

"SCHOOLS HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO THE PROFESSION TO INDUCT BEGINNING TEACHERS": A NARRATIVE OF A SCHOOL WITH MULTIPLE BEGINNING TEACHERS ON THE STAFF

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Abstract: Why is it that some New Zealand primary schools invite and welcome beginning teachers, known as Provisionally Registered Teachers (PRTs), to be part of their staff?

A narrative is presented here of one New Zealand primary school that employs several beginning teachers at a time.

Information was generated from interviews with 1) the senior management team; 2) Provisionally Registered Teachers (PRTs) on the staff; and 3) a recently-registered former-PRT still teaching in the school. The information generated from the interviews was analysed for the reasons why such a proactive PRT employment stance is maintained and how the school goes about the process of induction for these beginning teachers. The analysis suggests the management team's stance comes from a sincere belief that schools have an obligation to the profession to help induct beginning teachers. It also shows that this school strives to ensure its induction process is educative in nature (challenging the ideas and practices of its PRTs) as well as instrumental (providing support, advice and guidance on how to deliver the curriculum and meet registration requirements).

Best-evidence (Ministry of Education, 2004) suggests the induction process can be more effective if such a two-fold approach is used. The narrative illustrates the importance of the attitudes and actions of the management team in establishing and maintaining this two-fold approach.

THE INFORMATION-GATHERING PROCESS

It is suggested that "New teachers have two jobs – they have to teach and they have to learn to teach" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.1026). The author conducted interviews and questionnaires with staff at a large primary school to gain information about how it goes about the process of helping beginning teachers cope with two jobs. The management team (principal and deputy principal) responded to separate semi-structured interviews in March and April 2005, during which notes were recorded. Two follow-up interviews were conducted with the deputy principal in June and September to clarify information. Group presentations by PRTs about their beginning teacher experience to student teachers and the author in May 2005, were followed-up with an email questionnaire in June, to clarify and expand on points made at the presentation. As well, a Year 3 teacher who had recently been through the induction process as a PRT in the school, provided a retrospective perspective of the process via a semi-structured email questionnaire. The information generated from the interviews and questionnaires was analysed for consistency of ideas about the philosophy and practice used in the process of inducting PRTs. Participants had access to the draft of this article to check for accuracy. The following narrative summarises the information generated from the interviews and questionnaires.

TAHATAI COAST SCHOOL

Since its inception in 1996, Tahatai Coast School in the Bay of Plenty has enthusiastically employed PRTs on a regular basis. From the outset, the school wanted innovative teachers who were excited about learning and willing to take risks. A blend of experienced and new teachers was accepted as the ideal and at the time, bulk-funding allowed the management team the flexibility to employ six PRTs as part of the inaugural staff. Not only were staffing decisions about PRTs made according to the ethos of the school educational philosophy. Underpinning the decision to employ multiple PRTs, was the management team's belief that schools have an obligation to induct new teachers into the profession. Funding provisions may have altered, but three principals later, the belief in that obligation and the commitment to the workload and accountability that comes with employing several PRTs at a time, remains the same in 2005 as it was in 1996.

A good leadership team and a supportive staff are factors that are important to the success of having multiple PRTs on a staff. The official government PRT document to schools reiterates the significance of having empathetic staff involved in the induction process: "The modeling and support that experienced teachers and the school provide in the first two years are critically important for new teachers' motivation to stay in teaching and their development as effective teachers" (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 9). All appointment decisions are therefore crucial to staffing at Tahatai Coast School and can impact on the decision of how many PRTs might be employed each year. It is claimed that principals have particular decision-making styles when selecting and employing beginning teachers (Broadley & Broadley, 2003). These styles focus on eight basic clusters of information including management, school ethos, community, commitment, teamwork, child focus, maturity and enthusiasm. A principal's decision-making style can depend on which of these clusters of information are given priority. At Tahatai Coast School, a team approach to appointing staff is indicative of the clusters of information that are prioritized when selecting any staff member. Teamwork and school ethos feature strongly in the decision-making style for selection, in order that the right person for the job who has best fit with the whole team, is appointed.

When considering PRTs for positions, the appointments team looks at Tahatai Coast School existing staff and determines the number of available teachers who can be tutor teachers. The team also considers the potential compatibility between available teachers and PRT applicants. Therefore, the appointment process becomes something of a jigsaw puzzle as the appointments team tries to fit all the component parts together satisfactorily. "The match between PRT and mentor is

crucial for all parties - meaning children, PRT and mentor – and as a consequence the rest of the staff. It's a domino effect" (Deputy principal J. Griggs, personal communication, 17 May, 2005). The school seeks beginning teachers because they bring a passion for teaching and the latest pedagogical knowledge, and while these can be obvious in the "twinkle and the can do attitude" displayed at a interview (Evans, 2003), personality plays the main role in convincing the appointments team whether an applicant has the x factor to fit into the ethos of the school community. The school looks for beginning teachers who want to do more than just cope as PRTs. The school wants to employ teachers who take responsibility for their own learning but are willing to learn from others. Even more, the school wants to appoint learning leaders who want to cause learning to happen for both themselves and the students in the school.

According to the management team, staff become tutor teachers to the PRTs because they have a genuine commitment to the development of profession, even though the official remuneration for the task does not compensate for the time and effort spent on the task. Naturally, they welcomed the 2004 pay increase for mentors and tutor teachers as appropriate recognition and acknowledgement of the demands of the role. The Minister of Education Trevor Mallard has, though, expressed reservations about the necessity to pay for such mentoring and is quoted as saying (Larson, 2005) that he believes all professionals have an obligation to help new practitioners. Like most teachers who have experienced the reality of the extra workload and responsibility of being a mentor or tutor teacher, the staff at Tahatai Coast School who have taken on this role, consider the recent mentor pay increase to be more than justified.

The school management team initially found a downside to its PRT strategy was a high turnover of staff, due to the tendency of many young PRTs to immediately leave for an overseas experience once they gained their teacher registration. After putting in the hard work of helping PRTs through the induction process, the school found itself left with large gaps in its staffing. Such a situation motivated the Board of Trustees and the management team to stabilize the staffing by appointing a core of experienced teachers to support the flow-through of newer teachers. With a roll of over 680 students (predicted to rise to over 800), this full primary school with 26-plus full-time teachers and several part-time staff currently has a quarter of its staff as PRTs.

Increasingly, the school has found PRTs come from a wider age-group and bring a wealth of life-experience as well as the enthusiasm, energy and fresh ideas expected of recent graduates. Not only having a passion for teaching and an interest in innovative pedagogy, but also manifesting the quality of flexibility, is a prerequisite for becoming a PRT at Tahatai Coast School. The school zone has recently been re-defined because of rapid population growth in the area and the decile rating has changed from three to five, due to the socio-economic mix of multi-million dollar beach-front properties and government housing accommodation. Equipment and resources are relatively new and a particular feature of the school is a partnership with Apple computers, a company which upgrades the school ICT resources with state-of-the-art products that quickly become an integral part of systems and processes in the school. The management

team is also proactive in improving curriculum management, constantly reviewing and reworking everything in the school in terms of assessment and curriculum.

Similarly, the Interim Standards for PRTs have also been reworked. Organized into the areas of alignment, organization, engagement and success (recommended during professional development led by Graeme Aitken from the University of Auckland), with indicators adapted to be specific to Tahatai Coast School needs and expectations, the PRT Interim Standards are integrated into the school's overall performance management programme. PRTs are constantly monitored and weekly progress meeting notes with tutor teachers are filed in the school database. Evidence of each standard and relevant goals are formally appraised at least twice during the year. In an environment where change is a constant and expectations are high, PRTs at the school find it a challenge but exciting to be on the staff.

The exciting aspect is being a staff member of a progressive school where professionalism is fostered and the educative PRT development programme challenges beliefs and practices. Expectations are set at the beginning of the year during a staff Revival Retreat, which occurs before the school year begins. The school has a Learning to Learn focus and, during the retreat staff re-visit the core beliefs of the school, while new staff have a dedicated time to become familiar with the school philosophy and supporting practices. This orientation includes an overview of the principles that guide the school's operation, the ecology of learning and learning styles approach, a variety of thinking tools (DeBono's Six Hats, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, the school's particular Inquiry Model, and use of strategies such as PMI), consideration of the role of emotional intelligence, and the school's planning and assessment software package. To support this initial introduction, ongoing professional development and confidence-building comes from interaction with school personnel such as mentors, team leaders and colleagues. Self-reflection and goal-setting are integral aspects of the on-going interactive process.

As well, the school challenges PRT practices by having them observe/deconstruct lessons taken by tutor teachers, and ensures regular observation of their teaching by tutor teachers is followed by constructive feedback. The school holds needs-based Tecky-Breckies two to three times a term for all staff, the content of which arises from teacher's identified weaknesses in technology, including those of PRTs. Similarly, software development



needs are catered for through child-mentors or students in the school with expertise in software that PRTs need help with. Sometimes both PRTs and children attend externally provided software courses, in order to learn together. Commitment is challenged when PRTs are encouraged to take leadership roles within the school community. They are expected to share their learning journey stories with visitors (Apple Bus Tours and student teacher groups); to present about use and implementation of software at the annual ICT Innovations Conference; and to regularly contribute to extra-curricular activities and competitions such as school productions, sports teams, choir, dance and gymnastics. Beliefs are challenged at staff meetings that consider the Treaty of Waitangi and by professional development led by the *kaiawhina* of the school's bilingual unit. Over and above these internal school PRT development processes, are the professional development days available to all beginning teachers in the area through an external agency.

The PRTs indicated they appreciated the opportunities provided to extend their learning and career opportunities and they acknowledged the amount of support they are given both formally and informally by staff. One of the Year 1 PRTs noted the advantage of being at a school whose philosophy she really believed in, and specified that she enjoyed the encouragement given to her to be innovative, develop a personal teaching style, and take risks outside her comfort zone. She also valued the open-door policy whereby senior staff members are available to discuss celebrations and concerns. As well, she acknowledged how the school actioned the .2 release time to be beneficial to her practical and professional development as a teacher. She appreciated the continuation of professional reading (cultivated during her teaching degree studies) that happens during the Friday morning discussion of readings sessions that are a compulsory element of the staff professional development programme. The fully-registered former PRT on the staff reflected that PRTs at Tahatai Coast School are chosen because they are the right people for the job and bring something that the staff does not already have. "You are considered an equal to learn from, bringing your own strengths to the team". He also appreciates that PRTs are given time to learn and that "it is clearly understood that you are able to progress at your own speed, and support is given to make sure you reach success" (S. Crooks, personal communication, 9 June 2005).

Like PRTs interviewed elsewhere in NZ (Lang, 2001), the workload of being a

new teacher has proved to be much more onerous than the beginning teachers at Tahatai Coast School expected. While the PRTs at feel they are becoming conditioned to and capable of extreme workload in future schools, they do not necessarily enjoy the pressures such a workload creates at the beginning of their career. Even though there is a wealth of experience and knowledge in the school that they can draw on, they find the overall high expectations of the school can add to their stress levels. One of the Year 1 PRTs admitted adjusting to having a class and running a programme challenging enough, without also having to learn new planning/analyst software and produce the paper/digital work required by the school. As well, the large number of meetings that consume precious time seems excessive. However, the former PRT who recently gained full registration believes that PRTs at Tahatai Coast School are better prepared to handle the stress of being a teacher at any school, because they are coached well to become equipped with the skills necessary to deal with job-stress through the school's induction programme.

Even though being a PRT can be both challenging and exciting, it can also be challenging and exciting for schools to have one or more PRTs on the staff. The management team at Tahatai Coast School notes that while it *can* be a lot of extra work to have several PRTs at any one time, a spin-off is being able to take credit for helping to initiate so many beginners into the career of teaching. The management team has observed PRTs often go through what they call a state of mind continuum in their first year. This roller coaster or tumultuous process (Franks, 2005) starts out in January on an anticipation high; dips dramatically through survival mode into rock bottom disillusionment mode about a third to half way through the year; then starts climbing back up through rejuvenation and reflection phases until back on the original anticipation high, near the end of the year. From experience, the management team has seen the disillusionment phase occurring simultaneously for several PRTs at one time, which can put pressure on staff and the school. Frequently too this bulk-disillusionment occurs in winter, when immune systems are low and PRTs become ill. "Despite the time and emotion it can take to help PRTs through crises, it is as rewarding working with them as working with children and experienced teachers" (Deputy Principal J. Griggs, personal communication, 17 May, 2005).

Tahatai Coast School management team usually finds, regardless of their starting point, all PRTs need a lot of support in the first year. It becomes apparent when a major event looms (such as caregiver interviews), that all the PRTs have a sudden need to get together with a staff member to talk through worries and expectations. Some caregivers queried the seemingly frequent absences of their children's teachers who were PRTs, so a letter was sent out to explain the government legislation allowing them a day a week release time for their ongoing professional development (Ministry of Education, 2004). With six PRTs on the staff this year, quite a number of relievers are needed to cover the 6-day-equivalent staffing the release day total accumulates. The school juggles relief teachers who come in for other roles (such as Reading Recovery) to cover this release time and ensures the relievers plan, teach and assess in consultation with the PRTs, to reduce gaps in the class programmes and ensure consistent quality assurance records are maintained.

However, despite the extra work involved in tending and nurturing PRTs, Tahatai Coast School plans to continue employing PRTs who meet the right person for the job criterion. The management team is in a position to identify the characteristics of PRTs who have been more successful than others in adapting quickly to the role of being a teacher. These characteristics include having the personality traits and strength of character to be resilient when personal and professional issues arise; honest communication skills about celebrations and issues so that the school can identify and accommodate real needs; being a self-motivated, reflective practitioner; flexibility; and having the emotional intelligence to work in a team and respond effectively to students. The management team appreciates that for other PRTs, the role transition from student teacher to teacher can be more problematic than for those with the above characteristics, and therefore these teachers require a higher level of support from the school.

Tutor teachers too, the management team has found, can require different levels of support. For many who have an instinctive feel for the role, a one-day induction programme is all that is needed to prompt effective mentoring and nurture a professional and supportive relationship. Other tutor teachers require yet another staff member to co-work with them to improve the quality of their collegial relationship with the PRT, and to help upskill both the mentor and PRT to

fully comprehend the parameters of their respective roles. As part of the system to improve and record appropriate PRT information, a staff meeting for mentors and PRTs is held each term so that processes can be appraised and evaluated, and emotions can be aired in a safe environment.

There are principals of schools in the same region who have stated to the author that they have a policy of not employing beginning teachers. It is therefore refreshing to find a school with a management team that genuinely believes inducting PRTs benefits the teaching profession as a whole: a management team that is less concerned with the extra workload and how beginning teachers *might* affect school image, and more concerned to put energy into giving PRTs an opportunity to become the teachers they are capable of becoming. It is also helpful to its partnership with the University of Waikato, that the school is willing to collaborate and contribute to the university pre-service education programme in order that the transition process from student-teacher to teacher can be refined and the induction process improved. As part of the improvement process, the management team, led by a recently-appointed new principal, is working to vary part of the induction process next year, to accommodate current and future staff departures.

While senior staff will continue to mentor new PRTs, the mentoring of all six currently-employed PRTs will become part of the deputy principal's role in 2006. According to the management team, the 2006 PRTs will be at the Year 2 stage of more independence and fine-tuning of their practice and will therefore not need demonstration lessons or intensive feedback/feedforward on their teaching. They will be capable of self-identifying their needs and know where to go for help or what they need to do to improve (a PMI at the end of the year helps motivate goals for the following year). To fine-tune their practice, they will be able to utilize their release time to observe best practice in and out of their own school (for example, identify someone who has excellent ENP teaching skills and gain more knowledge and skills from that person). And pragmatically, the release time will be available on a flexible basis, so that they can work more efficiently on goals set at their personal appraisals (twice a year), by taking blocks of release time when appropriate rather than just weekly. Adapting the school's induction programme to fit the stage of development the PRTs as well as fit around staffing changes, reflects the flexibility of the management team to try to best fit PRTs and their needs into the school community.

Interestingly, once past the roller coaster phase, the current PRTs and the former PRT at the school reflected on and appreciated the quality of the experience provided for them. Being a PRT at Tahatai Coast School might seem stressful and the learning curve steep at times, but its PRTs value the experience of being part of both an instrumental and an educative induction programme. Similarly, it might be extra work and a time-consuming obligation to the profession to have multiple PRTs on the staff, but this narrative shows how the attitude of the management team at Tahatai Coast School can impact positively on the challenge of providing both an instrumental and an educative induction programme for beginning teachers.

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