teachers who teach in rural or remote NSW, teach in disadvantaged schools in urban NSW, or who had limited PDHPE specific support.

Experienced classroom teachers of PDHPE affiliated with ACHPER NSW and the NSW PDHP ETA who were interested in participating as mentors were asked to submit an expression of interest to the project management committee. These were judged against set criteria to determine the suitability of each applicant to become a mentor. The online mentoring phase of the project saw pairs of targeted early career PDHPE teachers matched with twelve experienced PDHPE classroom teachers. This took place after an additional one-day workshop where the opportunity existed for both mentees and mentors to mix both socially and professionally. Providing the virtual meeting place for participants in the project was
the BEST:PDHPE (Beginning and Establishing Successful Teachers) website, developed for education graduates from the University of Wollongong and participants in this project.

**Online Resources**

Participants were also given location details to enable them to access resources. These resources included web resources, lesson plans, online articles and research papers on a range of issues that are grouped around various themes that have been identified in ActiveHealth (www.activehealth.uow.edu.au), a Web-based physical and health education environment that encompasses:

- on-line access to the Physical and Health Education program at the University of Wollongong;
- physical and health education teaching resources;
- facilitation of professional development activities; and,
- access to physical and health information sources.

From ActiveHealth, participants not wishing to be involved in Phase 2 were also given the option of utilising the BEST website to access specific information related to beginning teaching. They were not, however, given password access to the mentoring sites at this stage in the project until further research related to the use of the BEST website had been conducted.

**Key Outcomes from Phase 1 - The Conference**

Given that ACHPER NSW was the first professional association to conduct such a professional development program for early career teachers, the management committee embarked upon a comprehensive analysis of both the induction conference and the online mentoring program. At the conclusion of the conference, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked for details about the effectiveness of the conference as well as providing guidance about potential program modifications for future conferences.

Whilst it is true that a long term evaluation of the outcomes of such a conference is required, comments such as, 'Outstanding'; 'A very valuable course'; 'Information was great'; 'Loved it, thought it was awesome, very beneficial'; 'It has been a great learning experience'; 'Very inspiring and motivating' coupled with an analysis of the individual response items, indicated that the conference overall was a resounding success.

The overwhelming majority of participants indicated that the quality of the sessions was excellent and that the content covered within sessions was comprehensive as well as being relevant to their needs as early career PDHPE teachers. Indeed the majority of participants (98%) indicated that the conference met their professional needs. Whilst for some this meant identifying areas that they could improve upon, for a number it also reaffirmed what they had learnt at university and that there are things that they were doing well.
Apart from the evidence that the two-day conference was appropriately focused and targeted at the professional needs of early career PDHPE teachers, participants considered that the conference contributed to the improvement of their professional skills and understandings. The overwhelming majority of participants rated the conference’s contribution to the improvement of their professional skills and understandings as high. This was further supported by data that indicated that participants were either very or moderately satisfied with conference sessions focusing on curriculum innovations and teaching practice. Specifically sessions on the main messages in the new Years 7-10 PDHPE syllabus (95% very or moderately satisfied); the NSW Quality Teaching Framework (93% very or moderately satisfied); Quality Teaching in PDHPE (93% very or moderately satisfied), and, Practical Workshops with a focus on teaching physical education (100% very or moderately satisfied).

Another pleasing outcome of the conference was that all participants believed it contributed highly to the enhancement of their professional confidence. The degree of their feelings in this area can be seen by the comments made by delegates such as, "it motivated me to succeed"; "made me want to be a better teacher"; "gave me faith in the profession"; "it gave me belief in myself"; and it "reignited my passion for teaching."

This showed an increased self-efficacy, and self constructed knowledge together with a professional awareness and growth. Whilst there is no way of knowing whether the level of confidence stayed high after returning to their schools, a comment by one of the participants, "I'm just starting to feel like a proper teacher and as though I fit in. I'm finally thinking to myself – yes, this is my career" (AGQTP, 2005), indicated that the conference may well have a lasting impact on a range of the participants.

Preliminary data from those involved in the mentoring aspect of the program that concluded at the end of 2005, indicated that the majority (66%) intended to stay teaching for at least eleven years. This may indicate that their continued online support during their induction and initial year of teaching helped them overcome feelings of isolation and provided much needed emotional support and confidence.

Perhaps one of the most pleasing outcomes of the conference was the extent to which participants believed that as a result of attending the conference they would be able to improve student outcomes - student knowledge, skills and understanding and student engagement and motivation. Comments such as, "the conference enabled me to reflect on my teaching"; "it improved my understanding of the reason for the PDHPE syllabus"; "made me think more about higher order thinking"; and, "made me think about how to use and understand other teaching models" reflects the early career teachers' focus on improving their pedagogy through self reflection and critique of their practices. This can only help to improve the quality of teaching in schools and improve the outcomes of both students and teachers of PDHPE.

Perhaps one of the most telling comments about the effect of the conference was that “the conference reminded me that when I walk into a lesson I need to stop and ask myself the four basic questions: what do I want my students to learn, why do I want them to learn this, how will they learn it and how well do I want them to learn it?” (AGQTP, 2005 p.1).
Concluding Remarks

This project represents a significant departure from traditional professional development approaches for early career teachers in NSW. Whilst the combination of an induction conference and mentoring activities when they have occurred have been cross-curriculum, this project is unique in that it specifically addressed issues that were specific to the curriculum area of physical and health education. Given the innovative nature of this approach, the results of the evaluation of Phase 1 - The Induction Conference - clearly indicates that this approach has the potential to provide real support for teachers in their first few years of teaching and provide participants with a sense of connectedness to the physical and health education profession.

Whilst the responses have been extremely positive, this is not a time for complacency. As all good teachers do, thought always needs to be given to how to do it "a bit better". Already in 2006, the induction conference has been completed with a greater number of participants and with a number of changes made reflecting the comments made by 2005 participants. Whilst all the principles of the first conference still provided a framework for the overall program and the content delivery, changes in 2006 were designed to provide:

- more time for group discussion and reflection,
- an increased emphasis on practical and positive behaviour management strategies,
- greater links to the NSW Institute of Teachers Professional standards and
- more sessions on teaching strategies specifically for physical education.

Whilst the evaluation for 2006 has still to be analysed, preliminary findings indicate that the conference was once again extremely successful.

That mentees and mentors from 2005 made themselves available in 2006 to act as session presenters and workshop leaders, highlights the level of commitment from within the physical and health education profession towards supporting its early career teachers. Whilst the results from Phase 2 are still to be reported, all the indications so far are that this project has not only supported early career teachers of PDHPE, but also has the potential to provide professional development opportunities for experienced teachers ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for students.
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