Neither Fish Nor Fowl: Exploring Seconded and Contracted Teachers' Experiences of the University Sector

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Abstract

While seconded and contracted teachers make a significant contribution to education faculties there is limited research regarding their experiences, needs and supports. Accordingly, interviews were conducted with five seconded and three contracted teachers in an Australian regional university and interpreted within a qualitative, interpretative framework. Themes that emerge from the study highlight the contrast between university and school cultures, issues around identity, the ways in which teaching is viewed, research activity for second/contracted teachers, positives and negatives around secondment, and the phases through which seconded and contract teachers move during their employment at university. Recommendations regarding the role and expectations of seconded and contracted teachers conclude the paper.

Introduction

Seconded and contracted teachers are crucial members of education faculties because, according to university coordinators, university administrators and seconded teachers themselves, they demonstrate to student teachers the importance of linking pedagogical theories to practice (Costley, Gannon, Sawyer, Watson, & Steele, n.d.; Reupert & Wilkinson, in press). While it is difficult to ascertain their numbers, it has been suggested that in North America many student teachers have their entire teacher education program delivered by contracted and seconded teachers–plus retired teachers, graduate students and freelance education consultants (Kosnik & Beck,

2008). At the same time, there is little research exploring their experiences whilst working in the university sector nor when (or if) they return to schools. Accordingly, this study explores the experiences of teachers who are seconded to, or are on contract with a university, while still being linked or otherwise employed with school bodies over the various phases of their university placement.

In this study, seconded teachers are defined as members of a school who have agreed to work in an education faculty for limited time, with the expectation that they return to their school based position. Contracted teachers are those who no longer hold positions in schools and are employed by a university for a contracted period of time. Despite their employment in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States of America, limited research is available on their experiences. Nonetheless, from this research, several key issues can be ascertained, as presented in the section below.

Positives of Secondment

In an interview based study, Australian university coordinators observed that secondees brought a currency of recent classroom practice, of benefit to student teachers as well as to the courses in which they taught (Costley et al., n.d.). Additionally, secondees highlight several personal and professional benefits of working in a university environment. A Canadian study of 17 secondees noted the benefits of professional development, afforded by their secondment, including the development of a professional discourse about teaching and the expansion of their teaching repertoires (Housego & Badali, 2000). Time for reflection upon one's practice was also viewed as a major advantage (Housego & Badali, 2000), whilst an earlier Canadian study of three secondees showed secondees benefiting from increased professional freedom, expansion of professional networks and personal growth (McEachern & Polley, 1993).

Despite the many advantages of secondment for universities (Costley et al., n.d,) and for seconded and contracted teachers themselves (Housego & Badali, 2000; McEachern & Polley, 1993) there are a number of issues for these teachers, arising from the relational complexities of belonging to both school and university. Although complexity is not necessarily a negative, the following issues do make the practice of university placements a less straightforward process for all parties than might be apparent at first glance.

Neither Fish Nor Fowl: Dilemmas of Identity

The transition from the classroom to academe appears to be all the more challenging because of the temporary nature of seconded and contracted teachers' university

employment (McEachern & Polley, 1993). In the literature, commentary regarding the length of secondees placement suggests that one year is too short to gain maximum benefit from the placement whereas more than three years is disruptive to one's career (McEachern & Polley, 1993). The question of length of placement has at its heart, issues relating to secondees' primary professional identity. In Lave and Wenger's terms (1991, as cited in Murray & Male, 2005), the brevity of secondees' immersion within universities means that they remain on the periphery of the community of practice and are unable to become fully absorbed in the "culture of practice". Murray and Male (2005) found that during their placement, teachers continue to call upon their "first-order practitioner identity" and context of the school setting. While this experiential knowledge gives seconded teachers currency and credibility, they soon find that the "second-order context" of universities demands a different set of pedagogical skills in relation to the teaching of adults (Murray & Male, 2005). This kind of second-order practice, in which there is no simple transfer of school teaching skills (Murray & Male, 2005), is reported to be a major issue for secondees (Housego & Badali, 2000). The recognition that secondees undergo distinct phases during their university placement (Housego & Badali, 2000) also suggests the complexities which underpin secondees' identity reformation as they shift between schools, universities and then possibly (but not always) back to schools.

Practicalities of Placement

There are a number of issues which arise in regard to the practicalities of placement which impact upon how teachers are received both by teacher education faculties and by the schools they have vacated. The informal "tap-on-the-shoulder" recruitment was identified in a recent Australian study as an issue for teachers who felt a moral obligation to continue to work at their school after official hours, while on placement (Costley et al., n.d.). Similarly, Canadian teachers reported that informal procedures provided universities with a great deal of power, which more formal recruitment processes may have overcome (Housego & Badali 2000).

A drop in income, loss of conditions and destabilization to one's teaching career were also seen as disadvantages for secondees and contracted teachers (Costley et al., n.d.). The lack of a research role meant that such teachers often took on high teaching workloads (Housego & Badali, 2000). Finally, due to the very different cultures of schooling and universities, placement to a university was not necessarily viewed by schools or teaching colleagues as a positive and was instead sometimes considered a drawback to one's career (Housego & Badali, 2000).

Seconded and Contracted Teachers – The Cinderellas of Teacher Education?

The place of research in seconded and contracted teacher's workloads has only been marginally touched upon in previous research (for an exception see McEachern & Polley, 1993; Reupert & Wilkinson, in press). At the same time, the capacity to undertake research is part of the implicit cultural capital of modern universities. Stressing this imperative, Roth (2002, p. 215) writes: "the culture of academia forces those who aspire to academic life and appropriate salary adjustments to engage in publication of some aspects of their work". How contracted and seconded teachers are positioned in relation to research tasks is unclear. For example, in one of the few papers that explore this issue, McEachern and Polley (1993), note that one of the benefits to secondees was "being involved in research" but what this involvement entailed is not explored further.

The aim of the present study was to identify the experiences, needs and supports of seconded and contract teachers in an education faculty at an Australian university. Additionally, we were keen to ascertain teachers' views of research during their placements. Given the current political climate which is increasingly judging universities on the production of high quality refereed publications (Hemmings, Smith & Rushbrook, 2004) we wanted to explore the way in which seconded and contracted teachers view and accommodate these pressures as an aspect of their university role.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

As the purpose of the study was to provide a thick description of the experiences of seconded and contracted teachers, data were collected and interpreted according to a predominantly qualitative or discovery-orientated approach (Mahrer, 1988) in which themes and issues were sought from participants. Accordingly, interviews were conducted to allow for the negotiation of meaning between each of the participants and an interviewer, with the aim of reporting participants' experiences as close as possible to their original constructions.

Procedure

Seconded and contracted teachers were invited to participate in a one to two hour semi-structured individual interview, via email. Questions were developed to identify teachers' experiences of their placement as well as their needs and supports. Representative questions included but were not limited to:

- What was it like moving from your school position into a university position?

- What has been your role within the university? How have you found that?
- How does research fit or not fit within that role?
- What have been the largest challenges? What have been the main supports for you?
- What do you see as the benefits to the university, to yourself and to students, in having seconded/contracted teachers?
- Where do you see yourself working in the future?

With participant permission, the interviews were transcribed.

Participants

The seconded and contracted teachers involved in this study were all based at a regional, multi-campus Australian university which services a significant cohort of distance and undergraduate students. Participants included two male and six females, two with a high school teaching background, and six primary school educators. Of the eight participants, six had been classroom teachers, with two having held principal positions prior to placement. One secondee was at the start of her placement, two were in the middle (having held the position for more than six months), another two were at the end of their placement and three were back in school positions. Three participants had been on contract, and five had been seconded from schools. University placements were time limited with three participants placed for one year only, two for two years, and one was on a contract that was renewed year by year, depending on funding (which eventually finished). Another two participants were originally seconded for one year but this was then extended to two years and then again to four years, inclusive. Most held either three or four year teaching qualifications with two undertaking a Masters' degree during their placement. The minimum amount of years participants had taught was three years (two participants) the maximum over twenty years (two) with the remainder having taught for over ten years.

Results

Data analysis

Once interviews had been transcribed, one of the researchers used an open coding system of analysis with each of the interview transcripts, attaching labels to lines or paragraphs of data and then describing the data at a concrete level (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002). Focused coding followed, which moved the coding process to a conceptual level. In the next iteration of data analysis, categories were created and named, in the first instance from participants' words, and when this was not possible,

from the researchers' perspective, as informed from the literature review (Patton, 1990). Identified categories, sample quotes from interviews, and complete interview transcripts were sent back to each participant with an invitation to add, delete and/or change any aspect of their transcript and the analysis (member checks: Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Across-interview analysis of all individual transcripts was then undertaken, independently by two of the authors (Merriam, 1998). Through a constant comparative method, the relationships and patterns across categories were explored and major themes finally identified, separately by the two authors (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006). Data were also analysed according to the phase of each participant's placement, namely beginning, middle, towards the end, and finally when their placement had finished. The two authors then met with the third author in the role of moderator, to reach a final consensus for the themes reported here. Seven themes were identified, labeled mostly with direct quotes from participants:

- "A culture shock"
- "No man's land"
- "I focus on my teaching"
- "I research to teach"
- "There was no induction, I had no mentor"
- Benefits of secondment
- "It's a journey"

"A culture shock"

All eight participants described not only the culture shock of moving from their school positions into a university position but more generally the cultural differences between schools and universities, at various levels. In terms of the transition, one participant described commencing his placement as "confusing, exciting, challenging and a relief". Another reported, "It was a culture shock . . . Schools and universities are worlds apart".

Many described the autonomy and flexibility afforded by the university environment as opposed to schools, with one participant suggesting that:

> At university, there was a lot more independence and freedom in terms of what you could think and say. And [at university, we are] not dictated by bells.

Some of the more obvious physical features were also reported:

> Having an office, my own phone, were amazing, after coming from a school. Being able to work from home, the flexibly of work hours, and the dress code, or lack thereof, were also other main differences.

At the same time, some described what they perceived as the competitiveness of university environments as opposed to

> [being in] a school environment [and] being part of a staff collectively. You are all united in your approach to teaching the children, particularly in a primary school.

While all described how supportive their university colleagues were, participants perceived that academics worked very much in isolation, for example, not sharing teaching notes and resources.

Referring not just to the general busyness of schools, one participant spoke more specifically about the different foci of schools and universities when she reported:

> [at university] you have to . . . be disciplined and know where you are going . . . I think that when you are working in the school system you don't think about yourself and what you are doing. You don't think about yourself. Your classroom and the children come first and then the school.

"No man's land"

All participants spoke about the issue of identity, reporting that they felt themselves to be neither a teacher in the education system nor an academic within the university. This was particularly the case at the start of their placement, "I had the initial feeling that I didn't really feel qualified to be here". Another reported how frustrated she felt in the transition from "running one's own school" to "being the novice in the building". In this phase participants describe feeling intimidated and lacking confidence.

More generally a tension surrounded whether they were teachers or academics, with one participant summing up this sentiment: "[I] felt like you're in no man's land – neither with DET or uni". Others were clearer about maintaining their teacher identities:

> I am a teacher. I was born a teacher. I can't see myself as anything else other than that for the moment.
>
> I see myself as a teacher and a learner. I see myself as a support person for students.

These descriptors of being a teacher were in reference to their role as a generic teacher, as a classroom teacher and/or a teacher of university students.

In terms of how the university perceived them, participants reported:

> As far as the wider university is concerned you basically don't exist. As far as your identify goes I think it [secondment] is a bad thing because you are not part of the university… it is just hard.
>
> I was given a mentor who had come directly from a school and was seconded. There could be lots of reasons behind why I was given another secondee [as opposed to an academic], it's like there is an "us and them" here.
>
> We don't fit in. I am not sure the university knows how to manage us.

"I focus on my teaching"

Related to the identity assumed by participants was their commitment to teaching. In the words of one interviewee, "I am a teacher because I don't do research". Another expanded on this point when she reported:

> I focus on my teaching . . . that is probably one of the differences between secondees and permanent members of staff. Their workloads, they get paid to do research, whereas when you are seconded or contracted, no you're not. So you do feel guilty by allocating those teaching days to do [research]. So as a result I spend a lot of time preparing for the teaching.

When describing their teaching practice participants described using the same skills and knowledge drawn from their classroom experiences. Whilst one female participant was initially intimidated by the university context, she "realised that there wasn't such a big difference between what I had perceived as being a university lecturer and a teacher". Others also talked about this generic skill base that generalised from the classroom into their university teaching when they reported:

> . . . students could see what I was talking about, [what] I was actually doing in my classroom.
>
> There isn't much difference between what is done at the university in terms of teaching and what we do in the school system. I really did think that lecturing was this separate entity in itself but it's not. I remember making the realisation that teaching is teaching. It's not different.

Similarly, while another participant reported that "[m]y workshops are very much based on what I'd done in classrooms" she added the proviso that "I had all this experience but I didn't know how to identify it, how to categorise it". Accordingly, she describes modeling the type of teaching she would do with children, but also learning and subsequently using what she considered to be "another language" to explain to students the types of practices she would employ with children.

Another participant described his university teaching in a pragmatic, applied way:

> I provide to students programs, design briefs [this participant has a Technology and Allied Studies background]. I tell them things that I mucked up in my first year and being able to say don't do this, try to do this. So putting in those practical things that one is going to get them out of trouble. I also help them build up a resource base.

All participants emphasize the importance of their teaching role, with one participant summarising that, "I put all the weight on my teaching because I feel that responsibility to my students".

"I research to teach"

As highlighted above, the teaching role for participants was paramount. Accordingly, how they balanced their work load reflected this teaching commitment. Secondees recognised the importance of research and "being a good teacher was not the only area [that was important]". At the same time, as one participant reported, "My teaching has to be sorted out first and sometimes research comes second".

Rather than actively conducting research projects, participants described reviewing and accessing research for teaching purposes with representative comments including, "I would more or less call it looking up stuff . . . for my workshops" and "[I researched] only as much as I need to teach my subjects".

Participants did perceive a "push" both from administration as well as from colleagues to become more engaged in research:

> It was very upfront, the push to do research, to do further study.
>
> There was enormous pressure on me to study and be part of research teams. At the time I felt bullied, but now I realise that it was because people wanted me to stay and to stay I needed to have research. It didn't come from the Head of School (HOS) so much but more from colleagues.

However, many of the secondees expressed a strong desire to "do research" but were unsure and anxious about the whole process. One secondee described participating in a professional development writing program designed specifically for Early Career Researchers (ECRs). In this program ECRs were expected to work on a piece of writing with the assistance of a writing mentor:

> [T]he work that I produced from that, it wasn't refined at all . . . and when I put it in front of an academic with a much stronger research background he said 'where are you going with this, what's it all about, there are so many ideas in here and confused . . . So by attempting to do something, showed you out to be a real minor league player, not even in reserve grade. So when the next [writing program] came up . . . it made me step back a bit . . . I was trying to do something with no genuine understanding of how to do it.

"There was no induction, I had no mentor"

Participants obtained their positions in what might be considered opportunistic ways, for example, one was waiting to get a permanent position in the local area and another was about to retire. They got "a phone call", "it was a fill in position", "tapped on the shoulder", with positions "evolving [or changing] each year". In other words, many of the positions obtained were not planned, and placements fluctuated depending on staffing and funding.

University expectations varied with some participants expected to do research and others to focus solely on teaching (the latter were subsequently given high teaching loads). This did not appear to be linked to being either a seconded or contracted teacher. The participant beginning her placement was confused as to the expectations the university had, disclosing "I don't really understand my classification".

For those on contract, income was a major issue:

> Income was a shock. You start again. And that's a little confronting when you've been teaching for several years and I was at the top of the scale. I came back to the bottom here.

In comparison, seconded teachers cited the benefits of being paid their teaching salary:

> I have been lucky because I am still on teacher salary and can be paid as a teacher but have the conditions of a lecturer and being selfish, the status that goes with that.

Other issues identified by participants were the lack of formalised support structures:

> There was no induction. I had no mentor myself but when a new seconded person started I was expected to mentor them. I went to [previous secondees] and asked all the questions I needed to ask.

> I got no official support, no official mentor, like the academics get.

Benefits of secondment

Participants identified the benefits of their secondment to the university, their students and for themselves. For the university, participants highlighted that "My salary was not paid by the university so therefore [it was a] viable option financially for the uni" and "[t]he university was able to set the job description".

Participants repeatedly described their practical knowledge and access to school networks and resources as the strongest asset they bring to students.

> [The university] are getting current experience . . . Coming out of the schools [means] you've got more idea of what up to date curriculum is being used . . . Whereas here you are kind of isolated and okay you can get hold of the documents but you don't know all that supportive stuff.

> [Because I was a teacher in the system] I had access to DET resources . . . internet sites, networks, I was still able to tap into those.

Expanding from this point was participants' ability to provide a role model of teaching to students:

> I bring recent school experience which is practical rather than based on research. Teachers practice by modeling what they expect in the classroom.

Some described being able to relate to students more effectively than academics with comments such as, "Someone, fresh from the classroom, and maybe being able to relate a little better, on a different level to what an academic is", "I don't think I was quite as scary as a lecturer can be sometimes" and "I think we speak in a language they understand".

Whilst their currency and applied experience was valuable many also suggested that this had time limitations with one reporting that, "There is a time when that benefit to students goes, i.e., around three years – currency goes".

Finally, all participants described the professional development opportunities their placement provided:

> Fantastic professional development. Instead of a narrow view of education I was able to work with people with diverse views and who have done a variety of research.

Several personal benefits were highlighted:

> The freedom and lack of stress . . . the stress is different. The stress here is getting assignment marks and that kind of thing, but you haven't got the day to day stress of the classroom, the day to day stress of the interactions and the politics within schools.
>
> Confidence. I would never have thought that I could stand up in front of 100 people in a lecture hall and talk to them.
>
> Being at the uni forced me to become more open minded.

Many participants also referred to being able to explore other possible career options, for example, one participant reported, "I get the opportunity to check out another possible career without losing my old one".

"It's a journey"

Data were also analysed according to the phase of each participant's placement. In addition, many participants, particularly those at the end of their placement, used the interview as a time of reflection and spoke more generally about their experiences.

Issues at the start of placement related to starting a new and often confusing position, were summed up by the following observation:

> When I first came here I did not see myself as part of the team. [Only after a semester] I felt that I started to see myself more in the role.

Those in the middle of their placement expressed uncertainty about their future career pathways:

> I'm having major conflicts about where I'm going, the life path that I'm on and whether I'm satisfied with it. I am getting a lot of satisfaction out of this secondment.

Another in the middle of his placement also suggested that the gap between his school position and university position was increasingly becoming wider, making it more difficult to decide whether to return to schools or not:

> The longer I stay here, the more suspicion or disconnectedness you have from colleagues that I had in the other camp [school system] and

> the more you are viewed as a lecturer rather than a school teacher. So you start to lose those contacts and those affiliations, you start to become not that current and relevant . . .

In comparison, participants towards the end of their placements were reflective about leaving, with most positive and keen about returning to the classroom:

> I want to go back to schools because . . . I didn't want to lose touch with what I was going to do in the classroom. I think I missed working with kids. I am a primary teacher through and through. Not that I didn't enjoy one minute of the time I was here. I loved the whole thing, but the primary classroom is where I belong.
>
> My language is changing but I haven't lost the language that I had before. It links up with currency . . . That currency is short lived . . . For me that's a good thing because I've evolved but the students need that middle person.

A contracted teacher, moving back into schools reported being acutely aware of the different agendas and cultures of schools and universities but wanted to maintain links, to the university environment through her research:

> I see myself as a beginning researcher . . . though primarily a teacher yes. I'm apprehensive going back to the teaching system and what sort of support I will be provided with . . . I'm hoping to become a teacher/researcher and my focus is going to be self study on my practice . . . [but] I didn't say that to anyone in the school where I'm going to. I don't want to be segregated from them. It's something I'll keep quiet about.

All three participants who had left the university had returned to school settings. One of those who returned to schools was undertaking a variety of action research projects, for example, analysing the school's Basic Skill Test (BST) results. After her placement to the university she believed that she was ready for action research projects having learnt that:

> research is a part of what all teachers do but it only works if it is documented and conscious . . . I have learnt for research to work in schools it needs to be documented and involve thorough, conscious planning.

In contrast, another did not consider bringing those research experiences into his school setting:

> What I have done out here [university] is not valued by schools at all. What they really just want is the job done day by day. So, I'm back in that constricting environment.

Two participants described how their teaching had benefited from their university placement:

> When I went back . . . my teaching benefited from it because I was more aware of what I was doing and I really questioned my programming; whether or not I could do that better.
>
> When I went back to school I was more confident . . . in meetings and that sort of thing. More confident to get up and say what I thought . . . when I was at uni we did this and we could try this, whereas I wouldn't have done that before.

Some described how they have changed personally and professionally over their placement:

> When I look at my first lectures they are very much what I had defined subconsciously as the giver of all knowledge . . . But that certainly isn't how it is. I mean it's a journey, it's quite refreshing.
>
> When I came out here, I remember a principal saying to me, "be careful, don't let them force you into further study." "No, there's no way," [I said], "I'm just there to do teaching." . . . And here I was just plonked into this environment that was at first over stimulating and overwhelming but then I spent a lot of time eavesdropping on conversations and going to seminars and learning the language . . . and then desiring it. I wanted to be part of that . . . I saw it as something that would benefit my practice so much . . .

Discussion

Many of the findings in this Australian study resonate with previous international studies, such as the professional and personal growth opportunities for teachers when seconded into universities (Housego & Badali, 2000). This study adds to existing research by highlighting the personal and professional attributes that participants took back with them to their school positions, including a readiness for action research projects, confidence and general professional learning.

The dilemma surrounding identity that seconded/contracted teachers have described (McEachern & Polley, 1993; Murray & Male, 2005) is also reflected in the present study

when participants report being in "no man's land", feeling neither a teacher nor an academic, or in other words, neither fish nor fowl. This was further reinforced for some participants in the middle of their placement, who report being disconnected from schools and unsure of their future career. Perhaps because they felt they did not belong to the university setting, many participants characterized their identity as teachers more generally of students in classrooms and universities. That their assigned mentors were other secondees reaffirmed the "us and them" environment, and contributed further to their perception of their difference from academics.

Participants' university teaching practices closely reflected their classroom teaching practice. One participant describes little difference between her university and classroom teaching practice. Others report modeling the ways teachers might work in classrooms and providing lesson plans and programs. Adult education teaching models were rarely articulated though one participant did suggest that she needed to learn "another language" in order to "categorise" and "identify" her university teaching. These findings relate to the first and second order practice previously described by Murray and Male (2005) and which constituted a challenge, albeit, seemingly unrecognized, by the participants in this study. This finding might be attributable to the limited time available to participants to develop adult pedagogies and participants' feelings of not belonging. Participants' alignment as teachers is further reflected in the way they viewed research.

Participants describe being passive rather than active agents in the research process. Rather than initiate and/or conduct research, several describe using research for teaching. Most were keen to "do research" but were unsure how. At the same time all acknowledged the encouragement or what one described as "bullying" to undertake research, from colleagues.

Based on the findings on this and previous studies the following recommendations can be made for university policy makers and administrators when employing seconded and contracted teachers. Recruitment needs to be formalised and planned, with teachers' teaching and research responsibilities clearly presented. Ideally, induction programs and continuing supports, such as mentors, need to be provided to seconded and contract teachers, as they locate themselves within the university environment, particularly if expected to undertake research but also more generally. Kosnic and Beck (2008) highlight the need for a pedagogy of teacher education for seconded and contracted teachers, which values the practical experiences of teachers, but at the same time *develops* rather than *transfers* these experiences into university settings. Finally, throughout their placement, seconded and contracted teachers require opportunities to engage with schools to maintain currency and share expertise. If appropriate support strategies are provided, seconded and contract

teachers' skills can be celebrated and effectively utilized for universities whilst on secondment but also when they return to their school positions.

While a small sample size limits the generalisability of findings, it did allow an in-depth exploration of the topic in question, particularly with an Australian sample. The study was cross sectional rather than longitudinal and future studies would profit from distinguishing between, and tracking seconded and contracted teachers over time, and with a further emphasis on gender. Overall, the study adds to existing research by highlighting the positioning of seconded and contracted teachers in relation to research, and recommending the support mechanisms that might be provided to this integral component of the teacher education workforce.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge funding from the Research and Development Fund from the Faculty of Education, Charles Sturt University.

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