

Casual Teaching: A significant gap in professional learning

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Numerous novice teachers begin their teaching careers as casual teachers, thus can be increasingly 'at risk' of leaving the profession. Subsequently, there is a dire need for appropriate teacher education for pre-service teachers and professional learning of practising teachers and principals to facilitate ways for Casual Teachers (CTs) to 'survive and thrive' within their schools. A new Bachelor of Education unit, plus ongoing research carried out with CTs, have highlighted some ways to facilitate significant understandings and skills required by pre-service teachers to become successful CTs, and permanent teaching colleagues to support their more itinerant colleagues.

Context – Novice casual teachers are 'at risk' of leaving the profession or regressing

Each year, throughout Australia, thousands of hopeful students graduate from Schools of Education, thus are looking to join the teaching profession, take ownership of their classes and make positive differences in their students' lives. Yet, in reality, this is only the case for a small number of these novice teachers, as permanent positions now are currently a relatively rare commodity unless they are prepared to go rural/remote or other 'hard to staff schools', which can raise their own challenges. In NSW, they will have to join the ranks of over 45,000 Casual teachers registered with Casual Direct (2012) and approximately 13,000 in Victoria (VARGO, 2012). In one university, which produces a high number of teaching graduates, it is estimated that only 22% are appointed to permanent full time work (Boyd, Harrington, Jones, Kivunja & Reitano, 2010). The large remainder of the graduating cohort/s are left to fend for themselves as they do not officially belong to or are supported by any school or system (Duggleby & Badali, 2007); however, simultaneously, they also have to attain and maintain registration and accreditation through meeting a number of minimum employment days and professional learning (PL) goals. Although the number of days employed might differ, these reflect similar requirements to their more permanently employed colleagues who often gain much of this support and PL through their schools. In addition, the permanent teachers (PTs) can more readily fund any shortfall in the required PL for themselves, as they draw regular salaries.

CTs are more 'at risk' than their permanent colleagues for both professional and personal reasons. Although both cohorts have achieved equivalent qualifications, it is only those with stable permanent or temporary (on contract) work who are likely to have official mentors, inductions, certainty of work, systemic support and some organised professional learning in order to help them transition into the profession. Contrary to this, the novice CTs have to continually be on the 'look out' for work (Jenkins et.al, 2009), personally finance their own PL, gain accreditation, fund their livelihoods while looking for work, thus balance uncertainly, fading confidence and feelings of marginalisation and job dissatisfaction (Jenkins, Smith & Maxwell, 2009; Lunay & Locke, 2006). Without positive, initial teaching experiences, it is noted that teachers are likely to be more 'at risk' of leaving the profession, 'regressing' in relation to teaching knowledge and skills (Pietsch,

2011) and negatively influencing their views on ‘job effectiveness, job satisfaction and career length’ (Fieman-Nemsar, 2001; McCormack & Thomas, 2005, p. 17).

Added to this, Duggleby & Badali (2007, p. 23) noted that casual teachers must have ‘extra skills’ to those of other teachers in order to attain success in their classes. This makes sense when considering how significant ‘getting to know’ your students and building positive rapport is to managing and planning appropriately for a classroom (Jenkins et al., 2009).

Yet it remains puzzling how they (CTs) can be expected to develop extra skills with less ‘time on class’ than their permanent counterparts, as well as with little systemic support or sponsored professional learning’ (Jenkins et. al., 2009, p.65).

Ultimately, these novice teachers are competing daily for work (especially in the initial stages), arriving in new situations thus having to deal with new students, school staffs, parents and systems (Jenkins, 2009), but they also have to magically learn the ‘extra skills’ required of a CT while ‘learning to teach’ at the same time. Continually, these CTs can be subject to high levels of scrutiny as a parent or teacher complaint, and classroom management issues can mean that they will not be employed again by the same school, whereas the permanent teacher is more likely to gain extra support from their mentors – formal or informal – as well as the advantage of being able to build constructive relationships within the school.

The significance of CTs becomes obvious when we note that a review of CTs in the US, UK and Australia, reveals that most school students spend up to one year from (K-12) with CTs (Lunay & Lock, 2006, p. 171) and that there also has been a significant increase of 36% in the employment of CTs since 2000 in Victoria alone (VARGO, 2012).

Addressing this ‘gap’ in pre-service education and professional learning for CTs and practising teachers/principals

As a result of the common challenging scenarios that face many novice CTs, it is important that pre-service teacher education addresses this ‘gap’ in teacher preparation. For example: how to go about gaining casual work should be essential learning for pre-service students. How to prepare appropriately for casual teaching work; what should be done on arrival at another new school; and what procedures/actions should be carried out on departing the school, all should be explored in pre-service education so that the realities of casual work are addressed to some extent. Still, such topics are rare within most teacher education awards apart from the occasional ‘one-off, add-on’ sessions.

Some ideas that have been shared by my research with CTs and interactions with students in a pre-service unit that I teach include the following. Strategies should be formulated by principals and staff in schools along the lines of how to make their school more inclusive and inviting for all staff, including those who come and go like CTs. Such simple ideas as providing each CT with a package of readily accessible information to facilitate their work (maps of the school, bell times, an abridged student welfare policy); all staff, including the administration staff greeting CTs warmly; and other staff introducing themselves and making sure that CTs know that they are teaching next door if they require any support; all would be helpful notions that alleviate much of the CT’s initial stress about teaching at a new school. Apprising CTs about where the keys to the staff toilet are and which cups in the staff room are available for visitors – seemingly mundane information –

still would ease many CTs' initial concerns about having to ask never-ending, basic questions and invading other staff members' territories and spaces. Principals and deputy principals could also invite the CTs to check in with them at the end of the school day to share their experiences with the intention of following up on any necessary issues. If this follow up is ensured, especially concerning the lack of appropriate behaviour, then school students quickly begin to realise that the school is supportive of the CTs whether they return to the school the next day, the next week or the next month.

All schools and systems, regardless of a teacher's employment status, should enhance support for ongoing PL, in order for CTs to gain and/or maintain registration, where feasible. Ultimately, novice CTs could be replacing the permanent staff who are leaving the school, thus it could be viewed as a responsibility of the profession as a whole to ensure a well-educated and professionally up-to-date future staff. Indeed, it follows that CTs benefit schools by their presence and work in the school and that if they are offered any PL opportunities then ultimately this will advantage the students and schools in which they work. Furthermore, the CTs would appreciate schools' offers of PL and to include and value them along with the permanent staff, hence CTs would tend to 'look after the school/s (Jenkins, et al., 2009) by continuing to accept their work.

Lastly, many CTs have reflected a great deal of resourcefulness and energy in their efforts to support each other in their work. In Victoria, the Victoria Institute of Teaching (VIT) hosts a number of geographically based networks for CTs, which aim to cater for their own PL needs, as well as provide virtual and physical collegial meetings and networks to sustain themselves and their work. They regularly mentor and offer suggestions to each other, plus air their successes and frustrations. From the quote below, it is clear that the inspiring resilience of this CT is still there, however it is shaky. These words pose the question as to how long this resilience can be maintained without the feelings of 'belonging' and satisfying work that more permanent work can enhance.

That hesitant and nervous girl who hoped and dreamed of being a wonderful teacher is still there. A bit battered, a bit bruised, but still well and truly there. I discovered that, given a voice for the first time in a long time, she doesn't want me on that plateau. I don't want me on that plateau. (A Female CT, CRT Support Network Coordinator, Wodonga CRT)
<http://wodongacrtsupportnetwork.blogspot.com.au/p/about-us.html>.

Conclusion

Significant numbers of well educated, enthusiastic and able novice teachers, who have persisted in gaining their degrees - some against significant financial odds - are lost to the profession as they can't financially sustain the 'uncertainty' of casual employment, the lack of job satisfaction and the debilitating loss of confidence that come from feeling marginalised and 'at risk'. In particular, the novice teachers who 'flee' teaching are those who can't afford to 'wait' for a more permanent income as well as those who are impatient to gain financial independence and 'make a difference' in the world of work. For those teachers who don't have families who can continue to house and fund them until something more permanent comes along, it is a difficult scenario to sustain.

In fact, the teaching profession as a whole, except for specific, 'lighthouse' cases of support which effectively integrate their CTs into their schools via constructive means, is letting these teachers down in all sorts of ways, especially in regards to the accreditation and registration requirements of ongoing PL. Without this PL, it would be difficult for the CTs to gain and maintain their accreditation. Schools of Education in universities and the

teaching profession (systems, teachers and principals) must work on ways to prevent these effective and energetic teachers from 'falling through the cracks'. Unless teacher education attempts to plug these significant gaps in pre-service teacher preparation, PL opportunities are offered to CTs to sustain their ongoing accreditation and work, and permanent teachers and principals formulate ways to welcome and support CTs in their schools, these teachers will continue to regress and/or be lost to the profession. In addition, without addressing this issue, we will continue to prepare teachers for the 'past' of permanent work where often teachers could build rapport with their own classes, rather than the 'present', where employment is increasingly likely to be casual (Jenkins, 2013) and time with the same students can be fleeting.

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