EXPLORING BEGINNING TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN MALTA

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Abstract – *The Maltese Government, being concerned about the quality of school education, is attempting to increase teacher effectiveness and student learning. To achieve these goals, it is argued, that current in-service programmes need to be improved and focused, especially by giving due attention to the induction phase. The important phase of induction within the professional development continuum for teachers is lacking. Schools need to devise appropriate professional induction seminars and workshops for new teachers to extend their professional knowledge and skills acquired during the pre-service stage. As such a number of discussion documents, research studies and papers have and are being written in order to provide the authorities with the appropriate data on which to base future educational policies in relation to teacher preparation and induction schemes. This paper explores the perceptions of primary and secondary school teachers who are currently in their induction phase (i.e. their first three years after graduation). It reports the views of around three cohorts (approximately 300 teachers) about two main areas: teacher preparation and professional development. The methodological approach adopted was a questionnaire survey followed by in-depth interviews of around 18 teachers. Through this study we hope to shed light on ways and means of improving the current B.Ed (Hons) teacher education programme and also point out how teachers feel once they are full-time graduates. This will provide direction as to how the education authorities, the respective teacher training institutions and schools in particular can support beginning teachers. The essential link between pre-service and continuing professional development is explored and identified as key to quality improvements at the school level. New teacher induction schemes for the Maltese education system are discussed.*

Introduction

This particular study arose due to an interest in learning about the perceptions of teachers with regards to their preparation (during the four years of the Bachelor of Education course or the one year Post Graduate Certificate in Education course), induction and professional development. Understanding what teachers experience once they have embarked on their new career as well as what they feel regarding their preparation is not only essential for the new graduates themselves but also for the respective teacher education institutions as it helps us to keep in touch with the realities of school life as perceived by beginning teachers.

The main aim of this paper is therefore to shed some light on what beginning teachers experience and how the teacher training courses in the island state of Malta can be improved, altered and enhanced in order to help newly qualified teachers settle down in their induction phase. The following four questions were central to this study:

- What are the current perceptions about the teacher training programmes given the experiences gained in school as full-time teachers?
- What problems do teachers face once they commence full-time teaching?
- What qualities or skills do they value as beginning teachers?
- What opportunities do teachers have to develop professionally?

Induction and ongoing professional development: a brief review

The quality of a teacher's experience in the initial years of teaching is critical to developing and applying the knowledge and skills acquired during initial teacher training and to forming positive attitudes to teaching as a career. There is a general acceptance of the value of good induction processes for the beginning teacher, but, as Coolahan (2002) argues, there has tended to be a lack of coherent policy on its implementation, despite 'the high probability that solid induction programs represent one of the most cost-effective preventative strategies around' (Fullan, 1993, p.106).

The entry of newly qualified teachers into full-time teaching is widely acknowledged as problematic. The beginning teacher is often 'thrown in at the deep end', with a full-teaching load and associated responsibilities. She/He often has few, if any, support structures to draw upon and can feel isolated, stressed and anxious. Research shows that poor induction can have serious consequences (Freiberg, 2002). On the other hand, beginning teachers who are provided with a system of support are able to overcome initial problems of class management and planning and focus on student learning much sooner than others (e.g. Breaux & Wong, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Lieberman, 1995). The purpose of induction is the further development in newly qualified teachers (NQTs) of those skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that are necessary to carry out those roles effectively. Induction forms a bridging process between their initial teacher education programme (i.e. pre-service phase) and getting fully established as a confident and competent practitioner. Coolahan (2002, p.26) has expressed concerns that whilst there have been a number of research studies conducted and experiments undertaken in the area there has tended to be a 'failure in follow-up consolidation'. Hopefully, the recent study introduced by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) research into 'Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers' across a number of European countries will help to address this lacunae.

A number of these reports help to highlight some major developments taking place in various European countries. Some of these developments are presented here with a focus on the induction phase.

In the United Kingdom the induction arrangements in all four countries (i.e. England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have been substantially revised and developed in recent years and so for various reasons. As Ross & Hutchings (2003, p. 53) report, the main pressures for these developments have been the following: it has been argued that securing an early foundation for continuing professional development is a necessary element of successful career development; that newly qualified teachers need particular attention and support that will build on their initial teacher training; that induction support will help teacher retention in the first year; and that a probationary period acts as a further check on teacher competence. In all cases the revisions relate to a general move to see professional development as a continuous process throughout the teaching career. Teachers in their induction build on the various competencies and standards that they would have been introduced during their initial teacher training. In Northern Ireland this is part of a continuous process of development extending into the second and third years of teaching.

The induction policy has two main principles: an entitlement to support and professional development for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), and assessment against defined national standards. NQTs have an individualized programme of support during their induction year from a designated induction tutor. This takes account of the NQTs strengths and areas for development as set out in the Career Entry Profile that each NQT brings from initial teacher training to the first teaching post. The programme includes observation of their teaching, watching more experienced teachers in different settings, and a professional review of progress at least every half term. The headteacher of their school plans that the NQT does not teach more than 90% of a normal timetable during the induction period. (In Scotland the amount of time that inductees have for teaching and professional development is 70% and 30% respectively.) This allows for the other professional activities to take place. Initial studies (Totterdell et al., 2002) show that for many NQTs the induction period is a supportive and positive experience, and acts as an incentive to stay in the profession. However, implementation is not uniformly good, and a minority of inductees experience lack of support leading to stress and disaffection.

An interesting development in the UK is the introduction of Early Professional Development Schemes (in the second and third year of teaching), which follow the induction year. This is meant to serve as a bridge between induction and continuing professional development. In Wales, teachers get funding for this, whilst in Northern Ireland what is covered and developed may be submitted to gain accreditation towards postgraduate qualifications.

In France, one of the most recent developments is that newly qualified teachers are to benefit from at least five weeks of training at the University Institutes for Teacher Training (IUFM) during the first two years of service (Cros & Obin, 2003, p.40).

During the initial year of teaching, Chinese teachers are on ‘probation’. They have a lighter teaching load in comparison to that of ‘experienced’ teachers (Paine, 1990), although one notes that even experienced teachers have a relatively ‘light’ load, having 6 to 12 lessons a week. The lighter load is meant to help teachers adjust to the school environment and to give beginning teachers more time for preparation. Schools are very helpful in the induction phase – the process of helping novice teachers is an active part of a school’s faculty. Teachers work in teams – in groups containing a mix of teachers with varied experience. There is also a lot of mentoring in order to aid the beginning teacher (Paine, 1990).

In Japan, the boards of education provide induction training for beginning teachers. This takes place at education centres and within schools (internship training programmes) under the guidance of an experienced teacher selected by the school head (San, 1999).

Beginning teachers are faced with a number of challenges as soon as they take on full-time teaching in a school. Research shows that they are overwhelmed and exhausted dealing with non-teaching duties (Moreira, 1996, Humphrey, 2000). They also realise just how difficult it is to address students’ diverse learning needs (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1989; Grudnoff & Tuck, 2001; Humphrey, 2000). Novice teachers feel inadequate with their lack of understanding of students they are about to teach, maybe reflecting different home backgrounds, different views and expectations about education (Schernpp et al., 1998).

Lack of curriculum knowledge (coverage and depth) (Elliot & Sinlarat, 1999; Parkinson & Rea, 1999) classroom management concerns (mainly discipline) (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2001), large number of students and disruptive or unmotivated students were other major challenges (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1989; Featherstone, 1993; Moreira, 1996; Fisher et al., 1999; Serow, Eaker & Forrest, 1994). Novice teachers also tend to be inflexible, that is they find it difficult to improvise or change plans to suit students’ needs and behaviour (Featherstone, 1993; Fineer, Manross, Schernpp & Tan 1998). They also report finding it difficult to plan long-term and to select suitable material.

Beginning teachers often feel isolated and are reluctant to ask for help (Featherstone, 1993). They desire more assistance regarding school policies, procedures and teaching responsibilities (Wilkinson, 1997). This situation is further complicated when administrators are unresponsive and/or parents are uncooperative (Serow, Eaker & Forrest, 1994). This highlights an important point raised in research conducted by Bleach (1999) and Earley (2001) about the importance of novice teachers having time to establish relationships with experienced teachers or mentors. Beginning teachers also face problems when there is a lack of teaching materials and school resources such as lack of labs or equipment for experiments (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1989; Moreira, 1996).

These findings provide an informed picture of the professional needs of NQTs.

Other studies also help to highlight not just the needs of beginning teachers but also what the novice teacher brings with him/her. In Greece, for instance, *'good qualities'* of the teachers are specific attributes of people's mind or character like kindness and honesty. (Peters, 1977 as quoted in Standa, 1996, p. 115). In New Zealand, a paper by Grudnoff & Tuck (2001) shows particular qualities or strengths of beginning teachers such as enthusiasm, commitment, dedication and personal and professional worth. Beginning teachers tend to share ideas and work in teams as well as possess positive interpersonal skills. Chinese beginning teachers highlight 'knowledge mastery' as the main prerequisite, however, this is followed by character and affective skills (Paine, 1990). Japanese beginning teachers also perceive 'professional attitude' to be the most important skill for a teacher to have (San, 1999, p. 22). Teachers wish to be role models; they want to appear enthusiastic and to 'perform' well. Another important skill is to treat all students equally (Paine, 1990). Dedication and investment of time and energy are also considered to be important qualities in a teacher.

A number of studies reviewed support the argument that no initial teacher training programme can fully address the needs of prospective teachers. Neither should it be expected to do so. Often many, even within the teaching profession, assume that NQTs should be able to handle the myriad of responsibilities that make up school life. This supposition, by its very nature, goes against the principles of lifelong learning. Whilst appreciating the need to have a teaching force of high quality we need to bear in mind the ongoing nature of teaching as a vocation/profession and address them from a holistic perspective (i.e. addressing the pre-service, induction and ongoing professional development together rather than as separate entities) (Bezzina, 2002).

The sense of disappointment and powerlessness reported by novice teachers (e.g. Elliot & Sinlarat, 1999) have to be addressed within such a scenario, for as a beginning teacher stated there is a difference between being prepared to teach and actually teaching. There are some things such as management and daily routines which are important but they can not be necessarily taught in teacher education programmes (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2001, p. 12). A study by San (1999, pp.22-23) in Japan helps to contextualise such a view. Japanese beginning teachers (especially primary teachers) are concerned with a number of education-related items such as class management, student guidance, understanding students, school management and relationships with home and community. Secondary school teachers tend to be more concerned with subject related items such as subject knowledge, basic teaching techniques and the study and use of teaching aids. With experience novice teachers tend to overcome initial concerns and challenges.

However, what this study helps to emphasise, whilst reaffirming findings from other studies, is the focus on character and attitudes. The teachers' level of experience did not seem to make a difference regarding the following concerns: teacher's professional attitude, subject knowledge, basic teaching techniques, use of information materials, study and use of teaching aids, relationship with other teachers, and understanding present situations of school education. The personal disposition one has and adopts can be crucial and these may be issues of relevance across the different teacher training phases. For as Coolahan (2002, pp.13-14) argues:

> 'The teacher needs to have a deep understanding of her/himself, and of the nature of her/his work. She/he needs to have developed a wide range of professional skills in teaching, planning, assessment and personal relationships. She/he needs to have flexibility, be open to self renewal and be a life long learner. … be prepared to co-operate as a team member. … It is only intelligent, highly skilled, imaginative, caring and well educated teachers who will be able to respond satisfactorily to the demands placed on the education system …'

The transition or induction Phase involves schools helping newly qualified teachers to settle down in the classroom and into the teaching profession. This is a crucial period in the teachers' lives, since the outcome of the transition between university and the world of work will determine the teachers' attitudes throughout their career. According to Bleach (1999, p.11) the induction programme should include the following:

- Pre-employment induction (involving at least a day in school following appointment to begin to get to know whole-school and departmental procedures)

- A statement of entitlement, setting out school aims with regard to newly qualified teachers, the commitments and expectations
- Use of Career Entry Profiles
- A programme of internally offered INSET
- Encouragement to pursue externally offered INSET
- Observation of more experienced colleagues in order to explore good teaching and learning practice.

Newly qualified teachers go through various kinds of processes and developments during this stage. Kagan (1992, in Fisher et al., 1999, p. 136) noticed that novice teachers undertake three main tasks:

- Acquire knowledge of pupils
- Use that knowledge to modify and reconstruct their personal images of self as teacher
- Develop standard procedural routines that integrate classroom management and instruction.

What has all this got to say about teachers' ongoing professional development? In Kagan's study teachers were interviewed in order to find out what they think about professional development and they admitted various concerns. They argued that sometimes the content they learnt was inappropriate for schools or the quality of training was poor or not suited to all teachers. Moreover, follow up activities or coaching on practice in schools is rare. Professional development is often not given priority by headteachers, therefore the organisation and infrastructure dedicated to professional development is poor. Usually, professional development is targeted by centrally imposed innovations, therefore schools do not actually have a say in choosing a professional development programme. These interviews showed that teachers had clear ideas about what professional development should include. The main criteria by which the teachers judged INSET courses were that it should be relevant and appropriate to their needs and level of knowledge and skill, therefore supplying them with practical advice and suggestions for action (McMahon, 1998).

Professional development

What these studies have helped to identify is the need to focus on formation, during the pre-service stage but then has to be strengthened during the induction phase and throughout the teaching career.

Waters (1998a) sums up the challenge as falling within two domains - personal and professional development. Personal development involves the person as a whole, therefore before being a teacher, the individual is a person. Professional development deals with occupational role development, which enhances skills and knowledge, in order to be able to teach effectively. In teaching, personal and professional development affect each other. Experiencing job satisfaction, means feeling good about oneself. Feeling happy in one's life means feeling good at work. Waters (1998a) suggests that the best option to help teachers develop personally is by providing programmes that develop the inner resources of teachers as individuals. This could include aspects, such as, stress management, self-esteem, and assertiveness training. This will assist teachers to cope with pressures of the job.

Reflection, as already emphasized, plays a very important role in looking at the teacher as a whole person. Routman (2002) and Danielson & McGreal (2000), amongst others, argue that reflection is an important tool for teachers' professional development. Reflection includes teacher thinking, meta-cognition, creative learning, and self-directed and self-regulated learning. Reflection does not only mean thinking but also taking action. The process of reflection could be enhanced by providing experiences that improve self-esteem and self confidence through a gradual process.

Furthermore, as Prattle & Rury (1991) argue there is a need for mutual respect, open communication, shared success, mutual support which can help to nurture trust between teachers. The goal of teacher education should be to produce skilled '*practitioners*' who work with others. The concept of mentoring should also be extended throughout the career as it helps to keep the notion of reflection as an ongoing process (Beach & Pearson, 1998).

The introduction of portfolios may also assist teachers in their personal and professional development as it is a means of guiding oneself – one can revisit and revise ideas. Use of portfolios may lead to the development of new understandings, leading teachers to recognize links between different aspects of their life experience and formulating insights for future actions (Chetcuti & Grima, 2003).

It has also been noted that teachers do not tend to change their practice in line with research findings or state mandated change (Kelsay, 1991; Boostrom, Jackson & Hanson, 1994). There seems to be a communication gap between researchers and teachers. One possible way of overcoming this communication gap is to introduce teacher-led research in specific areas that they have identified and deem as important for their situation (Holmesland & Hostmark Tarrou, 2001). In Australia, situations have been established where university academics work with schools in collaborative research projects. The purpose of such research is to enhance professional development of teachers and academics and to foster relationships between academics and teachers whilst providing opportunities for collaborative sharing of achievements and problems (Johnson et al., 1999; Sachs, 1997). In China, teachers often engage in research on teaching. Individual research sections have been set up in some of the elite schools in order to promote research, which can take place at the school itself (Paine, 1990). Research by Handscomb & MacBeath (2004) also suggests that teachers are being encouraged to become 'learners' and 'researchers' (as part of in-service teacher education); they can learn from their own observations but with instruction teachers can make more sense of their experiences.

Traditional professional development that takes place outside the school by their nature decontextualise the learning needs of teachers (and their students). More in-house, site-based managed programmes need to be organized and supported. Through a system of in-house procedures and also through networking or clustering (Bezzina, 2003; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997) teacher educators and teachers work together to improve teaching and learning outcomes for students and teachers. Various initiatives where such an approach has been introduced have led to particular developments being noted (Boostrom, Jackson & Hanson, 1994; Johnson et al., 1999). School-based professional development may also help to address the concern raised by teachers that whilst they may be willing to address particular changes, they may lack the confidence or the skills to address them (Licklider, Storer, Lychosz, Wierseme & Fields, 1996).

Apart from participation in in-service training, teachers need to involve themselves in other responsibilities to enhance their learning. Recent developments include the Teacher2Teacher Programme, which engages teachers in pairs or peer coaching, or becoming mentors, tutors to other teacher (Earley, 2001). They could also involve themselves in the creation of websites, conferences, magazines and so forth.

Professional development in the Maltese context

The quality of education in Malta has become a major issue of debate and reform (Giordmaina, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2001). Various initiatives, mainly at policy making level and introduced through Ministerial initiatives have been undertaken especially over the last decade.

A study of the Maltese context shows that the pre-service education of prospective teachers is the sole responsibility of the Faculty of Education within the University of Malta. The Faculty runs a four-year Bachelor's degree in Education [B.Ed. (Hons.)] and a one-year P.G.C.E. course. On completion of either of these two course teachers are certified as graduate teachers and can seek full-time employment in the elementary or secondary/high school sector.

On the other hand, the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers is of two kinds:

- ***Professional education*** – this entails the widening and deepening of a teacher's theoretical and research perspectives by undertaking advanced studies at the University (e.g. diploma, master's and doctoral degrees). The University also provides a variety of courses (e.g. certificate and diploma and master's programs), aimed at enhancing the professional skills and aptitudes of participants.

- ***Professional training*** – this is aimed at the development of teachers' knowledge and skills relating to daily work (e.g. INSET courses, seminars). The Education Division (similar to a Local Education Authority in the United Kingdom) is the main agent as it provides teachers varied opportunities to extend their skills and knowledge base in specific areas. The Malta University Services, a business enterprise within the University structure, also offers training opportunities in specific areas throughout the school year.

The existing model therefore caters for two important phases in teacher PD – the pre-service phase and the ongoing professional development phase. This model has certain shortcomings. First, there is no link between the pre-service and ongoing PD of teachers. Once students graduate and are employed in the State or Non-State sector they are entrusted with a full teaching load as from day one. It is left entirely in their hands to pursue PD opportunities. Teachers are not provided with support mechanisms at the school site that help them settle down and be gradually induced into the teaching profession. Thus the induction phase is currently non-existent in Malta. Second, there are no organizational structures at the school-site that encourage and facilitate opportunities for immediate and sustained practice, classroom observation, collaboration and peer coaching (Bezzina, 2002).

The educational climate within the Faculty of Education has witnessed, especially over the last ten years, 'a shift from individualism to social relationships' (Bezzina & Camilleri, 1998) The B.Ed. (Hons.) programme is based on the following main features: 'participation, consultation, support, collaboration, reflection, motivation, openness and empowerment'. Various initiatives have been undertaken (e.g. Tomorrow's Teachers Project, 1997) which have helped both the individuals members within the Faculty but also the Faculty's own identity and character to grow.

Faculty members have, through a number of initiatives, explored ways and means of improving the initial teacher education programme, including seminal work in the areas of assessment and portfolios, an improved academic programme linking theory with practice, improved links with schools through stronger and better links with the education authorities and schools, reviewed student-teacher evaluation sheets which include formative forms of assessment (one which is based on the accumulation of competencies in identified domains and focused suggestions for improvement); mentoring courses for heads and envisaged ones for teachers, and a number of initiatives all with the intention of improving the programmes we have.

The Faculty, at the same time, encourages and supports undergraduate and post-graduate studies in various areas that have to do with teaching practice as they provide us with valuable researched information as to how we can enhance and make more relevant our programmes and possibly creating new ones that have been undertaken do tend to express some concerns that students have raised about the programme. Over the years, but especially over the last few years, there has been a concerted effort to encourage undergraduate students to explore areas of study that look into specific aspects of our course. The intent is that such information is then disseminated through various means. Over the past few years, in fact, we have introduced opportunities through seminars and showcases for undergraduates and postgraduates, to present their research findings in formal, organized sessions. This helps to create the appropriate environment for healthy debate.

According to one study (Lia & Mifsud, 2000) newly qualified teachers are of the opinion that the B.Ed. course does not adequately prepare them for most of the realities found in schools. The notion that teacher education should reflect reality was also brought out by Vassallo (2000). Her findings emphasise that since Teaching Practice provides the student teacher with hands on experience in schools, it is often the most valued experience during the four-year course. She argues that during teaching practice the student teachers are often under undue pressure since they have to develop competences which are often not practised in the schools themselves. On the other hand, from the study conducted by Astarita & Pirotta (1999), it resulted that other newly qualified teachers see the teaching practice phase as somewhat artificial and it did not provide realistic training in gaining control in the classroom.

Similar to findings in international studies, Maltese beginning teachers experience difficulties in discipline, classroom control and work overload. The transition also involves stress, uncertainty, frustration and sometimes despair. Teachers feel that they do not have enough support and sometimes they feel embarrassed to ask for help (Astarita & Pirotta, 1999).

From this brief review it appears that although teacher training courses in various countries are structured in different ways, there are many similarities. In brief, teacher education at the pre-service stage:

- Has limited impact on beginning teachers; teachers do not feel completely satisfied with the training they receive
- Needs to create better links between theory and practice
- Needs to include more or extended field experiences (teaching practice)

There are also similarities with regards to what teachers consider as important and there are also similarities regarding the constraints or challenges which teachers face. The main difference perhaps emerges when one compares the experiences of Asian teachers with those in other parts of the world. Asian teachers tend to give a lot of focus on becoming masters in their subject. However, in all cases it emerged that experience is essential for effective teaching; experience helps one to overcome difficulties faced in schools.

In the case of professional development, the issues raised were:

- Teachers may feel that they have a limited role with regards to professional development, that is, they cannot do much for themselves
- The need to explore the ongoing personal and professional development of teachers with a clear focus, especially in the initial years, on character formation
- The use of peer-coaching, mentoring, building a portfolio and involvement in research have been identified as means to enhance the teachers' ongoing formation.
- School-based initiatives within a culture of support and collaboration will help teachers to handle professional challenges both coming from within the school and external to the school.

The literature shows that beginning teachers tend to face the same difficulties and to value the same qualities. These similarities exist even though teachers undergo different types of preparation, end up teaching in different school environments, and work in countries with different mentalities and stages of historical, political and cultural development. This is not to say that there are no differences across the different countries, however, the similarities are more striking.

Within this context, conducting a study that would help the Faculty of Education understand what in fact Maltese beginning teachers face was deemed important. It was assumed that going back to cohorts that were in the induction phase (i.e. the first three years of teaching) would provide us with valuable insights into current practices in two main areas: teacher preparation and teacher professional development. In the next section, an outline will be given, regarding the methodology used in order to carry out the research study. It will give an overview of the methods used and the cohort involved in the research.

Methodological approach

The decision was taken to conduct a questionnaire survey followed by semi-structured interviews (Bezzina & Stanyer, 2004). The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section dealt with the teachers' perceptions of their preparation (the B.Ed/PGCE course). The second section asked teachers to identify desirable skills and to identify the challenges they came across in their induction phase. The final section dealt with teachers' opinions about the importance of professional development and the opportunities available for teachers to develop as professionals.

Beginning teachers' perceptions were measured either through a ranking system (1 being the most important), or teachers were asked to select as many as they desired from a given list. Most of the questions were close-ended, although the respondents were given the opportunity to present suggestions.

The teachers involved in the particular study were selected from the cohort of teachers who graduated between 1999 and 2001 by adopting a random sampling procedure. There were 978 teachers in the cohort (B.Ed, PGCE, Primary and Secondary). Questionnaires were sent by post during February 2003 to 480 teachers. It was decided to mail to the participants' home address the questionnaires so that the respondents were free to answer in the comfort of their own home and probably had more time to reflect before answering. 261 (i.e. 54,4%) teachers responded to the questionnaire. Table 1 highlights the respondents according to years of experience, course, gender, school level and type of school.

As can be seen from Table 1 the majority of respondents came from those having three years experience with very low response rates from those having one or two years experience. They are definitely not representative of the cohort of graduates. This paper aims at presenting the main findings not across all the identified four variables (i.e. course followed, gender, school level and school type) but report what they authors deem to be significant within the current Maltese scenario.

TABLE 1: Respondents according to different cohort groups

According to years of experience	N	%
1 year	28	10,7
2 years	82	31,4
3 years	146	55,9

According to course	N	%
B.Ed	201	77,0
PGCE	60	23,0

According to gender	N	%
Female	173	67,8
Male	82	32,2

According to school level	N	%
Primary	105	39,2
Secondary	163	60,8

According to school type	N	%
Private	76	29,2
State	184	70,8

After the questionnaires had been analysed, 18 interviews were conducted. The interview questions were chosen, in order to elaborate on information derived from the questionnaires. The 18 teachers were chosen to represent the different categories identified in Table 1.

The majority of graduates (58%) describe the teacher training programme as effective, whilst the majority (70%) said it has helped them to become professional. At the same time, the majority of respondents (93%) found that the course is rather different to the eventual realities of school life, describing it as 'too idealistic' (54%) and 'not practical enough' (51%). Interesting to note that with experience teachers found the course more practical, although still idealistic

In order to minimise the difference between the teacher training course and the realities faced in schools respondents forwarded a number of suggestion. The following list shows the highest responses:

1. Extension of TP (provided that qualified, experienced tutors may coach students and there is less pressure) (N=37)
2. Less theory, more practice (more hands-on experience) more concrete examples. You learn from experience (practical sessions beside TP) (N=34)
3. Tutors should be more in contact with teaching in classroom. Lecturers need to be put in classroom experience first and then come to lecture (N=24)
4. Lecturers should be appointed from amongst practicing teachers – teaching students of the same age as ours (N=22)
5. More classroom observation and variety of schools for TP ('good' schools as well as 'bad') More work in schools and tutorials regarding what has been observed (N=13)
6. Get together with teachers (from different schools) who have experience and exchange ideas and resources that can be used in various situations (N=10)
7. Some tutors and lecturers are not down-to-earth. (N=10)
8. Credits that apply to different realities in schools should be experienced (N=10)
9. More credits on practical issues – discipline and class management etc. (N=6)
10. Methodology units need to focus more on HOW to teach the particular unit/ content of the subject (more practical than theoretical) (N=5)

The respondents were asked to indicate how relevant they perceived the main components covered during their course. The responses are recorded in Table 2 with the main results highlighted in bold. *Teaching Practice* was indicated by the majority (83%) as the 'most relevant', followed by *subject content* (50%) and *psychology* (47%).

The respondents were also asked to identify courses they felt should be introduced at the pre-service stage. As a group beginning teachers felt the need to add First Aid (69,3%), Problem-solving skills (65,9%), relationship skills (54,0%) and Public Speaking (53,2%). The other options suggested to the teachers were chosen by less than 50% of the respondents. When the results were analysed, according to years of experience, all teachers with one year of experience felt the need to add Problem-solving skills (100%). This goes down drastically to 65,8%

and 69,2% respectively. The majority of teachers with one year of experience (89%) identified the need for training in relationship skills. This percentage decreased with experience. Overall, teachers with less experience tended to identify more needs.

TABLE 2: Perception of respondents as to the level of relevance of the various components of the course to their day-to-day teaching

Course elements	**Most**	**Relevant**	**Not so relevant**	**Irrelevant**
Psychology count	124	109	19	2
%	**47,5**	41,8	7,3	0,8
Sociology Count	44	142	59	8
%	16,9	**54,4**	22,6	3,1
Philosophy Count	12	55	127	54
%	4,6	21,1	**48,7**	20,7
Methodology Count	132	96	23	5
%	**50,6**	36,8	8,8	1,9
Teaching Practice Count	217	36	7	1
%	**83,1**	13,8	2,7	0,4
Subject Content Count	94	132	23	5
%	36,0	50,6	8,8	1,9

TABLE 3: Training needs identified by respondents according to years of experience

List	All Respondents		1 year of experience		2 years of experience		3 years of experience	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
First Aid	181	69,3	18	64,3	60	**73,2**	101	69,2
Problem-Solving Skills	172	65,9	28	**100,0**	54	65,8	94	64,3
Relationship skills	141	54,0	25	**89,3**	50	60,9	74	50,6
Public Speaking	139	53,2	24	**85,7**	45	54,9	86	58,9
I.T.	97	37,1	9	32,1	31	37,8	58	39,7
Extra methodology	92	35,2	8	28,6	43	**52,4**	45	30,8
Seminars & Workshops	82	31,4	7	25,0	22	26,8	50	34,2
Extracurricular credits	70	26,8	6	21,4	26	31,7	36	24,7
Extra subject content	63	24,1	7	25,0	26	31,7	29	19,9
Extra psychology	51	19,5	6	21,4	38	46,3	30	20,5

The majority of respondents (75 %) found teaching practice most helpful for their career. However, differences regarding choices made by teachers with different amounts of experience do not appear to be significant. Out of the three groups (one year, two years and three years of experience) the highest percentage of teachers who found Teaching Practice 'helpful' belongs to the group with two years of experience. The teachers with three years of experience had the highest percentage for the choice 'artificial' whereas teachers with one year of experience had the highest percentage for the option 'too restricted'.

TABLE 4: Perception re the value of Teaching Practice for respondents

	helpful	**artificial**	**too restricted**	**too short**	**too long**
Count – one year	21	2	3	1	0
%	77,8	7,4	11,1	3,7	0
Count – two years	69	4	4	4	1
%	84,1	4,9	4,9	4,9	1,2
Count – three years	99	22	10	15	0
%	66,7	15,3	7,3	10,7	0

85% reported that the expectations set/ demands made during the field practicum is not kept up once they graduate. The main reasons identified were time constraints (78%), teaching load (68%) and amount of corrections (49%).

Beginning teachers were asked to select (from a list) the qualities or skills they felt necessary for teachers to have. They were asked to rank three qualities in order of importance.

The majority of teachers felt the *'ability to motivate students'* was most important (93,1%) This was closely followed by '*being well-organised*' (91,2%). '*Good relationships*' with students and '*voice projection*' were the third most popular choice (90,4%) followed by '*efficient classroom management*' (89,3%). Quite a high number of skills/qualities were selected by more than 50% of the respondents. With regards to years of experience, the choices were not so different. However, teachers with one year of experience tended to perceive qualities and skills related to relationships with students as being more important (the ability to motivate students, the ability to make students comfortable especially low achievers and the ability to help students overcome difficulties). The teachers with two and three years of experience focused more on the importance of organisational skills and character (voice projection, efficient classroom management and leadership skills) although they do feel the importance of having good relationships with students. Whilst the ranking of the three most important qualities did not bring out any salient differences between the three cohorts one notes that the respondents with more experience gave less importance to issues such as: patience, flexibility, ability to evaluate one's performance, focusing on the positive and friendliness. Qualities which were actually highlighted more by the respondents with three years of experience were: ability to control one's emotions, putting students' needs first and charisma. The responses of all the respondents and the results according to years of experience have been collated in table 5.

The teachers were also asked to tick the challenges they faced when they started their career. They were asked to rank their choices from 1 to 5 (first being most difficult). The main challenges teachers identified were coping with mixed ability classes (78,9%), class discipline (66,3 %) and curriculum demands (58,6 %). Physical exhaustion also received a high response (54.8 %). The ranking shows that class discipline (26,4%) is the top concern. The second issue was coping with mixed ability classes (20,6%).

Asked to give reasons to these challenges the main choices were: not enough experience (60.9%), the course was not appropriate enough (41.8%), lack of support from the education authorities (31.4%). The results show a significant difference according to the respondents' experience. All teachers with different

TABLE 5: Qualities and skills needed by teachers as perceived by respondents

List	All Respondents		One year		Two years		Three years	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Ability to motivate	243	93,1	26	92,9	76	92,7	133	91,1
Well-organized	238	91,2	21	75,0	68	82,9	122	83,5
Voice projection	236	90,4	23	82,1	73	89,0	133	91,1
Good teacher-student relationships	236	90,4	25	89,3	74	90,2	131	89,7
Class management	233	89,3	23	82,1	72	87,8	130	89,0
Helping sts. overcome difficulties	222	85,1	25	89,3	69	84,1	121	82,9
Confidence	221	84,7	25	89,3	66	80,4	123	84,2
Patience	221	84,7	21	75,0	70	85,3	83	56,8
Making students comfortable	216	82,8	26	92,9	66	80,5	118	80,8
Leadership skills	212	81,2	18	64,3	70	85,4	121	82,9
Ability to involve students	211	80,8	22	78,6	68	82,9	115	78,8
Knowing subject/curriculum	208	79,7	23	82,1	67	81,7	112	76,7
Fairness	207	79,3	23	82,1	67	81,7	115	78,8
Co-operation	205	78,5	20	71,4	67	81,7	112	76,7
Likes teaching subject	205	78,5	23	82,1	62	75,6	114	78,1
Humour	204	78,1	21	75,0	62	75,6	93	63,6
Alertness	188	72,0	19	67,9	61	74,4	106	72,6
Letting sts. learn in their own way	185	70,9	21	75,0	63	76,8	99	67,8
Consistency	181	69,3	20	71,4	58	70,7	97	66,4
Punctuality	181	69,3	21	75,0	54	65,9	96	65,8
Flexibility	181	69,3	23	82,1	63	76,8	61	41,7
Make sure students understand	178	68,2	22	78,6	66	80,5	106	72,6
Ability to evaluate performance	174	66,6	21	75,0	67	81,7	92	63,0
Friendliness	172	65,9	21	75,0	53	64,6	84	57,5
Good listener	171	65,5	20	71,4	63	76,8	111	76,0
Ability to control one's emotions	169	64,8	19	67,9	56	68,2	118	80,8
Ability to focus on the positive	160	61,3	20	71,4	52	63,4	81	55,5
Ability to keep sts.' confidences	159	60,9	20	71,4	49	59,8	84	57,5
Charisma	158	60,5	19	67,9	54	65,9	128	87,7
Putting students' needs first	140	53,6	16	57,1	43	52,4	104	71,2
Kind/generous	139	53,3	16	57,1	45	54,9	75	51,4
Help students monitor progress	135	51,7	15	53,7	45	54,9	63	43,2
Ability to make allowances for students	128	49,0	16	57,1	34	41,5	70	47,9
Showing that one likes students	118	45,2	14	50,0	39	47,6	61	41,7
Stand up for students' rights	109	41,8	16	57,1	37	45,1	53	36,3

years of experience gave the same reasons: '*not enough experience*' (64.3, 65.9 and 57.5%) as first, '*the course was not appropriate enough*' (42.9, 46.3, 40.4%) as second and '*lack of support from education authorities*' (32.1, 30.5, 32.2%) as third concern. However, one can also note that the percentages of less-experienced teachers tend to be higher for all the options (see Table 6).

TABLE 6: Reasons as to the challenges teachers face in class

Reasons	All Respondents		One year		Two years		Three years	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Not enough experience	159	60,9	18	64,3	54	65,9	84	57,5
Course was not appropriate enough	109	41,8	12	42,9	38	46,3	59	40,4
Lack of support from Education Authorities	82	31,4	9	32,1	25	30,5	47	32,2
Lack of support from School Leadership Team	73	28,0	7	25,0	18	22,0	48	32,9
Tension at school	58	22,2	8	28,6	21	25,6	28	19,2
Tension in one's personal life	16	6,1	1	3,6	6	7,3	9	6,2

The teachers were asked whether they wished they had more support as soon as they embarked on their career. The majority wanted more help. A significant difference in the responses were observed when the group was categorised according to sector, that is, private and government. Table 7 shows that 81% of State school teachers identified the need for support as against 69% of private school teachers.

TABLE 7: Perceived need for support by sector in which teaching

	All respondents		**Private**		**State**	
	Count	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Yes	203	79,5	52	68,4	148	80,5
No	51	20	24	31,6	35	19
Not sure	1	0,5	0	0,0	1	0,5

Asked to identify what support would address their needs, the three main preferences were resources, teamwork, and an experienced colleague (Table 8). Again, a marked difference was present in the results for private and state school teachers. The percentage of state school teachers who chose resources was twice that of private school teachers. Teamwork and experienced colleague were considered more important by the state school teachers (47,3% and 42,4% for state school teachers as against 32,9% and 30,3% respectively for private school teachers).

TABLE 8: Type of support needed by sector in which teaching

Type of support	**All Respondents**		**Private**		**State**	
	Count	**%**	**Count**	**%**	**Count**	**%**
Resources	119	45,6	18	23,7	85	46,2
Teamwork	115	44,1	25	32,9	87	47,3
An experienced colleague	100	38,2	23	30,3	78	42,4
Co-operation from school management team	72	27,6	23	30,3	52	28,3
Support from education authorities	57	21,8	17	12,4	42	22,8
Mentor	50	19,2	14	18,4	35	19,0
Support from the government	16	6,1	8	10,5	12	6,5
Help from family or friends	12	4,6	6	7,9	8	4,3

Analysing the results according to years of experience showed that teachers made similar choices. Teachers with one year of experience feel more need for a mentor (35,7%) than their colleagues with two (15,9%) or three years (17,8%) years of experience.

The majority of teachers believed professional development as necessary to keep up-to-date with developments in the teaching profession. No differences were present within different groups of the cohort. The highest choices were '*co-operation*' (70.5%), '*self-evaluation*' (62.1%) and '*further study*' (60.9%). As can be seen from Table 9, co-operation is more important for less experienced teachers.

TABLE 9: Professional development support identified according to years of experience

Choices	All Respondents		One year		Two years		Three years	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Co-operation	184	70.5	21	75,0	60	73,2	95	65,1
Self-evaluation	162	62,1	16	57,1	52	63,4	89	61,0
Further Study	159	60,9	16	57,1	50	61,0	85	58,2
Developing a professional portfolio	45	17,2	5	17,9	6	7,3	32	21,9

45% of teachers identified '*INSET courses*' as the main provider for their professional development, followed by '*seminars*' and '*meetings*'. '*Team teaching*', '*workshops*' and '*conferences*' were very low, below the 20 percentile. The main reasons identified were '*time constraints*' (28%), '*reluctance to change*' (22%) and '*lack of financial resources*' (21%). Teachers who have just one year of experience also identified '*lack of co-operation*' as being one of the top two reasons for the lack of professional development opportunities in their school.

Discussion

Pre-service phase

Responses showed that over half of beginning teachers perceive the B.Ed. (Hons.)/PGCE programme as being effective. This positive attitude was similar to the findings made by Grudnoff and Tuck (2001) in their New Zealand studies. The majority felt that the course does not completely make one a professional. That teachers feel that they are not completely professional may be considered to be a genuine and positive reply. A teacher is always in the making. On the other hand, the fact that 12,6% of the respondents considered themselves to be professionals is worrying. This may mean that they do not feel the need to improve as professionals!

The majority of the respondents viewed the teaching programme as being different from the reality in schools. This had already been noted in previous local studies conducted by Lia and Mifsud (2000) and Vassallo (2000). This shows that teachers in Malta have the same difficulties as their colleagues abroad when it comes to linking theory to practice. They are similar to teachers abroad, with regards to their naivety and unrealistic optimism (discussed by Bullough & Stokes; 1994, Pineau, 1994). They have a similar sense of what Veenman (1984) describes as 'reality shock' – 'the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of classroom life' (p.143).

Respondents believe the course was too idealistic, especially by those with more years of experience. This reflects the need for a symbiotic relationship between expectations and school realities. Therefore, the teacher education programme needs to get closer to schools. The most popular suggestion was to extend the period of Teaching Practice. The need for more field practice was also felt by teachers abroad (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2001). This recommendation was followed by the wish for less theory and more practice. This could be related to the inexperienced teachers' inability to make links between what is taught at university and what they experience at school as mentioned earlier. The third and fourth most common suggestions are related. Both suggestions imply the wish for lecturers (and/or tutors) who teach in schools (or who have taught recently in schools). This was similar to the concept of the clinical faculty as described by Cornbleuth and Ellsworth (1994). A possible solution could be to start a teacher-to-teacher programme similar to those in the UK (Earley, 2001) however, instead of teachers coaching beginning teachers, they could also help teach those still at the pre-service stage.

Looking at these suggestions, it appears that teachers want more exposure and more experiences through engagement in schools. They feel the need for more practice and need more help to see how pedagogies, concepts and theories may be applied in different school situations.

In relation to the various course components taught during the programme, the majority of teachers consider psychology to be quite relevant. It is worth noting that females consider psychology to be more relevant than their male colleagues. This could be linked to traditional views of what males and females consider to be important for their development. Females also consider psychology to help one recognise problems that children might have. In the case of sociology, just over half of the respondents consider this topic to be relevant whilst almost a quarter consider it to be not so relevant.

The majority of teachers find philosophy to be not so relevant. Similarly, in the USA, it is felt that teachers do not consider philosophy to be relevant as teachers are unable to make links between theory and classroom practice (Pineau, 1994).

In Malta, theories/ ideas raised and discussed in lectures but they are not given the opportunities to try out what they have reflected upon. Also, worth noting is that secondary teachers considered philosophy to be more relevant than those teachers who teach in primary schools. Could this be since secondary teachers teach older students, and therefore may be able to apply philosophical ideas in order to deal with problematic situations appropriately?

Slightly over half of the teachers believe methodology to be most relevant. Since Maltese teachers seem to value methodology lectures (mainly because of their immediate sense of application), if educational theories (psychological, sociological and philosophical) were integrated with methodological approaches and subject teaching, teachers may start finding the latter more relevant to their teaching. A modular approach to teaching courses at the university may help redress this issue.

Teaching Practice was considered to be the most relevant domain by a large majority of respondents. The positive response towards the role that teaching practice has within the programme could be utilized in order to make other educational disciplines more relevant for teachers. This could be achieved by adopting a more hands-on approach to teaching these disciplines.

The respondents also found that courses in 'relationship skills', 'public speaking' and 'problem-solving' should be introduced. Studies by Fisher et al., (1999) and Handscomb and MacBeath (2004) emphasised that relationships are vital, especially at the beginning of one's career.

In the case of teachers with different amounts of experience, it emerged that teachers with two years of experience found teaching practice to be more helpful than their colleagues. This difference could be due to the different stages that teachers pass through. The first year is, more often than not, a '*shock*' (this was confirmed by teachers during the interview), therefore, teaching practice is not completely viewed as having been positive. In the second year of teaching, teachers are settling down in the school environment, and therefore may actually appreciate the field experience. In the third year, however, teachers' expectations and attitudes may change again, according to the school context and situations they find themselves in. They may end up believing that the reality of school life is such that it cannot be truly addressed in a teaching practice session.

Respondents identified different challenges. Teachers with less experience found interpersonal relationships to be more problematic than teachers with three years of experience. Teachers who teach in secondary schools emphasised inadequate working conditions and students' characteristics as the main challenges. Responses tended to reflect the environment teachers were in.

Transition

Asked to choose qualities or skills that teachers should possess the majority of teachers felt that a teacher needs to be able to motivate, be well-organised, be a person who establishes good relationships, needs to have good voice projection and is able to manage a classroom efficiently.

Teachers with one year experience emphasised qualities related to establishing good relationships with students. However, teachers with two or three years of experience focused more on the importance of organisational skills and character. Perhaps teachers with more experience find it easier to build relationships with students, that is, they have more experience on how to act and react to students' needs and discipline. Secondary school teachers chose leadership skills and the need to like the subject more than primary school teachers. These differences make sense. Secondary school teachers face a wide variety of students with different abilities and needs. Managing students during adolescence and motivating them is challenging. Secondary teachers also teach a specific subject and their love, or otherwise, for the subject is easily apparent and will affect the way they relate with students. Another difference between primary and secondary teachers is that primary teachers gave more importance to letting students learn in their own ways. Primary teachers get to know their students better than teachers at the secondary level (they spend the whole day with the same group whereas secondary school teachers teach a variety of classes), therefore they are more likely to discover the particular learning styles that students have. In the case of private and government schoolteachers, the difference in choice is more one of degree. Private school teachers marked the qualities more than their state school colleagues. This difference emerged prominently with regards to the following qualities and skills: humour, being a good listener, having confidence, making sure students understand, showing that one likes teenagers, the ability to focus on the positive, keeping the matters shared by students private, and students' ability to evaluate one's work. This could be related to the different school environment that private school teachers find themselves in. Private schools tend to set higher expectations for their students. This in turn leads teachers to have their own personal high expectations. Since the students are more receptive, it is easier to try out new ideas and to relax (be humorous, develop relationships with students, and so forth). With regards to gender, the difference was that females gave more importance to these qualities. This difference could be related to the different upbringing that females and males have. Females give more importance to having good relationships with the people they are working with (in this case the students). Males tend to be less affected by those around them. However, the low regard for these qualities and skills contradict an earlier result, where males' desire for relationship skills (as a university study unit) was higher than that of their female colleagues.

The teachers were asked to mark the major challenges that they faced as beginning teachers. Responses showed that the greatest emphasis was put on class discipline (very similar to the trend abroad), coping with mixed ability classes and curriculum demands (related to what is felt by teachers in Asian countries and in the UK) and physical exhaustion. Differences in choices were found amongst the three groups. Private school teachers emphasised fitting into the school system more than state school teachers. The school system in government schools and private schools are quite different and teachers who have had no experience in private schools (during teaching practice) may find it difficult to adapt and accept different ideas, different cultures and structures. Teachers in State schools felt the challenges of discipline and the sense of surviving from day to day more than those in private schools. In the case of discipline, problems are more often associated with State schools rather than private schools. The more challenging schools will not be easy for any teacher to settle in, let alone a beginning teacher. Survival becomes key and hence this relates to the importance that beginners give to establishing relationships as this will help them to be accepted by the students. Teaching comes later. Interesting to note is that even teachers with two and three years of experience still felt the same. This goes to show on the one hand the difficulty of settling down in challenging schools, and more so that later on as the years go by, other factors come into play in determining how teachers relate to students.

Professional Development

The majority of teachers expressed the desire for more support. This is in line with a similar study conducted in Malta by Astarita & Pirotta (1999). However, as already noted private school teachers did not feel the need for support as much as State school teachers. This study identified a number of support mechanisms that would be helpful. These included resources, teamwork and the help of an experienced colleague. In the case of teachers with one year of experience, they choose support from an experienced colleague more than teachers with two or more years of experience.

When asked whether professional development was necessary in order to keep up-to-date with developments in the teaching profession, the majority of teachers believed this to be true. The best way to implement professional development is through co-operation. However, teachers interviewed remarked that co-operation is only possible if all the teachers work together. It is difficult to meet in secondary schools and even more so in primary schools. Co-operation was also seen to extend to the students, their parents, the Head of School, the Faculty of Education and the Ministry of Education, the latter as a provider of resources or information.

The three cohorts considered co-operation to be the best way to improve professional development. However, the enthusiasm for co-operation decreased with amount of experience.

The teachers were also asked to show how professional development was being implemented. The respondents identified INSET courses, seminars and meetings as the three main ways that professional development was being addressed. However, the percentages are not very high. The current options available to teachers are few and most of them are not offered within the school context. A culture of collaboration within schools is still lacking (Bezzina & Camilleri, 2001).

The main reasons sited as to why professional development practices were not implemented were time constraints, reluctance to change, and lack of financial resources. However, one should note that the percentages as a whole are quite low (under 30%). The percentages increase according to the amount of experience that a teacher had. A reason for this may be that teachers with more experience become disaffected with the system. One may also note that teachers with one year of experience felt that lack of co-operation was the main reason for professional development not being implemented. This response can be linked to an earlier response regarding professional development, where teachers with one year of experience felt the need for co-operation more than their more experienced colleagues. 'Lack of interest' on the part of the school was given more importance by State school teachers whilst private school teachers emphasised 'lack of research'.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to present some of the main results of this research study. It did not include the findings from the interview sessions which helped to reinforce and enlighten some of the points presented in the questionnaire survey. A number of salient points and issues and possible explanations were sought. In brief, the analysis of results highlighted the following areas:

- Teachers felt that the course was effective but they were not under the impression that the course automatically turned them into professionals (which implies the formative nature of the profession).
- Beginning teachers felt the difference between university and school realities which can be linked to the gap between theory and practice or teachers' inability to make a connection themselves.

- Although there is a disparity between university studies and school realities, teachers' perceived that differences could be minimized.
- The course could be improved through a more inquiry-based approach with more focus on field practice and other experiences in school involving lecturers and teachers.
- Teaching Practice, methodology and psychology (in order of preference) were considered to be the most relevant course elements as teachers found it easy to apply this knowledge in schools.
- Sociology and subject content were considered only as being relevant (as opposed to most relevant) because they are not always applicable.
- Philosophy, considered to be the most difficult course element to apply to school realities, was marked as being not so relevant and was an area which teachers feel a more practical orientation is required.
- Desire for certain credits (First Aid, Problem Solving Skills, Relationship Skills and Public Skills) showed that teachers identified the varied and demanding skills needed by teachers.
- Teaching Practice was considered to be helpful, yet it was not really considered to reflect the true work of a teacher given the different demands expected of beginning teachers once they take on a full time post.
- The main qualities identified by beginning teachers included the ability to motivate students, being well-organised, good teacher-student relationships, classroom management and voice projection.
- The main challenges identified included coping with mixed ability groups, class discipline, curriculum implementation, and physical exhaustion
- After graduating teachers wanted more support mainly in the form of resources, teamwork or an experienced colleague/ mentor.
- Teachers wanted more support especially in the form of co-operation amongst teachers.
- Only a low percentage of teachers felt that professional development is being adequately implemented (through INSET, seminars and meetings). The current opportunities for growth centre round INSET courses and do not necessarily address teacher needs and do not cover all areas teachers require training in. The rest pursue in the main academic programmes that will help them gain further qualifications. The respondents identify 'fear of change' and 'inertia' as possible reasons as to why professional development is not seriously addressed within the schools.

Whilst the beginning teachers involved in this study perceived the course to be effective they also identified areas for improvement at all three stages - the pre-service, induction and professional development. At the pre-service stage, the course needs to be closer to reality, hence a stronger bond between the university course and schools need to be further nurtured. During the induction phase teachers need more school-based support and co-operative environments. Professional development needs to be given more importance.

After reflecting upon the issues highlighted in the literature and analyzing the results of the local study, the following recommendations are being presented:

- There should be a continuation between all three levels of teacher development. This could be achieved through closer links between university and schools even after a teacher has graduated.
- Developing a Career Profile that teachers develop throughout their teaching career.
- Stronger and more concrete ways of getting closer to schools need to be introduced to establish links in areas such as curriculum design and development, class management and pedagogy.
- Upon graduation teachers should be given support through a mentor or a school support system (e.g. a member of the school management team should assist newly qualified teachers in the initial years).
- The area of professional development needs to be reviewed. More opportunities and possibilities for teachers to develop further need to be explored. Not much provision or variety of provision is being utilized and varied systems can be introduced to facilitate the learning that can take place, particularly in schools.

The authors are of the opinion that if these issues are taken seriously we will be able to:

a. address the current gap between the three stages of development
b. introduce a culture of ongoing professional development, irrespective of context
c. link education/learning at the pre-service stage with the initial and on-going professional development phase
d. link educators in their different stages in similar learning engagements.

Naturally this research study is far from conclusive. In itself the study has a number of limitations, in that it studied three cohorts that have recently graduated. If other age gaps had been introduced that may have brought with it some more interesting findings. In that regard, it may have been wiser to group the initial two-three years together and compare and contrast them with those who have been in the profession say between 5 and 8 years and then 10 and 15 years. Such an investigation would provide interesting, maybe even different feedback. Definitely a methodological approach worth exploring.

At the same time we feel confident that this study has gone some way as to introduce the views that teachers have about the area that has been reviewed – the professional development of teachers. They provide us with some interesting insights which can help us not only to improve the teacher education programme from a number of levels, but it also helps to highlight ways and means of bringing the teacher training institution closer to schools, identifies areas for further research, and also indicate clearly the need that the induction phase is a crucial one with special needs that are currently not catered for.

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